

What's in a (Post Office) Name?

From Aaronsburg, Pennsylvania, to Zwolle, Louisiana

Historically, prospective postmasters or patrons suggested Post Office names, subject to the approval of the Post Office Department. Often the name proposed for a Post Office matched the name of the place or community it would serve. Names of local or famous people, distant places, and nearby geographic or man-made features were all common sources of place names.

Some Post Offices were given the first postmaster's name or some variant, for example, Salsbury, California (first postmaster Thompson G. Salsbury); Travilah, Maryland (Postmaster Travilah Claggett); Remlap, Alabama (James W. Palmer); and Trebloc, Mississippi (Joseph M. Colbert).¹ Remlap and Trebloc are examples of names that were reversed, presumably because they were unacceptable as originally proposed. Along the same lines, the Nikep Post Office was established in Pekin, Maryland, possibly to avoid confusion with Pekin, Indiana.

Ten Most Common Post Office Names in 2008

Clinton, 26
Franklin, 25
Madison, 25
Washington, 25
Chester, 23
Marion, 23
Greenville, 22
Springfield, 22
Georgetown, 21
Salem, 21

The sources of some Post Office names are lost to history; there are no federal records on name origins.

Petersburg or Petersburg?

In the early 1800s, unique names for Post Offices were not mandatory. The 1825 *United States Official Register* lists many instances of two Post Offices with the same name in the same state. Even more confusing, some states had three Post Offices with the same name, for example, three Bloomfields in Ohio and three Washingtons in Pennsylvania.

In August 1825, Jacob Myers, the postmaster of Petersburg, Pennsylvania, complained to Postmaster General John McLean that Mr. Myers' mail was being sent to the other Petersburg, Pennsylvania, Post Office. The Postmaster General replied that the most effective cure for the confusion caused by "two Offices of the same name in a State, is to change the name of one; & I would enquire of you whether another name may not usefully be applied to yours."² Mr. Myers apparently took Mr. McLean's advice. In 1828 his Post Office was renamed East Hempfield, later changed to East Petersburg. The "other" Petersburg, Pennsylvania, Post Office was renamed Littlestown in 1832. (The current Petersburg, Pennsylvania, Post Office was operating at the time under the name Shaver's Creek.)

Earliest Instructions Regarding Names

The earliest instructions found regarding the selection of Post Office names appear on the application to establish a Post Office. In the 1840s:

*The name of the candidate for postmaster should not be applied as the name of a post office. It is preferable to have some LOCAL or PERMANENT name, which must not be the name of any other office in the State; and you should aim to select a name not appropriated to any office in the United States.*³

Despite this instruction, many new Post Offices continued to be named after the first postmaster. In one 15-year period in Chickasaw County, Mississippi, 9 out of 20 new Post Offices were given the postmaster's first or last name or some variant.

While the call for unique Post Office names aimed to eliminate confusion in mailing, names that were too similar to other names continued to create problems. The August 1850 issue of *The United States Postal Guide and Official Advertiser* contained the following notice:

The Postmaster at Charlestown, Va., desires us to call attention to the frequent misdirections of newspapers and letters to his office, which are intended for another, of nearly the same name. Charlestown is in Jefferson county. Charleston, once so called, but now called Kanawha Court-House, is in Kanawha county. Some attention to this matter will save the Postmaster the frequent trouble of remailing. It will do more: it will give

despatch to the transmission. In so far as mistakes delay papers or letters, the convenience and confidence of the community are impaired, and the revenue of the Department injured.

A similar complaint was lodged by Postmaster Ephraim Jewett of Saint Johnsbury, Vermont, in the February 1852 issue of *The United States Postal Guide and Official Advertiser*:

There are in this town three post offices, viz: St. Johnsbury, St. Johnsbury East, and St. Johnsbury Centre. Many letters directed to one or the other of the offices in town, are through the carelessness of postmasters mailed to this office, the effect of which is to delay the letters . . .

