

Stories of Words: Toponyms



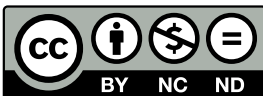
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Toponyms often describe landforms, such as this valley.

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New York City is named after the Duke of York.

Learning About Words

Las Vegas. New York. Pie Town. Toponyms, or the names of places, are as different as the people who have named them. The word *toponym* comes from the combination of two Greek words: *topos* for “place” and *-nym* for “name.” By learning the story of a toponym, you also learn the story of the people who lived in that place.

Historically, **explorers** gave new names to the places where they landed. The names often honored an important person such as a king, a queen, or a god. In Central America, Spanish explorers named the country of El Salvador after their god whom they called “the savior.” Before they arrived, the **native** people called it by a name that meant “land of the jewels.”

El Salvador means “the savior” in Spanish.



Many towns have been named after landforms, the land features of a place. Midway is a popular toponym in the United States. A city halfway between two cities or landmarks might have been given this name.

The toponym that is found in the most states is Riverside. Before cars and trains, the fastest way for people to travel was by boat. A business near a river was perfectly placed to sell food or goods. Therefore, many towns were located by rivers and were called “Riverside.”

There also are places that come by their names from local **lore**. Take Pie Town, New Mexico. The story goes that a World War I **veteran** made and sold pies from his store. Word spread about the delicious pies. People began to travel from near and far to buy them, referring to the town as “Pie Town.”

As you can see, toponyms can tell fascinating stories. So, let’s read about a few more...



1

Home Away From Home

Many place names begin with the word *new*. They were named to recall or honor other places. In the United States, there are towns, cities, and states named by newcomers after the country of their birth. For example, New Mexico was named by Spanish **settlers** from Mexico.



Here are some U.S. cities or states named after other places in the world:

Original Place	New Place
Hampshire, England	New Hampshire
Isle of Jersey in the English Channel	New Jersey
Athens, Greece	Athens, Georgia
Madrid, Spain	New Madrid, Missouri



There are also places in the United States that are named after other places within the United States. Bowling Green, Ohio, is named after Bowling Green, Kentucky, which is named after Bowling Green, Virginia. Worldwide, sixteen cities go by the name Bowling Green.

What is a bowling green? It is an area of mowed, green grass in which a game, similar to modern-day bowling, is played. It is likely that the first Bowling Green was named after the green grass or the sport itself.

2

Amazing Animals

Some toponyms are named for animals, and some animals are named after toponyms. The name canary illustrates both uses of toponyms. Spanish explorers who discovered islands along the northern coast of Africa found many dogs living alongside the native people. They named the islands Canary, from the word *canis*, which means “dog” in Latin. Later, when explorers discovered little, yellow birds on the islands, they called the birds “canaries.” Therefore, the islands got their name from an animal (dog). The name of the islands inspired the name of a different animal (the canary).

The town of Dinosaur, Colorado, has streets named after specific dinosaurs, such as Brontosaurus Boulevard and Stegosaurus Street. The town and streets got these names because of their location by the Dinosaur National Monument, which is known for its many dinosaur bones.



Of all bears, the Kodiak bear is the second largest. It can be found on an island off the coast of Alaska called Kodiak Island. The name came from the language of the native people who lived on the island. *Kodiak* means “island.” This means that Kodiak bear means “island bear,” and Kodiak Island means “island island.”

Horses can come in a range of sizes, the smallest of which is the Shetland pony. As the name suggests, Shetland ponies were originally from the Shetland Islands off the coast of Scotland. The climate there is harsh with long, cold winters and a very short growing season. Scientists believe this is why many of the animals found on Shetland Island are smaller versions of animals found in other places. This might make you wonder if *Shetland* might have come from a word that meant “small.” No, the *shet-* in *Shetland* is believed to have come from a word that meant “land.”



3

Welcome to Lake Lake

Many place names come from the language of the people who first lived there. When English-speaking newcomers arrive on the scene later, they often change the name to an English one.

However, in some cases, English speakers tag on a word in English to the existing name. This additional word often has the same meaning as the native word. Therefore, when **translated**, the name is a repeated word.

Here's an example. Lake Michigan, Lake Ontario, and Lake Tahoe are all lakes in the United States. A different group of Native Americans lived around each of the lakes. Each group called the lake "lake" in its native language. When translated, each of the lakes is named "Lake Lake." By saying "Lake Michigan," "Lake Ontario," and "Lake Tahoe," you can say the word *lake* in four languages!



Almost 30 cities are called Glendale in the United States; chances are good, therefore, that you live in or near one. The word *glen* means “a valley between mountains.” *Dale* comes from an Old English word that also means “valley.” In some Glendales, you may even find a school named Glendale Valley. This would make a Glendale Valley student a member of Valley Valley Valley School.

