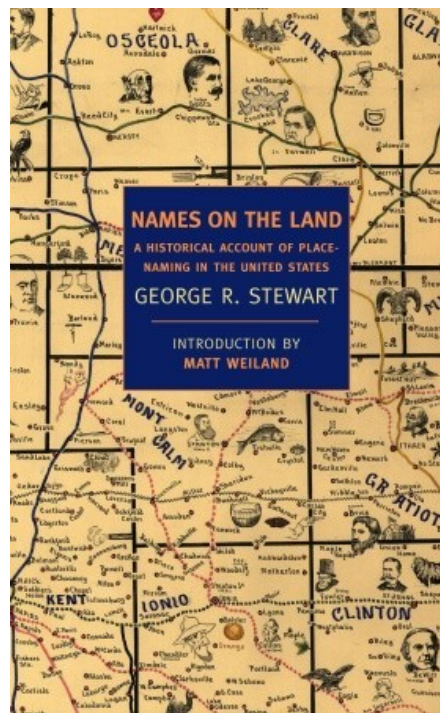




Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States

George R. Stewart , Matt Weiland (Introduction)

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This beloved classic about place-naming in the United States was written during World War II in a conscious effort to pay tribute to the heritage of the nation's peoples. George R. Stewart's love of the surprising story, and his focus not just on language but on how people interact with their environment, make *Names on the Land* a unique window into the history and sociology of America.

From the first European names in what would later be the United States; Ponce de León's flowery Florida, Cortez' semi-mythical isle of California, and the red river Rio Colorado; to New England, New Amsterdam, and New Sweden; the French and the Russians; border ruffians and Boston Brahmins: *Names on the Land* is no dry dictionary but a fascinating panorama of language in action, bursting at the seams with revealing details. In lively, passionate writing, Stewart explains where Indian names were likely to be kept, and why; the fad that gave rise to dozens of Troys and to Athens, Georgia, as well as suburban Parkside, Brookmont, and Woodcrest Manors; why "Brooklyn" is Dutch but looks English and why "Arkansas" is Arkansaw, except of course when it isn't.

His book has delighted generations of road-trippers, armchair travelers, and anyone who ever wondered how their hometown, or (more likely) the next town over, could be called *that*. Stewart's answer is always a story; one of the countless stories that lie behind the rich and strange diversity of America.

Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States Details

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From Reader Review Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States for online ebook

Mark Buchignani says

A wonderfully interesting book which begins in ancient naming origins and over time transitions to numerous specific outstanding or intriguing examples, such as Nome, Alaska, which was originally marked on the map as “? Name” because it had none. This then was misread as “Nome” and so it became. “Nome is therefore an authenticated example of the workings of mere error.” I found the early part of the book fascinating, the latter entertaining. If you are at all interested in U.S. place-name nomenclature, Names on the Land is for you.

N W James says

It's a little dry. But in a 1950's tv program kind of way. We're used to whistles and bells in our culture nowadays. I know SEVERAL people who won't attend a movie on the basis of monotony if it doesn't have at least one explosion or murder in it.

This book is not for them. I kept having to remind myself that the book was written 50 years ago. As a textbook. And apparently a very well respected one. George Stewart has a mild humor as he writes. He passes the silly, the overly complicated, and the mundane stories of how we named the New Land mostly in a hurry and mostly without having done it for thousands of years.

I'm a name nerd. So I liked it. I learned the 6 basic ways people name places. I learned that most of the 'Indian' names I grew up around in Michigan were really just badly heard Sioux/Algonquin filtered through badly translated French. Same is true for most of the 'Indian' names of the states. I learned the spelling of Arkansas vs. the pronunciation of Ar-kan-saw caused a lot more furor than one modern reader could believe. Same is true for Mt. McKinley. I learned the county I was born in (Genesee County, Michigan) was named after the county and town in New York state. The Genesee Indians probably never lived in Michigan. That shoots down a lot of childhood daydreams I had. A lot of the west (west of Appalachia, that is) was named to get people to move there and buy land. That explains all the Mt. Pleasants, the Oak Brooks, the Springfields. I learned that most of the states after the original 13 had been chosen from several different names (i.e. Washington was almost Columbia after the river, Missouri was almost Jefferson, Minnesota was almost Mississippi).

