

How Thirteen U.S. Places Got Their Names

by

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When you look at a map of the United States, it soon becomes obvious that most place names fall into one of several categories:

1) Names brought over from the old country, such as Worcester, Massachusetts; Holland, Michigan; and Dublin, Georgia. Many cities with "New" in their name fall into this category: New Ulm, Minnesota; New London, New Hampshire; and New Vienna, Ohio.

2) Names of people, such as Blythe, California; Madison, Wisconsin; and Dickinson, North Dakota.

3) Names describing the area, such as Desert View Village, Arizona; Lakeland, Florida; and Greenville, South Carolina.

4) Names from Native American terms, places, or people, such as Waukesha, Wisconsin; Pahrump, Nevada; and Wetumpka, Alabama.

There are other categorizations that can be made, but you get the idea. But even though most place names fall into broad categories, there are places that got their names from a unique occurrence or event. That is what this document is about.

This is not a work of intense scholarship. The brief stories in this paper were assembled from fairly brief searches on the Internet. And while I think the information presented is reasonably accurate, it's possible that some of it is apocryphal.

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The Place Named by a Challenge

In 1783, the British and Americans signed the Treaty of Paris, ending the revolutionary war. Charles Scott, who served during the war as a scout, and later a colonel, and even later as commander of George Washington's light infantry, settled in Kentucky.

However, although the British had stopped fighting, their Native American allies had not. In 1787, Shawnee warriors killed and scalped Scott's son. In 1790, Scott formed a team of volunteers to continue the fight. As the battles escalated, the U.S. military became involved, and Scott was reinstated as a brigadier general. He teamed with fellow brigadier general Anthony Wayne to construct a series of forts. One of the forts was built where the Auglaize and Maumee rivers meet.

While the fort was being built, Scott declared "I defy the English, Indians, and all the devils of hell to take it." And that's how **Defiance, Ohio**, got its name.

The Place Named from Two Errors

When the Spanish and English arrived in Florida, they found a confusing mix of Indian tribes. *The Florida Indians of the Seventeenth Century* by Charles M. Andrews states "Exactness and reliability in locating and labeling these Indian tribes is not possible in all cases, for the connections and relationships seem to have ebbed and flowed in such confusing fashion as to lead some anthropologists to adopt the practice of grouping together adjacent and apparently related tribes when the information was insufficient to make their separations clearly indicated."

One tribe in this mix was the Jobe (pronounced Hoe-bay). Their name (misspelled) remains to this day on Hobe Sound.

When the English arrived in the middle 1700's, they mistakenly interpreted "Jobe" as "Jove". That was error one.

Once the name "Jove" made it into the English records, mapmakers mistranslated it. They took "Jove" to be the Old Latin god of sky and thunder. Dutifully, they updated the name on their maps to the more modern Latin "Jupiter". That was error number two, and that's how **Jupiter, Florida**, got its name.

The Place Named for Wagon Repairmen

In 1719, a trading post was established in Pennsylvania, at a strategic point where trails leading from the Delaware to the Ohio rivers, and from the Potomac to the Upper Susquehanna intersected. The area around the trading post would become Harrisburg.

In addition to the aforementioned trails, the Great Wagon Road, which transited the Appalachian Valley from Pennsylvania to North Carolina, passed nearby.

All this meant that there was a lot of traffic through the area. And in the late 18th and 19th centuries, a considerable amount of that traffic used Conestoga wagons. Conestoga wagons had several features that made them popular: they could carry up to 12,000 pounds, they were tarred to prevent leaking while crossing rivers, the wheels were often iron-rimmed, and they had accessories like water barrels, toolboxes, and feedboxes for the horses.

About seven or eight miles west of Harrisburg, along one section of the Great Wagon Road, a group of mechanics set up a community to make and repair Conestoga wagons. And that's how **Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania**, got its name.

The Place Named Because Native American Names Are Hard to Pronounce

The Snohomish Indians lived (and continue to live) in Washington State. In the 1880's, the gold rush brought settlers to an area about 40 miles northeast of Seattle, and they were welcomed by the local tribe and their chief Tseul-ted.

The settlers found " Tseul-ted" too hard to pronounce, and so they called the chief "Sultan". And that's how **Sultan, Washington**, got its name.

The Place Named for an Act of Kindness

In the 1870's, southwestern Kansas was a dry place. The tapping of the Ogallala aquifer would not begin until the 1900's, and water was a precious commodity. Travelers who stopped at ranches or farms to ask for a drink were often refused or charged.