On a clear night, you can see a large band of stars, stretching from one part of the sky to another. Long ago, people thought the band of stars looked as though someone had spilled milk in the night sky. As a result, they called it “galaxy,” which means “milky circle.” Today, we use the word galaxy to mean “a collection of stars, planets, gases, and other space objects.” The galaxy that Earth and the sun is a part of is called the Milky Way Galaxy—or the Milky Way milky circle.

Galaxy comes from a word that means “milky circle.”

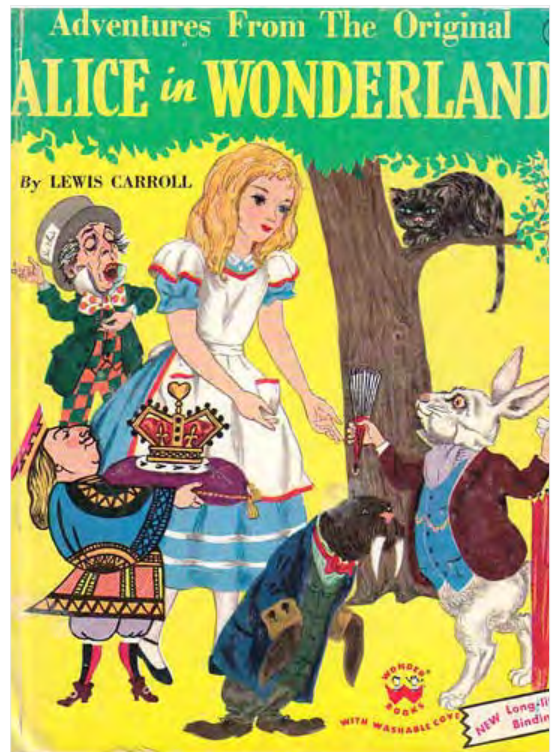


4

Once Upon a Name

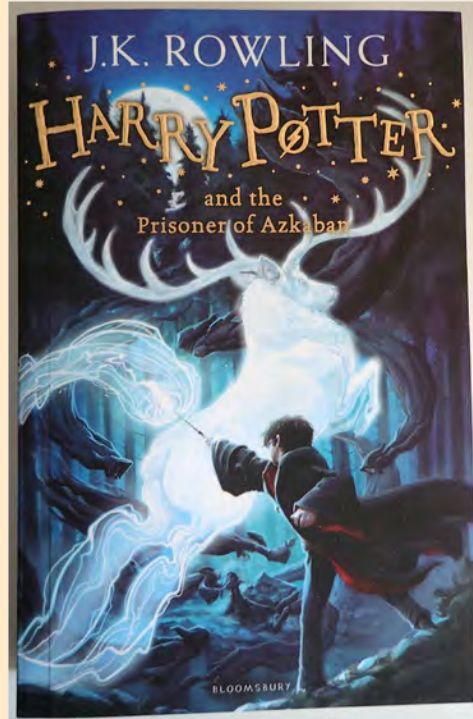
Fictional places need names, too. When writers want to create a mood, they do so with words. A scary story might be set in a place called “Fear Street.” Or if a writer wants readers to feel like the story events could happen to anybody, she might have her characters live in a place with a more common toponym such as Oakdale.

Toponyms, therefore, give readers clues about the story. The story of *Alice in Wonderland* is a good example. Lewis Carroll named his setting “Wonderland” to signal to readers that they were entering a magical place, full of wonder. The story begins with Alice following a rabbit wearing a waistcoat and muttering “Oh dear!” What follows is a series of events that peak Alice’s—and the reader’s—curiosity.



Sometimes toponyms from storybooks have roots in reality. When J.K. Rowling needed a name for a prison in her Harry Potter series, she combined a real word and a real place. The result was Azkaban, which comes from *Abaddon*, Arabic for “depths of hell,” and Alcatraz, which is an infamous prison on an island close to San Francisco, California. Anyone who has read the Harry Potter series would agree that Azkaban is like an island in the depths of hell.

Rowling borrows from real life often. Another example is King’s Cross Station in London, England. In the book, characters catch the train to Hogwarts, a fictional school for wizards, there. The name “King’s Cross” comes from a statue of King George IV that once stood there. The *cross* comes from *crossing*, which is a place where large or important roads **intersect**. It makes sense for the train to Hogwarts to start at a crossing. It is the place, after all, where the magical world and the non-magical world intersect.



5

Mumbai to Bombay to Mumbai

Even though some place names have been around for thousand of years, they're not always **permanent**. Toponyms can change for many reasons. Some toponyms are changed because of war. They can be made shorter or be spelled differently. Place names can change quickly or slowly. This is because what is important to a group of people can change over time. Remember: Place names are a reflection of the history and values of the people who live there.