Whitaker says

A really great book shows us how everything is great and worth to die for

John P says

Excellent! Informative and interesting all the way through. Stewart displays a powerful command of language and story. The amount of research required to produce this work is mind-boggling and yet after

Stewart's distillation, the result is more than readable - it's a joy. He punctuates his straightforward delivery with occasional humor and believable (and likely correct) inferences. The notes are well done too and showcase more of his personality than does the main body.

Tim says

A fine tracing of how our nation's landscape was named: natural features, cities, and towns. The author follows the individual strands of explorers and why they named features as they did (reflecting their heritage, religion, country, or for that matter, a whim of the moment.) Then settlers, factions, towns people, the Post Office and finally a Board to settle disputes or "clean up" anomalies - if the locals would allow it.

The book is comprehensive from the opening sentence, "In the beginning, then, the land was without names." On and on and on the book wanders from East to West, taking one all across the continent until ending in Alaska and Hawaii. And much time and detail is given to native Americans, the Choctaw, Iroquois, Seminole whose languages were often musical to the ear, and those names stayed. Waves of French, English, German, Dutch all added their lines, and in many cases renamed features and towns to their liking only to have some return to a former label, or something different altogether.

Along the way, Stewart exhibits a wit and dry humor, and not a little of his own musings. On Pg141, he grieves (one feels) at the mournfulness of statues and battlefields where those in combat died, "[during the French-Indian war near Ticonderoga, NY], many died that day, men who had seen no visions, as men always die when a stupid general flings them against an unshaken fortress." And later, remarking on the "great men" whose names are found from Maine to Georgia, "Sunderland, Walpole, Litchfield, Hardwicke, Bedford, Halifax, Pelham, Newcastle, Carlisle and the rest. What most of them ever did for the colonies to deserve so much as the naming of an out-house would be difficult to discover."

The taking of Indian names was both original, and then rediscovered with a passion in the early to mid 1800s. Stewart quotes a poem on pg 277 by a popular Lydia Sigourney who wrote "Indian Names" -

Ye say they all have pass'd away
That noble race and brave;
That their light canoes have vanish'd,
From off the crested wave;
That, mid the forests where they roam'd,
There rings no hunter's shout;
But their name is on your waters,
Ye may not wash it out ...

Old Massachusetts wears it
Within her lordly crown,
And broad Ohio bears it
Amid his young renown.
Connecticut hath wreath'd it,
Where her quiet foliage waves,
And bold Kentucky breathes it hoarse
Through all her ancient caves.

The author notes regarding African Americans, pg330, "Unfortunately the rich imagination and verbal luxuriance of the race had free play only in the informal names of its own districts. Catfish Alley in Charleston, or Congo Street, Adam and Eve Alley, Solomon Alley, Elysian Fields, and Concrete Quarters"

all in the small city of Monroe, Louisiana.

A reference book but a rich and meaningful one.

Kathrina says

How I wish George R. Stewart was still alive, so that I could actually respond to his request for letters on names of the land. How grateful I am that he found the process of naming so fascinating, and that his passion poured out in every sentence he wrote. A friend of mine recently read Moby Dick, and her review considered -- damn, this guy really likes whales -- and though I don't believe whales topped her list of fascinating obsessions, she appreciated the passion with which Melville spoke of them. The same is here; I do enjoy the contemplations of names, their evolution through history, but Stewart's passion makes the act and process of naming an art form. I cheer with him when he deduces that Oak River (or Creek, Stream, Brook, Valley, whatever) was named because it had few oaks, not many, and thus the descriptor was specific to its uniqueness, not what was common. Or when he leads us through the evidence that Oregon is really a misreading of the word Wisconsin?! I wish I had a photographic memory so that I could recall at a moment the absolute ton of onomatopoeia trivia packed in these pages. I am in awe of the goodreads readers who have claimed this book is boring; I have found this book to be the most engaging way to learn my American history, as I can associate historical events through the names they left behind. There is no end to the creativity, ingenuity, and melting-pot amalgamation of the naming of this country -- how can that be boring? It's our story! Thanks to NYRB for keeping this book in print.