To help address this problem, in the 1880s the instructions on selecting new Post Office names went one step further:

*Select a short name for the proposed office, which, when written, will not resemble the name of any other post office in the United States.*⁴

In the 1890s this was relaxed:

*Select a short name for the proposed office, which, when written, will not resemble the name of any other post office in the State.*⁵

Burgh to Burg, Borough to Boro

Between 1850 and 1890 the number of Post Offices more than tripled, from 18,417 in 1850 to 62,401 in 1890. Inconsistent geographic name usage and spelling was deemed "a serious and growing evil in the publications of the Government."⁶ On September 4, 1890, President Benjamin Harrison created the United States Board on Geographic Names to resolve unsettled questions regarding place names and thus gradually induce uniformity.⁷ In its first annual report, the Board singled out the Post Office Department as one of many sources of confusion and cited the "thousands of cases where the name of the post-office does not conform to the local name of the place in which it is situated."⁸ The Board wanted to hurry along the trend towards simplifying place names and outlined the following guiding principles:

- 1. That spelling and pronunciation which is sanctioned by local usage should in general be adopted.*
- 2. Where names have been changed or corrupted, and such changes or corruptions have become established by local usage, it is not in general advisable to attempt to restore the original form.*
- 3. In cases where what was evidently originally the same word appears with various spellings sanctioned by local usage, when applied to different features, these various spellings should be regarded as in effect different names, and as a rule it is inadvisable to attempt to produce uniformity.*
- 4. Where a choice is offered between two or more names for the same place or locality, all sanctioned by local usage, that which is most appropriate and euphonious should be adopted.*
- 5. The possessive form should be avoided whenever it can be done without destroying the euphony of the name, or changing its descriptive application.*
- 6. In names ending in "burgh," the final "h" should be dropped.*
- 7. Names ending in "borough" should be abbreviated to "boro."*
- 8. The word "center," as a part of a name, should be spelled as above and not "centre."*
- 9. The use of hyphens in connecting parts of names should be discontinued.*
- 10. The letters "C. H." (Court House) appended to the names of county seats should be omitted.*
- 11. In the case of names consisting of more than one word, it is desirable to combine them into one word.*

12. It is desirable to avoid the use of diacritic characters.

13. It is desirable to avoid the use of the words city and town, as parts of names.⁹

Soon after the creation of the United States Board on Geographic Names, Postmaster General John Wanamaker ordered that its decisions be followed whenever possible. He and his successor issued a series of orders in the 1890s relating to Post Office names.

February 13, 1891: Conform to Board Spellings

Ordered, No. 87

The several clerks in the Division of Appointments and in the Bond Division of this Department will hereafter be furnished with bulletins to be published by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names in which will be noted all changes in the spelling of geographic names. Where these changes effect the names of Post Offices, the form of spelling decided upon by the U.S. Board must be carefully noted upon the records of this office, and where new bonds are required on account of appointment of a Postmaster, or for any other reason, the new form of spelling the name of the office must be observed in the appointments and in the bonds.

It is also ordered that the forms of spelling the names of Post Offices, decided upon by the said U.S. Board on Geographic Names shall be observed in all branches of this Department.

John Wanamaker,
Postmaster General¹⁰

April 14, 1892: Name Post Office after Town or Village; Short Names Preferred

Ordered, No. 48.

That, to prevent errors in the assortment and distribution of mail matter in the Railway Mail Service, and in post-offices, and the erroneous addressing of mail matter by the public, which heretofore have occasioned great confusion and delay, the office of the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General is hereby directed not to establish hereafter any post-office where the name of the proposed office differs from that of the town or village in which it is to be located. Whenever it is possible the name of the post-office should be the same as that of the railway station, as well as that of the town.

Appeal by parties in interest in such cases to the Postmaster General will be considered only upon submission of a written brief setting forth in full all the facts and the reasons why uniformity of name is not practicable.

It is further ordered that, whenever it be possible, single and not compound words be selected for names of post-offices; and short words are especially recommended.

John Wanamaker,
Postmaster General¹¹

April 9, 1894: Short Names Generally Required

The May 1894 issue of the *United States Official Postal Guide* contained the text of the April 9 order, as well as additional instructions from the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General, who was responsible for establishing post offices:

Instructions Relative to Names of Post Offices

Post Office Department, Washington, D.C., April 9, 1894:

Ordered, No. 114.

To remove a cause of annoyance to the Department and injury to the Postal Service in the selection of names for newly-established post offices, it is hereby ordered, that from this date only short names or names of one word will be accepted. There may be exceptions when the name selected is historical, or has become local by long usage, but the Department reserves the right in such cases to make the exception or not as it sees proper. Names of post offices will only be changed for reasons satisfactory to the Department."