But just a few miles off the Santa Fe trail, homesteader S.S. Rogers supplied water for free. Travelers would ask the price of water, and he would reply "Oh, that's alright, water's always free here". To which many travelers would reply "That's mighty liberal". And that's how **Liberal, Kansas**, got its name.

The Place Named by a Misspelling

Stephen Tuttle Thompson was born Feb. 22, 1832, in Rhea County, Tennessee. His family moved to Marshall county, Alabama (named after Chief Justice of the United States John Marshall) around 1840. In 1858, he relocated to an area that became known as Thompson's Village.

In 1882, he was named postmaster and required to submit three proposed names for the new post office. He wanted the post office to be named after his son Ranson Arad Riley Thompson, so Stephen included "Arad" in his submissions.

The post office selected Arad, but either due to error or because they thought it a misspelling, they officially designated the post office "Arab". And that's how **Arab, Alabama**, got its name.

The Place Named After a School Named After a Highway

In 1928, US 99 opened between Seattle and Tacoma. Along the route were eight small school districts, and the powers that be decided it was time to consolidate them.

The first elementary school they constructed was along the federal highway, and they named it Federal Way school. They also named the school district the Federal Way district. And that's how **Federal Way, Washington**, got its name.

The Place Named After a Dead Puma

In the 1830's, German settlers moved into an area about sixty miles west of Houston. One of these settlers was Leopold von Roeder, who built a farm near the San Bernard river.

The river has multiple springs, and it was near one of these springs that a son of Leopold killed a puma. And that's how **Cat Spring, TX**, got its name.

The Place Named for an Oil Refinery

A little over twenty miles west of New Orleans lies a community that was once named "Sellers", after a wealthy landowner, Thomas Sellers. In the early 1900's, the Shell Oil company bought a large tract of land and established the **New Orleans Refining Company**. And that's how **Norco, Louisiana**, got its name.

The Mississippi Place Named After a Louisiana Newspaper

In the 1850's when she was nine, Eliza Jane Poitevent (you owe it to yourself to read more about her) moved from Gainesville, Mississippi to Hobolochitto, about fifty miles northeast of New Orleans. In 1859 she graduated from the Amite Female Seminary in Liberty.

Even though it was not proper for a southern lady to write, and even less proper to write for publication, she began submitting poems to magazines and newspapers under the pseudonym "Pearl Rivers". The *New Orleans Picayune* published one of her poems, and after 1867 all of her work was published in this paper. Eventually, this led to her becoming the literary editor of the paper, and the wife of a co-owner. When he died, she inherited the Picayune.

In 1904, Hobolochitto was chartered and needed an official name. Eliza Jane jumped at the opportunity, and that's how **Picayune, Mississippi** got its name.

The Place Named for an Economic Theory

Henry George, who lived from 1839 to 1897, was the father of Georgism, an economic theory that centers on the proposition that people own what they create, but nature is everyone's equally. This led George to develop the "single tax theory".

Proponents of the single tax theory formed a club in Des Moines, Iowa, to determine how to start a colony based on Georgism. They created a constitution for their model community, and one of the members remarked that there was a fair hope they would succeed. And that's how **Fairhope, Alabama** got its name.

The Place Named for Exhausted Animals

In 1779, Revolutionary War General John Sullivan led a 450-mile campaign against the Iroquois in western New York. To approach the enemy, Sullivan decided to blaze a trail through a largely uninhabited section of the Pocono Mountains.

The mission was successful, but the effort required exhausted the men and their horses. On the return trip, about six miles north of Fort Reid, they had to put down a large number of sick and disabled horses. Over time, the Iroquois collected the horse skulls and arranged them in a line along the trail. The spot became known as "the valley of the horses heads".

And that's how **Horseheads, New York** got its name.

The Place Named Because It Got High

About 135 miles southwest of Oklahoma City, a small settlement called Frazer was established on Bitter Creek. Frazer became a stopping point for cattlemen using the Great Western Trail -- cowboys would often stop for buttermilk and Frazer gained the nickname "Buttermilk Station".

On June 4, 1891, a flash flood almost destroyed Frazer. Residents moved two and a half miles east to higher ground, and W. R. Baucum suggested renaming the town for a Latin word meaning "high." And that's how **Altus, Oklahoma** got its name.