joyce says

Interesting to read a book on American place-naming written when Alaska and Hawaii weren't even states yet, and when there were people still living whose parents remembered the Civil War. The "historical experience" was probably enhanced by the first-edition copy I'd checked out from the library, brittle pages to match that effusive old prose style, reminding me to be patient even when I skipped some of the longer-winded passages.

Fun read - would love to see the same with tons of maps, just because I'm a nerd like that.

Ocean Gebhardt says

I'm very happy this book exists, although a newer version or edition might be due at this point. Regardless, if you want to know where the name of every city, state, mountain, river, etc. in the US comes from, and why and how, this is probably the best source.

Andrew says

This is only incidentally a book about placenames in the United States. Though Stewart did explain the

origin of many names, more or less in historical order, and clearly enjoyed a good story (such as the way that "Wisconsin," through a series of misspellings and displacements, became "Oregon", or the squabbling over the name of Mount Rainier), his real love was the process of naming. The ways that Americans and their predecessors named the landscape are manifold, and much of the style of New England or Ohio or California names derives from the practices that were current when these areas were settled. And unlike so many historians of his time, Stewart did not ignore the American Indians. He concluded by musing on the ways that a good name can become poetic, through romantic, historical, or meaningful connotations.

The pace is slow and I took several weeks to read this book, which is probably the right way to approach it. This is the fourth of Stewart's books that I have read, the others being 'Earth Abides' (a powerful novel about the human and ecological consequences of an epidemic that wipes out nearly all the human race), 'Storm' (a meteorological novel that led to the practice of naming hurricanes), and 'U.S. Route 40' (a travel book about the coast-to-coast highway that includes the old National Road). If you like his style, all of these books are still worth reading, and 'Earth Abides' is one of the few pre-1950 science fiction novels to remain perennially in print.

Hadrian says

Exactly what is promised in the title. A history of place names in the United States, from the colonial era until the present writing - the 1950s, with the then-territories of Alaska and Hawaii given prominence.

While much of the book slides into a dull recitation of facts, you can find plenty of trends or fads. How many names first came from Europe, then from basic descriptions (Blue Ridge mountains, Chimney Rock), how many then came from classical references, or mistranslated or misspelled Native names, and so on. Stewart finds some charming primary sources as well, about some confused debates over naming towns and beloved mountains.

Sean says

Written back in the 1940s, "Names on the Land" is a collection of stories relating how various places in the United States got their names. Stewart starts out describing how early explorers named natural geographic features and carries the story of place naming through the 20th century.

Readers shouldn't expect a single narrative about place naming, but rather a large selection of anecdotes. Stewart describes the naming of many, many places. My favorites include Portland, OR (determined via a coin flip) and Nome, AK (transcribed from "? Name" on map).

Alex Rosenthal says

I knew I was in trouble as soon as I picked up this book and saw that it was 400 pages.

There are two ways a book like this could work. You could have a narrative study of the trends in place-naming and how these trends reflected the growth of the United States. Or you could have a bathroom style book of factoids explaining how each place in the United States got its name, something quick and easily digestible. Unfortunately, this book is both. A long narrative story that goes from place to place and explains

how each place got its name, occasionally providing historical context. This ends up being less interesting than I'm making it sound. Each of these stories are interesting in and of themselves, but reading them one after the other is deadening and something like being stuck talking to a dull person at a party: you start by thinking "this could be interesting, I'm gonna hear what he has to say," and after a short while you're thinking "dear god in heaven get me out of here."