W. S. Bissell,
Postmaster-General

In selecting names for post offices the name of the town or village in which the office is to be located may be adopted if it is a short one, and if such name is in no way similar to that of any established office in the State.

Where it is proposed to locate an office at a railroad station, the name of the station may be selected if a short one, unless there is already a post office of the same or similar name in the State; in which case the railroad company may be prevailed upon to take the name selected for the new post office.

The prefix of "East," "Old," "New," "North," "South," or "West," to the name of a post office is objectionable; as also is the addition of "Burg," "Center," "City," "Corners," "Creek," "Cross Roads," "Depot," "Hill," "Hotel," "Hollow," "Junction," "Mill," "Mound," "Peak," "Plains," "Point," "Port," "Prairie," "Rock," "River," "Run," "Ridge," "Store," "Station," "Springs," "Town," "Vale," "Valley," or "Village," and all other prefixes or additions, as such prefixes or additions are liable to lead to confusion and delay in the transmission of the mails.

R. A. Maxwell,
Fourth Assistant Postmaster-General

As a result of these orders, thousands of Post Office names were shortened in the 1890s. In his 1896 *Annual Report*, the Postmaster General, perhaps attempting to calm fears of sweeping name changes, stated:

*The Department fully understands that post-office names are often interwoven with the history and business interests of localities and is opposed to changing these names by modifications in spelling or otherwise, except in extraordinary cases where the good of the service actually requires it. In the selection of new names the Department rule of short, single names is strictly adhered to, but changes of names are not authorized by the Department at offices of long standing, except for reasons above adverted to, or when from petitions it can be fairly gathered that a large proportion of the patrons demand it and the change is otherwise acceptable to the Department.*¹²

Some affected communities successfully lobbied to have the earlier form of their name reinstated. For example, the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Post Office lost its "h" in 1894, but regained it in 1911.¹³ The name of the Marlborough, Massachusetts, Post Office was shortened to Marlboro in 1894, but was changed back to its earlier spelling in 1966.

The current *Postal Operations Manual* specifies that:

*a Post Office normally should bear the official name of the incorporated city, town, or borough in which it is located, as shown in its charter. A Post Office located in an unincorporated place should generally bear the approved name of the principal community served.*¹⁴

Naming Buildings In Honor of Individuals

Since at least 1967 some postal facilities have been named in honor of individuals – usually by Congress and sometimes by the Postal Service. Individuals so honored have included important local and national figures, congressmen, and postal employees who died in the line of duty. For example, in 1984 the Houston, Texas, Post Office was named the "Barbara C. Jordan Post Office Building," in honor of former African-American Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. In 1998, the Paterson, New Jersey, Post Office was designated the "Larry Doby Post Office," honoring the Hall of Fame outfielder who was the first African American to play baseball in the American League. In 2000, the Chino Hills, California, Post Office was designated the "Joseph Iletto Post Office," in honor of slain Filipino-American letter carrier Joseph Iletto. And in 2003, President Bush signed into law a bill designating a postal facility in Chicago, Illinois, the "Cesar Chavez Post Office," honoring civil rights leader Cesar E. Chavez, who led the first successful farm workers' union.¹⁵ By 2003, the naming of postal facilities for individuals had become "the single most common form of legislation if measured by the number of public laws

