

MUTABILITY AND STAGNANCY OF PLACE NAMES: THE CASE OF THE STATE OF INDIANA

MUTABILIDADE E ESTAGNAÇÃO DE NOMES DE LUGARES: O CASO DO ESTADO DA INDIANA

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Resumo:

Estudos sobre topônimos frequentemente focalizam mudanças de nomes, mas raramente abordam lugares que persistem com seus nomes tradicionais. O caso do Estado de Indiana nos Estados Unidos é apresentado como exemplo de um espaço cujos topônimos foram definidos predominantemente no século XIX e que continuam reproduzindo os valores, a política e a história dos colonizadores europeus e do movimento americano pela independência e democracia no passado. Congelados no tempo, os topônimos de Indiana não correspondem à configuração multicultural e multirracial da sociedade de hoje e, provavelmente, não mudarão no futuro, embora a renomeação seja muito mais comum em nível local (por exemplo, ruas e escolas), do que em unidades administrativas maiores, como condados e cidades.

Palavras-chave: Mudança de nomes de lugares; história de nomes de lugares; estudos toponímicos críticos; Estados Unidos no século XIX; Estado da Indiana.

Abstract:

Studies on toponyms frequently focus on name changes, but rarely address places that persist with their traditional names. The case of the State of Indiana in the United States is presented as an example of a space whose place names were predominantly defined in the nineteenth century and that continues reproducing the values, politics, and history of the European colonizers and the American independence and democracy movement from the past. Frozen in time, Indiana toponyms do not correspond to the multi-cultural and multi-racial configuration of today's society and are unlikely to change in the future, though renaming is far more common on the local level (e.g., streets and schools) rather than for larger administrative units such as counties and towns.

Keywords: Place name changes; place name history; critical toponymy studies; nineteenth-century United States; State of Indiana.

ARE PLACE NAMES FOREVER?

The study of place names is one of the most compelling and complex research topics in human geography, because it entails a wide range of dimensions from general cultural, historical, and political contexts to particular aspects such as the marketing value of names, regional perception, and sense of belonging. The existent literature on place names, their origins, history, and meanings are substantial and deals with a wide range of geographical scales, from school and street names to town, counties, and countries. Naming places as a form of symbolic representation can shape local identities and reveal spatial histories that are frequently based on regional narratives and foundation myths or that can be determined by political interests and endeavours that may vary considerably through time and space.

More recently, geographers have criticized the “traditional” descriptive history of place names as atheoretical scholarship “characterized by political innocence to say the least (...) [and] chiefly developed through research by mapmakers, specialized linguists, and etymologists interested in gaining some understanding about what might be called ‘bygone landscapes’” (VUOLTEENAHO; BERG, 2009, p. 1). Parting with this approach, critical research on toponyms analyses the relations between the material world and discourse by studying the contested cultural politics of place-naming at the interface between culture, identity, and power rather than the place names themselves (ROSE-REDWOOD; ALDERMAN; AZARYAHU, 2010; SEEMANN, 2020).

A particular theme in place name studies is the investigation of name changes in the toponymic landscape. How long do place names last? What are the motivations to replace toponyms? What are the impacts of this change? A prominent recent example is the town of Asbestos in the francophone Canadian Province of Quebec, whose name was inspired by a local asbestos mine that started operation in the late nineteenth century. Today, the town’s name evokes a negative image for business and tourism due to the proven carcinogenicity of asbestos. After several phases of name selections from a pool of about 1000 submissions, residents voted for a name change in a municipal referendum in October 2020, when slightly more than 51% of the voters opted for the toponym Val-des-Sources, Valley of the Springs, in order to highlight the town’s natural landscapes and “detoxify” its name (FAZIO, 2020).

The example above only refers to one specific name, but there are also cases of systematic renaming campaigns. During the Vargas Regime in Brazil (1937-1945), many towns and districts had their names translated into indigenous words as a symbol of national identity and unity (SEEMANN, 2005). In post-Cold-War East Berlin and post-Ceausescu Bucharest, urban landscapes went through a renaming process, eliminating street names in honour of socialist heroes and commemorative dates by replacing them with supposedly more democratic attributes (LIGHT, 2004; AZARYAHU, 1997). But Ireland and Scotland did not only suffer from the oppression by British colonizers.