Rebecca Wilkins says

This was one of those boring books to read before going to sleep.

Tony says

Stewart, George R. NAMES ON THE LAND: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF PLACE-NAMING IN THE UNITED STATES. ((1945; revised in 1958 & 1967; this ed. 2008). ****. Stewart wrote this book while he was serving in the military during WWII. How places got their names had been a life-long interest of his since he was a teenager. It is a book that you can't read at just a few sittings. You have to keep getting up to tell someone what it was you just learned. This takes time. My wife has resorted to reading her book in a room with the door shut when I was reading this one. I think that all of us – at one time or another – have wondered about the origin of a place name, or the name of a river or a hill. Stewart manages to take us through the many processes that existed through history that had play in such naming. We find that many of our place names were derived from Indian names, transliterated into the language of whichever settler had asked. If these particular settlers were displaced by other foreign groups, then the spelling might be changed or the meaning translated into a new language. Many of our place names have been transported whole from the original countries of the various settler groups, although spelling might be changed. It is interesting to note that the original names as they existed in England or Ireland or France had lost their histories, and could not be explained any further. Another problem was that there was no uniformity of spelling in earlier times, and the language made room for lots of variant spellings. Some particularly interesting stories are behind the names of such cities as Newport News, the Bronx, Yonkers, Broadway, Wall Street, Chicago, Seattle, etc., etc. As I said, it is a fascinating book that was brought up to date (1967) when Stewart wrote additions that included Alaska and Hawaii, and made projections about the probable effects of the post-atomic age. This edition has an introduction by Matt Weiland. Recommended.

Lobstergirl says

For some reason I was expecting more charm, more narrative from this. Stewart's pile-of-facts style reminded me of John McPhee, as if this were a 500 page McPhee New Yorker article. It was boring.

But there were some moderately interesting facts, and some bright moments, as in this 1864 Congressional discussion of the naming of Montana:

Mr. Sumner: The name of this new Territory - Montana - strikes me as very peculiar. I wish to

ask the chairman of the committee what has suggested that name. It seems to me it must have been borrowed from some novel or other. I do not know how it originated.

Mr. Wade: I cannot tell anything about that. I do not know but that it may have been borrowed from a novel. I would rather borrow from the Indians, if I could find any proper Indian name.

Mr. Sumner: I was going to suggest that in giving a name to this Territory, ...I would rather take the name from the soil, a good Indian name.

Mr. Wade: Suggest one and I will agree to it.

Mr. Sumner: I am not familiar enough with the country to do so.

Mr. Howard: I was equally puzzled when I saw the name in the bill...I was obliged to turn to my old Latin dictionary...

At first it seemed surprising that a primary source would be more entertaining than a secondary source. But it shouldn't be; they usually are.

Later, Stewart made a joke:

Berlin in Alabama, bearing the name of Adolph Hitler's capital, changed it to that of the capital of King Croesus by becoming Sardis. Your author commends this as a prudent selection, scarcely subject to political vicissitudes. The United States is unlikely ever to become involved in a war with Lydia, especially since that once potent kingdom disappeared from the list of independent nations in the sixth century B.C.

Constantine says

Light in tone and deep in content, a fun book to dip into or read cover to cover.

Else says

I am a name enthusiast and also have a great deal of respect for George Stewart--a former Cal professor and a prolific and varied writer. Despite all of that, I barely made it through this naming death march of a book. (Don't be fooled by the chapter "Melodrama in the Forties" beginning on p. 242. Nope that's about the 1840s.) But read it I did, and I'm glad I did. If you expect to see me in the next few months be prepared for an onslaught of place-name fun facts; I've stored them away like a giddy chipmunk.