Cornell, Westchester, to Kitchawan.	Middleburgh, Schoharie, to Middleburgh.
Crary's Mills, Saint Lawrence, to Crary Mills.	Mile Strip, Madison, to Milestrip.
Curry's, Sullivan, to Curry.	Miller's Place, Suffolk, to Miller Place.
De Bruce, Sullivan, to DeBruce.	Naumburg, Lewis, to Naumburg.
De Grasse, Saint Lawrence, to Degrasse.	Ne-Ha-Sa-Ne, Hamilton, to Nchassne.
DeWittville, Chautauqua, to Dewittville.	North Petersburgh, Rensselaer, to North Petersburg.
East Bloomfield Station, Ontario, to Holcomb.	Obernburgh, Sullivan, to Oberburg.
East Carlton, Orleans, to Kent.	Olive Bridge, Ulster, to Olivebridge.
East Kendall, Orleans, to Morton.	Page Brook, Chenango, to Pagebrook.
East Martinsburgh, Lewis, to East Martinsburg.	Pearsalls, Queens, to Lynbrook.
Edinburgh, Saratoga, to Edinburg.	Peterborough, Madison, to Peterboro.
Ellenburgh, Clinton, to Ellenburg.	Pleasant Brook, Otsego, to Pleasantbrook.
Ellenburgh Center, Clinton, to Ellenburg Center.	Porter's Corners, Saratoga, to Porter Corners.
Ellenburgh Depot, Clinton, to Ellenburg Depot.	Prince's Bay, Richmond, to Prince Bay.
Ellicottsville,† Cattaraugus, to Ellicottville,†	Fullman, Jefferson, to Grenell.
Fair Dale, Oswego, to Fairdale.	Rathboneville, Steuben, to Rathbone.
Findley's Lake, Chautauqua, to Findley Lake.	Red Hook, Dutchess, to Redhook.
Forest Port, Oneida, to Forestport.	Rosburgh, Allegany, to Rossburg.
Golden's Bridge, Westchester, to Golden-	Sacket's Harbor, Jefferson, to Sacket Harbor.
	Saint Johnsbury, Niagara, to Saint Johnsbury.

Partial list of Post Office name changes in New York, *United States Official Postal Guide*, October 1894.

enacted.”¹⁶ In 2007, 54 of the 175 public laws enacted – more than 30 percent – concerned the naming of postal facilities.

The *Postal Operations Manual* specifies that the Postal Service may name a postal facility after an individual “only with the approval of the Postmaster General and only if the individual has been deceased for at least 10 years, with the exception of deceased U.S. Presidents, Postmasters General, or former members of the [Postal Service’s] Board of Governors.”¹⁷ These restrictions do not apply to individuals honored by acts of Congress.



¹ National Archives Microfilm M841, *Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832 – September 30, 1971*.

² National Archives Microfilm Publication 601, *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789 – 1836*, Roll # 28, John McLean to Jacob Myers, August 24, 1825.

³ National Archives Microfilm Publication M1126, *Post Office Department Reports of Site Locations, 1837 – 1950*, Roll # 264, application to establish the Keyser’s Ridge Post Office in Allegany County, Maryland, dated February 23, 1850, on form printed in 1840s. The same language also appears on the application to establish the Pipe Creek, Bandera County, Texas, Post Office, dated August 26, 1873 (*Ibid.*, Roll # 565).

⁴ *Ibid.*, Roll # 580, application to establish the Burluson, Johnson County, Texas, Post Office, dated November 21, 1881.

⁵ *Ibid.*, application to establish the Donald, Johnson County, Texas, Post Office, dated July 21, 1892.

⁶ *First Report of the United States Board on Geographic Names, 1890-1891*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1892), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1. The U.S. Board of Geographic Names is part of the U.S. Geological Survey.

See <http://mapping.usgs.gov/www/gnis/bgn.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ *Orders of the Postmaster General, 1884-1905*, Vol. 2, February 13, 1891, Records of the Post Office Department, Record Group 28, National Archives and Records Administration.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, April 14, 1892.

¹² *Annual Report of the Postmaster General, 1896*, 42-43.

¹³ A short paper on Pittsburgh’s name change on the Carnegie Library’s website explains that while the city’s name was spelled Pittsburg from 1890 to 1911, city ordinances and council minutes kept the h [<http://carnegielibrary.org/exhibit/hname.html>, June 10, 2004].

¹⁴ *Postal Operations Manual*, Issue 9, July 2002 (with updates through January 17, 2008), 9.

¹⁵ The Library of Congress hosts a website with a searchable database of public laws, called Thomas, which includes bills naming postal facilities. See <http://thomas.loc.gov/>, for further information [May 27, 2004].

¹⁶ Nye Stevens, Congressional Research Service, “Naming Post Offices Through Legislation,” July 3, 2003, 1 [http://lugar.senate.gov/services/pdf_crs/Naming_Post_Offices_Through_Legislation.pdf, accessed August 4, 2008].

¹⁷ *Postal Operations Manual*, Issue 9, July 2002 (with updates through January 17, 2008), 10.