Place naming also played an active role in weakening the local resistance to the colonial power. Gaelic names were substituted by Anglonyms, English toponyms that intentionally substituted native Irish names on maps and signs, whereas topographers of the Ordnance Survey “translated” and “authorized” the namescape of the Scottish Highlands by literally “writing out” the natives (FRIEL, 1981; WITHERS, 2000). On the other hand, changing toponyms does not only reveal the political power of place-naming, but can also be employed as a tool of resistance or consolidation of cultural identities as in the cases of the Hebraicization of the national map of Israel in the 1950s (AZARYAHU; GOLAN, 2001) and Hawaiian place names as a mechanism of “anti-conquest” (HERMAN, 1999).

Scholarship on toponyms from a cultural-geographic point of view has shown concern with the dynamics of place names rather than their continuity and the lack of change (LIGHT; YOUNG, 2014; 2018). Why do certain toponyms remain the same or are difficult to change? In the recent past of the United States, many popular and official initiatives aimed to come to terms with the country’s history of slavery. Schools and streets named after “heroes” of the Confederate States Army were questioned and monuments in honour of its leaders were removed. Changing the name of Lee Magnet High School in Baton Rouge, a tribute to the Confederate general Robert E. Lee (1807-1870), had been marked by a five-year-long heated debate between supporters of the original name

and defenders of a name expressing diversity, inclusion and democracy, when, finally, in 2020, after analysing more than 5000 suggestions and under public pressure, the school was renamed Liberty Magnet High School (RDDAD, 2020).

This article aims to investigate aspects of the mutability and stagnancy of place names using the example of the historical namescape of the State of Indiana in the United States which are predominantly based on nineteenth-century American history and political values shaped by European immigration and the initial nation-building of the country. Indiana toponyms have been “frozen” in time and do not correspond to today’s cultural and ethnic diversity, but there are no initiatives to change these taken-for-granted names on a local, regional and national scale. My intention is to discuss this immutability and reflect on possible changes in the future.

MAPPING PLACE NAMES IN INDIANA

Initial place-naming in the Eastern half of the United States is marked by events and personalities from the early history of the United States. Toponyms frequently refer to territorial conflicts between Spanish, British and French forces, American independence fighters, and Native peoples and reproduce the history of European settlements and colonizers and the American Revolution. Printing the names of these places on a map was the first step to confirm the existence of places. The Scottish map-maker John Melish (1771-1822) produced one of the earliest cartographic representation of the new country. His “Map of the United States with the Contiguous British & Spanish Possessions” (1816) narrates not only the history of land occupation and territorial formation, but also adds the name of places, rivers, and lakes (figure 1). Coloured outlines indicate territories and states that emerged in the first four decades of the country, whereas the Mississippi River appears as their main westernmost frontier. Beyond this line, the empty space of the unknown West, including Texas, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountains, is filled with pictorial mountain ranges and the veins of larger rivers. The density of place names on the map decreases further to the West, with the exception of the Spanish territories from today’s New Mexico to the Pacific Coast and south to Mexico that show a number of toponyms.



Figure 1. John Melish: Map of the United States with the Contiguous British & Spanish Possessions (1816). Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection

In Melish's map, the area of the State of Indiana that grew out of the Northwest Territory (1787-1800) and the Indiana Territory (1800-1816) before becoming a state in 1816 includes only a few place names, for example, Vincennes (an original French colony) and the Harmonist Society (a religious group of German settlers) in the Southwest and Vevay (settlement of immigrants from the Swiss town Vevey) in the Southeast of the state. Further north, the toponyms indicate that these lands are not settlements, but military fortifications in disputed indigenous territory at the border of the State of Ohio in the east: Fort Wayne (named after the general "Mad" Anthony Wayne), Fort Adams (tribute to vice-president John Adams), Fort Greenville (named after Nathanael Green, general in the Revolutionary War), Fort Recovery ("recovery" from the defeat of the United States army against Native Americans in the Battle of the Wabash in 1791), and Fort Jefferson (tribute to president Thomas Jefferson).