Here are a few of Stewart's stronger opinions about naming practices:

--On the United States of America as a name: "The makeshift establishment of the national name was the worst misfortune in our whole naming-history. Its too great length has consumed paper, ink, time, and energy. Its vagueness and inaccuracy have caused incalculable misunderstanding, and bad feeling. Yet the trouble has never been acute enough to occasion an amendment to the Constitution, and any official change has become less and less likely."

--Disdain for timid namers: "In the years following the Civil War a horrible malady called 'good taste' began to rage throughout the United States. It was the disease of people who were basically unsure of themselves. Those suffering from it became artistically timid, insipid, and sterile.

In naming, which is a kind of art, the stricken people preferred conventional terms of pale elegance. They rejected the honest names of earlier times, and rejected also the vigorous names of the great industrial age in which they lived. Their namings tended to be effeminate, snobbish, Anglophile, and full of liquid sounds."

--On stating the obvious about the origin of names arising from plants: "Such names rarely sprang from incidents, because a man does not often have an adventure with a tree."

--And finally, when referencing an enthusiastic reader's compilation of all two-letter place names: "This is a kind of sheer intellectual whimsey which is too little cultivated in the modern world."

Indeed.

Rachel says

It isn't a bad book, but it's a bit like reading a dictionary. It gives the history of place names in the U.S., and I love that kind of history. However, I didn't make it past the East coast chapters before I decided I wanted to supplement my reading diet with something plot-driven, and eventually I forgot all about this book on my nightstand. I'll be picking this up again, but for now, I'm just going to say I'm done with it.

Lacey says

Have you heard the story about how chocolate chip cookies were invented? Once upon a time there was a lovely young housewife who was going to have company and wanted to make chocolate cookies for them. Lo and behold when she went to the cupboard she found, to her everlasting shame, that she was all out of cocoa powder. Undeterred she broke up a bar of baking chocolate and stirred the chunks into the cookie dough, assuming that in the oven the chunks would melt and mix into the cookie, making it fully chocolate. Obviously that didn't happen but the result was even better and we all lived happily ever after eating the new cookies.

Reading this book was kind of like inventing the chocolate chip cookie. I thought it was going to be a book full of fascinating facts about names famous and obscure throughout the land. What it actually is is chocolate chip nuggets of interesting factoids interspersed within the cookie part. Except the cookie part is some of the dullest, driest prose I've ever read. I'm rather proud of myself for having made it through, but I don't know that I'd encourage anyone else to attempt the project.

David says

RATED IN CATEGORY "BOOK" : 1 STAR

RATED IN CATEGORY "SLEEP AID" : 5 STARS

I acknowledge that many goodreads reviewers profess to find this book "fascinating". I understand that it is regarded by some as an "American classic". There is something distinctly impressive about George R. Stewart's sheer stamina.

What I cannot do, based on empirical evidence from extensive trials, is read more than a page of this book without lapsing into prolonged, profound slumber. It may be the most boring book ever written.

On the plus side, the book's soporific effects are remarkably consistent, with a median time to sleep onset of just under a minute. The side-effect profile is quite favorable, with no potential for addiction, or adverse drug interaction with other therapies. The most prevalent adverse effect observed in trials was chronic bruising of the reader's ankle, the most common site of impact when the book slides from the subject's grasp at the moment of sleep onset. Use of the product near an open flame is a distinct fire hazard and is contraindicated.

My experience with this product suggests that repurposing it as a sleep aid, for subjects with mild to moderate insomnia, represents a practical option well worth considering. Viewed as a potential remedy for subjects experiencing insomnia, the risk-benefit ratio is quite favorable.

If you have difficulties falling asleep, and worry about Ambien-induced "sleep-snacking", "sleep-driving" or - God forbid - "abnormal thinking", or the addictive potential of benzodiazepines, you might want to consider "Names on the Land" as an inexpensive, safe, surprisingly effective alternative. I imagine that an audio version of the therapy would be equally efficacious.