The original city of Athens has been around since 500 B.C.



Wall Street in the original settlement of New Amsterdam.

Colonial Names

New York City is one of the most populated cities in the world. Some of its earliest settlers were from the Netherlands. They named their colony after Amsterdam, a large city in the Netherlands. New Amsterdam, as it was called, was home to the Dutch settlers for about 40 years. When the Netherlands lost a war with England, they had to give up control of New Amsterdam. The English renamed the colony “New York,” after the Duke of York, who later became the king of England.

Though the English renamed many of the place names in New York, there are some names that came from Dutch settlers. One well-known street in New York City is Wall Street. When the Dutch still lived in their colony, they built a wall to keep English soldiers out of it. The wall was taken down, but the English kept the name “Wall Street.” Today, Wall Street is a busy street, famous for business.

Fly east for nearly 8,000 miles from New York City, and you will arrive at Mumbai, the most populated city in India. Mumbai was named in honor of a goddess in the Hindu religion.

European explorers arrived in Mumbai in the 1500s. They took control of the city and, eventually, the entire country. Soon thereafter, the name of the city was changed to Bombay. There are some who believe that Bombay means “good bay.” The city is on a bay. Furthermore, in many European languages, the word *bom*, or *bonn*, means “good.”

It was not until 1995, long after Europeans no longer controlled India, that the name of the city was changed back to Mumbai. Once again, the name honors the religion and history of its native people.



Shortened Names

Do you have or know someone with a nickname? The name Johanna becomes Josie, or Manuel becomes Manny, and so on. A nickname is a shortened version of a name. Toponyms also can be nicknames.

Let's consider Los Angeles, California. Before it became the second largest city in the United States, Los Angeles was a small town of settlers. These settlers were **missionaries** from northern Mexico who believed in the Catholic religion. Their leader named their town *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles*, or The Town of our Queen of the Angels, to recognize their religion. This long name didn't last. Soon, the name of the mission was shortened to "Los Angeles." Today, some people shorten the name even more and call it by its initials, "L.A." Or, if you wanted to call Los Angeles by its nickname, you would say "the City of Angels."



Temporary Toponyms

Place names do not have to be serious and permanent. If the members of a place agree to it, then a city can take on a new toponym for a short time.

In 1993, there was a popular football player named Joe Montana. For fun, the tiny town of Ismay, Montana, was asked to change its name to honor this exciting football player. For about a year, the town was renamed as “Joe, Montana.”

The people of Ismay agreed to change its name because many of them admired Joe Montana. Another reason, perhaps a more popular one, was that the town needed a new fire truck. The renaming, they believed, could help raise money for the truck. Football fans traveled to the town and bought shirts, cups, and other things, all of which were stamped with “Joe, Montana.” And Ismay, which returned to its original name after the football season, got its much-needed fire truck.



Our Changing Language

The name of a place tells the story of the people who live there. Think of the many places named after Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Those toponyms tell about the history of our country. They show that Americans honor the founding fathers. Other toponyms, such as those named after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Clara Barton, show that we remember the people who worked hard to better the lives of other people.



Place names can also describe the land as it was. For example, Las Vegas is now a big city with lots of lights and visitors from all over the world. But, when the Spanish explorers first passed through the area, it was a peaceful valley where they could get water and their horses could eat grass. The Spanish explorers called the area “Las Vegas” after the Spanish word for “meadow.”



We study place names to learn the values of a group of people. In doing so, we also learn new words. We can better remember the meaning of these new words and how to use them. This is because we can connect them to the history of a place.

The next time you go to a place, pay attention to its toponyms. Look at street signs or at names of cafes, schools, or businesses. You might pick up some new vocabulary. You might even be inspired to learn more about the people who live or have lived where you walk.



Glossary

explorer a person who travels to discover

fictional made-up, especially for the purpose of story telling

inhabitant a person who lives in a place

intersect to cross each other, as in two roads

lore knowledge, traditionally told

missionary a person sent to spread a religion in a new place

native connected to the place where someone was born

permanent lasting and unchanging (for all time)

settler a person who lives in an area, especially one with few, if any, people

translate to put into words of another language

veteran a person who was in the armed forces



Think About It

- Pick a place that you have always wanted to visit. Answer the following question. How did it get its toponym?
- Create a toponym. Draw a picture of a place and then name it. Write a brief paragraph under your drawing, which explains your name choice.
- Work with a friend to tell the story of your community. Make a list of 5 to 8 local toponyms. Research their stories. Sort them by event, person, landmark, etc. Share your findings with the class.



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