John Melish's "Map of Indiana" (1817) was published shortly after his map of the United States and provides far more details about the places in Indiana (figure 2). The map contains the names of 20 counties, county seats, and a few other towns. With the exception of Switzerland (country), Orange (settlers from Orange County in North Carolina, and a tribute to the Dutch protestant Prince William V of Orange), and Pike (Zebulon Pike, explorer of the American West), all the counties refer to war heroes, politicians and presidents of the United States. The map omits the names of the townships in each county, though it shows the regular squares of the United States Land Partitioning System west from the Ohio River indicating the location of the latitudinal baseline for the survey and the numbering of the ranges and townships.

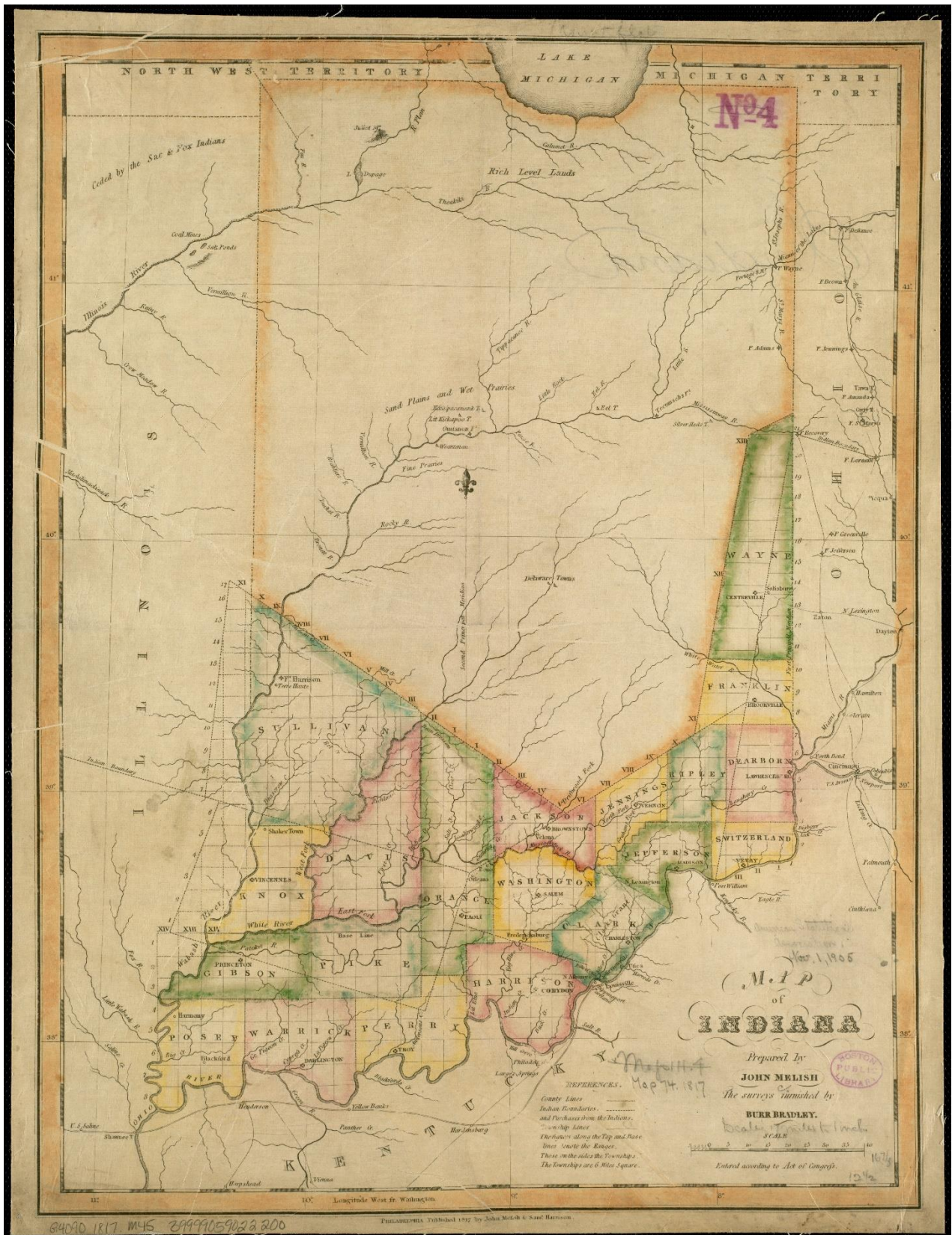


Figure 2. John Melish: Map of Indiana (1817). Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library

Toponyms on the town level include the name of the settlement founder or a local authority (Brookville, Fredericksburg, Lawrenceburg, Princeton, and Troy), patriots and war heroes (Paoli, Bono), historical battlegrounds (New Lexington), and the reference to the original home of the settlers (New Albany, Utica). Peculiar cases are Centreville (located in the “center” of Wayne county), and Corydon, the first state capital, that received its name from General Harrison (governor of the Indiana Territory and later ninth president of the United States), as a reference to his favourite song, a hymn about a shepherd named Corydon in the Old Missouri Harmony Songbook (BAKER, 1995, p.103). Velona in Jackson County is a misspelled version of Vallonia (also Valonia), whereas Blackford and Darlington had only a short life as settlements and do not exist anymore.

Though few toponyms appear on the map, they already indicate that place-naming can be based on political or poetic practices in Indiana, mingling official decisions built on discourse, power, and naming regulations with the vernacular, local and regional expressions of identity and folklore (SEEMANN, 2020). The town of Paoli serves as an illustrative example of the combination of politics and poetics. Historians are not sure if the name comes from the Corsican general and patriot Pasquale Paoli or the son of the governor of North Carolina with the same name or, rather as a local joke, if the name derived from the fact that there was “a Swede named Oley who operated a toll road” and travellers who wanted to pass had to “pay Oley” (BAKER, 1995, p. 256).

Whereas a county name may have the function of showing a patriotic attitude to the outside world, toponyms on a local level often refer to the population of a place and became more common, giving more emphasis to local history. All the 92 counties that exist in Indiana today were created between 1790 and 1859 and numerous other subdivisions (townships, town and other places) were founded in the nineteenth or early twentieth century so that the place names reflect the zeitgeist of this historical period, both politically, culturally and ethnically.

In Indiana, the first systematic work to gather information on places and their history appeared in the 1820s. John Scott (1793-1838), a pioneer among editors and printers in the new-born state, established his residence in Centreville and published the first gazetteer of Indiana with the title “Topographical Dictionary, Containing a Description of the Several Counties, Towns, Villages, Settlements, Roads, Lakes, Rivers, Creeks, and Springs in the State of Indiana” (SCOTT, 1826). Gazetteers provided information on places and their geographical feature, local history and social statistics from A to Z, but did not explain the meaning of place names. Scott’s publication became very popular and grew from 143 pages in its first edition to 199 pages in the second edition (1833) and 440 pages in the third edition (10000 copies in circulation), respectively. In the preface of the second edition, the editors Douglass and MacGuire stress the growing importance of Indiana as a center of literature, science, and internal improvements” and write:

“Frequent and earnest inquiries are made by the citizens of our sister States, as well as by foreigners, respecting the climate, soil, and local advantages of Indiana. To answer such inquiries, and at the same time to enable our own citizens duly to appreciate the natural and acquired advantages which they possess, are the primary objects of this publication (SCOTT, 1833, p. iii)

Local place name studies beyond gazetteers and county atlases became increasingly popular between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, but a first state-wide systematic study of toponyms in Indiana was only carried out in the 1970s, when Indianapolis-born folklorist and historian Ronald Baker and collaborators started to create a database on Indiana place names. The group released a new academic journal, "Indiana Names," which kept this title for five years until 1974, when it was changed to "Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore" and a decade later to "Midwestern Folklore", indicating that, apparently, journal names can be more dynamic than place names. In the first edition of the journal, Baker himself defined the aims of the initiative spearheaded by the Committee on Place Names in the Department of English at Indiana State University: "organize a network of county collectors of Indiana names and eventually publish a multi-volume dictionary of Indiana place names", besides stimulating and maintaining interest in research on the topic, hosting an annual conference on toponyms in the State, and contributing to the National Place Name Survey initiated in the late 1960s (BAKER, 1970, p. 20).

Though Baker mentioned the project of a "multi-volume dictionary of Indiana place names", the results were published in a single 200-page volume (BAKER; CARMONY, 1976) that gathered a total of 2271 names, mainly places and a few rivers, based on historical plat books and post office records. The entries were organized according to the following structure: present spelling, pronunciations, alternate names, type of feature level ("scale" from village to county name and type of waterbody), location, origin, and legends. In addition, Baker and Carmony proposed a tentative place name classification into thirteen main categories and several subcategories such as persons, names for other places, locational indicators (e.g., North Fork Salt Creek), descriptive (characteristics of the place or surroundings) and inspirational names (evoking virtues such as harmony or union or referring to names from Antiquity or literature such as Rome and Walter Scott's novel *Waverly*), humorous words (Gnawbone, Popcorn, or Santa Claus), Indian or pseudo-Indian names (Mongo, Muncie), foreign names (from European languages other than English), incidents (sites of battles or treaties), folk etymology (rewriting of unfamiliar name), coined ("manufactured" toponyms) or mistake names ("corrected" on purpose or by accident), and legends and anecdotes. The category "names for person" is the largest. 78 out of 92 Indiana county names refer to non-local people and personalities, whereas 580 settlements (28.67%) of all toponyms for cities, towns, and villages pay a tribute to early settlers or founders (BAKER; CARMONY, 1976, p.xii).

In 1995, Baker single-handedly released an updated version of his book under the title "From Needmore to Prosperity – Hoosier place names in folklore and history" (BAKER, 1995), increasing the number of names to over 4000. In the updated and expanded introduction to the book, Baker addresses the paucity of indigenous place names in Indiana:

"Counties, arbitrary territorial divisions, usually were created after the Native Americans were forced off the land; consequently, the Native American influence on the naming of counties would be negligible, for Native Americans would not have names for these nonexistent legal entities. Moreover, sometimes there were strong feelings against Native American names" (BAKER, 1995, p. 26).

In a more recent book that specifically deals with indigenous place names in Indiana, MacCafferty (2008) affirms that despite the dominance of names in European languages and the fact that there is no presence of recognized indigenous groups in the State today, Native names are still plentiful: "In fact, in any direction one turns in Indiana, a native place-name beckons from very close by" (MACCAFFERTY, 2008, p. x).

In his "Atlas of Indiana", Robert Kingsbury (1970) reserves one of his maps to foreign city, country, and region names (figure 3). The map literally shows the "world" in Indiana by presenting more than one hundred references to foreign places. Many toponyms are a tribute to European immigrants, for example the German cities of Hamburg, Darmstadt, Oldenburg, Bremen, and Frankfurt. Rome, Carthage, and Athens evoke ideals of the period of Antiquity. Other names differ from the correct original spelling: Leipsic (pronounced "LEEP-sik") has its Z and G replaced by S and C; Edinburg temporarily lost its H before recovering it again; Angola is already a second-hand name. It does not refer to the African country, but to Angola in Erie County, New York, that gained its name from the real Angola in Africa (BAKER, 1995, p. 51). Siberia exists in Indiana because the local postmaster misspelled the original proposal of Sabaria or Savaria, a town in present-day Hungary (Szombathely), the birthplace of the Catholic Saint Martin of Tours (p. 301), whereas Russiaville does not have connections with Russia at all: it is a Midwesternized corruption of Richardville, referring to Jean-Baptiste Richardville (1761-1841), the Europeanized name for a local indigenous chief of the Miami people, correctly pronounced as "Rusherville" (p. 288).

**FOREIGN CITY,
COUNTRY AND
REGION NAMES
USED FOR INDIANA
CITIES AND
TOWNS**

**A Study in
Toponymy**

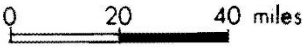
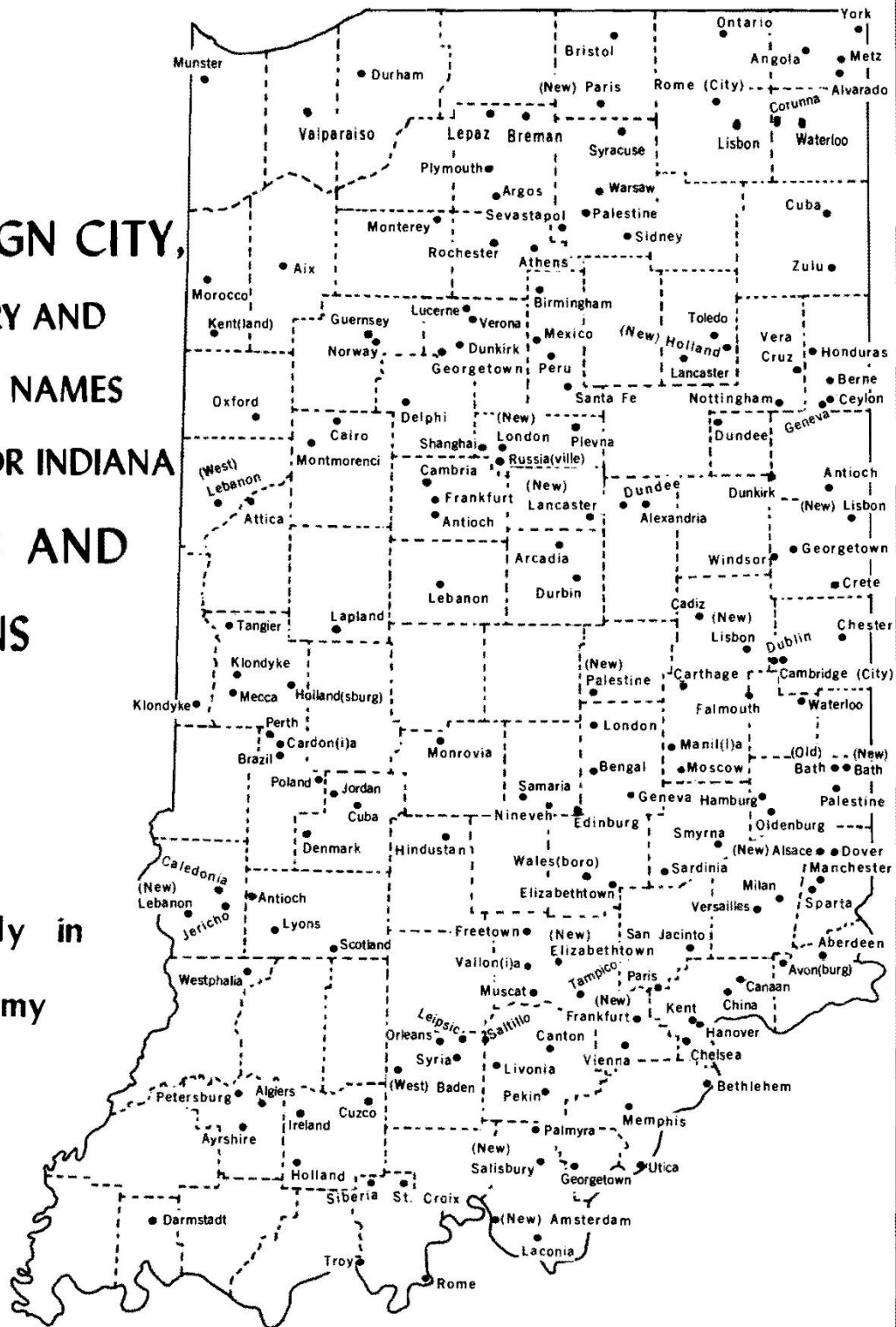


Figure 3. Foreign city, country, and region names used for Indiana cities and towns (KINGSBURY, 1970, p. 42)

Latin American countries are another presence in Indiana, though they do not mean a large Hispanic population in these places: Honduras, Peru, Cuba, and Brazil. The latter is pronounced either “ber-ZIL”, “bruh-ZIL” or “BRAY-zil” and has its name connected to several folkloric stories: someone supposedly read about a revolutionary movement in Brazil around 1844 and liked the name. The case of Brazil, Indiana, also shows that place-name jokes as narratives about origins were not uncommon, though they cannot be taken seriously: “In the early days, a man named Bray worked in the train station here. Once when a train came in, the conductor asked for Mr. Bray and was told, ‘Bray’s ill.’ That’s how Brazil got its name” (BAKER, 1995, p.75).

Brazil, Indiana shows that official naming practices clash with popular interpretations without value or proof. Many other toponyms in Indiana are based on rumours, speculation or even irony to explain their origins. Among the curiosities and bizarre names figure places such as Buddha named after the founder of Buddhism, a tramp with this name who passed through the town, or the city of Buda in Hungary that united with Pest to form the capital city Budapest (BAKER, 1995, p. 80) and Mecca, a name referring to a local “Arabian church” or cheap Muslim workers who came to town in 1898 to build a tile plant (BAKER, 1995, p. 214).

Frequently, topographers carrying out land surveys or the local postmasters were behind the name requests. Post offices served as the central locale for communication, and similar to the practice in other States, the government of Indiana wanted to make sure that toponyms do not repeat themselves, though the commendatory name Mechanicsburg appears at least six times in the State. Decisions about the selection of toponyms were frequently made by local authorities without consulting the population at large so that the naming process was frequently biased and excluding:

“The great bane of writings on American place-names has been that they so often have consisted of idle lucubrations over a railway time-table or a Postal Guide. To be sure, the oddities are funny, but one soon tires of them. Genuine significance can be found when place-naming is regarded as a dynamic process, growing out of the characteristics of a particular culture” (READ, 1970, p. 206).

The study of place names in Indiana (BAKER; CARMONY, 1976; BAKER, 1995) rarely goes beyond the discussion of potential origins and folkloric anecdotes and does not take into account deeper cultural-historical configurations and a thicker description of political contexts. The entries in these place name dictionaries repeat the same pattern over and over again, frequently in the passive voice: a town was named by its first store owner, its first settler, its founder and so on. But places do not name themselves. Someone names them, and with a reason, but these motives are rarely revealed. Investigating these motives would be the critical part in research on toponyms, though origins and meanings are frequently lost in the mists of history.

Despite their diversity, Indiana place names can be very conventional. Reading through the list of about 3600 places in the “Every Place in Indiana” spreadsheet, released by STATS Indiana (s.d.), a public data utility, the results are less diverse and spectacular as can be seen in the image of a word cloud based on these names (figure 4). Generic names (e.g., Corner, Center or New), geographical features (Hill, Mount or Creek), and directions (e.g., North or West) are the most common elements in place names in Indiana.



Figure 4. A word cloud of present-day Indiana place names by frequency

CHANGES AND CONTINUITY IN PLACE NAMES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Indiana place names from Aaron to Zulu are characterized by their almost complete immutability, similar to the situation in other States in the country. Counties, townships, towns and other administrative units are not subject to any change in the near and far future, with a few exceptions that refer to racist slurs and ethnic insults (MONMONIER, 2007). For Indiana, a name change request has to pass through a sequence of bureaucratic processes approved by the Indiana Board of Geographic Names and the U.S. Board of Geographic Names (BGN), created in 1890 to standardize toponyms for the whole country. However, recent changes are rare and must be supported by a “compelling” reason. A striking example from the 21st century is Bde Maka Ska in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the re-established indigenous name for Lake Calhoun, a reference to John Calhoun, the seventh vice-president of the United States (1825-1832) and ardent defender of slavery. The renaming process took approximately nine years and had to go through all instances of the Minnesotan justice system until its approval in 2020.

Many place names in Indiana reproduce the status quo of the nineteenth century, posing an almost insuperable problem: the toponyms do not reflect the multi-cultural and multi-racial society of the second millennium and will most unlikely be renamed, though names changes on an exclusively local scale such as streets, schools or other smaller places may happen far more frequently as in the case of schools named after Martin Luther King Jr. (ALDERMAN, 2002). However, in the long run, the chances to create a Martin Luther King county in the United States will be minimal so that the country has to continue living with the paradox of having a diverse society and an archaic toponymy.

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