

A GUIDE TO
CHANGING
RACIST
AND
OFFENSIVE
PLACE NAMES
IN THE
UNITED STATES

2022



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF TRIBAL HISTORIC
PRESERVATION OFFICERS



The
Wilderness
Society

Acknowledgements

We recognize Native American and Indigenous Peoples as the longest-serving stewards of the land. We acknowledge and affirm their inherent sovereignty and self-determination and respect treaty rights, including reserved rights that exist outside of reservations.

We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples and commit to being more conscientious and inclusive and working with Indigenous Peoples to advance the establishment of trust and respect in our relationships.

We seek the guidance of Native American and Indigenous Peoples to effectively advocate for the protection of culturally significant lands and the preservation of language and culture.

We respect and support the priorities, traditional knowledge, interests and concerns of Native American and Indigenous Peoples to ensure a more just and equitable future.

This guide is the result of the efforts of dozens of people, and we are extremely grateful for their input and expertise.

We would specifically like to thank [IllumiNative](#) and [Tahoma Peak Solutions](#), both of whom provided extensive comments and suggestions. Their input helped make the guide much stronger and more inclusive.

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The **National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers** is a non-profit membership organization of tribal historic preservation officers that supports and encourages tribal historic preservation programs. We provide guidance to preservation officials, elected representatives, and the public about national historic preservation legislation, policies and regulations. We promote tribal sovereignty, develop partnerships, and advocate for tribes in governmental activities on preservation and funding issues.

Founded in 1935, **The Wilderness Society** is the leading conservation organization working to unite people to protect America's wild places. With more than one million members and supporters, we have led the effort to permanently protect 111 million acres of wilderness and ensure sound management of our shared national lands. These places are essential for life on earth. We see a future where people and wild nature flourish together, meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing planet. To accomplish that, we must ensure that public lands are a solution to the climate and extinction crises and that all people benefit equitably from public lands.

This guide uses racist and otherwise offensive terms on an illustrative basis and discusses racism, sexism, violence and other sensitive or potentially disturbing topics.

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Executive summary

Tribal leaders in Yellowstone National Park marching to present a petition to rename Mt. Doane and the Hayden Valley. Mt. Doane was named for an Army captain who participated in numerous massacres of Native Americans. Hayden Valley was named for an early explorer whose reports called for the extermination of Indigenous people. © 2017 Billings Gazette.

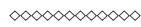
The names we give to natural places and geographic features like parks, mountains and lakes matter. Recently, there is growing acknowledgement that many place names across the U.S. are derogatory and hurtful, and some are worth challenging and replacing.

Indigenous Peoples stewarded the area we call North America for thousands of years before white European settlers forcibly removed them. Africans and Black Americans were enslaved and exploited on American soil for centuries as well. The same places these atrocities took place became our national parks, forests, wilderness areas and other cherished public lands and waters. We can't allow the names of these natural treasures to offend the same communities still owed such a deep debt for that violent and troubled history.

Yet across the United States are thousands of places and geographic features with names that honor Confederate leaders, perpetrators of atrocities against Indigenous people and historical figures with repugnant racial views. Sometimes place names include racial or sexual slurs or are otherwise offensive. Aside from enshrining hurtful ideas and memories, these names perpetuate prejudice and racism and create an unwelcoming environment for many people on America's public lands.

Place names must be equitable and just, honoring cultural diversity and advancing dignity for all. They should tell an honest history, celebrating and respecting a fuller array of those who helped build our nation—especially those whose memories have previously been neglected.

We must do better. Place names should not cause harm; they must be equitable and just. They should honor cultural diversity and advance dignity for all people. They should tell an honest history, celebrating and respecting the first Americans—Native Americans—and a fuller array of those who helped build our nation, especially those whose memories have previously been neglected.



The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is the official naming authority of the United States. With oversight from the secretary of the interior, the board is responsible for naming and renaming geographic features—physical sites like lakes, mountains, rivers, cliffs and valleys—throughout the country. The board allows anyone to propose naming or renaming a geographic feature. This allows us to address historic injustices by replacing disparaging and otherwise offensive place names.

Many geographic features with racist and offensive names have already been renamed by the board due to the committed efforts of people from across the country. Each of these name changes is a success story that benefits the local community and the country as a whole. In December 2021, for example, a mountain in Colorado was renamed in honor of a female Native American leader. The mountain had previously been named with a racial slur. Similarly, in July 2021, more than a dozen sites with racist and offensive names in Texas were renamed.

Anyone can be a part of this change, whether as a concerned individual or a representative of a communal organization or tribal nation. You have the power to ensure place names truly reflect the best of America.

The board renaming process is straightforward. It starts with a simple proposal, then, after input from local governments, federal land management agencies and tribal governments, runs through state naming authorities and ultimately the board itself.

This guide provides you with everything you need to know to successfully navigate that process and change the name of (or establish a new name for) a geographic feature.

Many geographic features with racist and offensive names have already been renamed by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names due to the committed efforts of people from across the country.

Inside are resources to identify offensive place names; instructions on how to propose new names; guidance on conducting outreach to and engaging with tribal nations and other stakeholder groups; and advice on securing a favorable recommendation from state naming authorities.

Present and future generations deserve to enjoy these incredible places without feeling unwanted, unsafe or insulted. We hope this guide will be used to continue and accelerate the elimination of racist and offensive place names from the American landscape, and in doing so, help all people feel welcome on public lands.



Changing racist and offensive place names

Formerly named Mt. McKinley, this peak in Alaska was renamed Denali, one of the early Athabaskan words for “mountain.” © NativeStock Pictures

Introduction: What’s in a name?

Place names have the capacity to tell important stories. Some honor notable people, like Black Elk Peak in South Dakota, named after the Lakota spiritual leader. Others evoke the physical features of a place, like Death Valley in the California desert, or Big Bend National Park, along a curve of the Rio Grande River in Texas. Still others represent a deep connection to local community, culture and history. For example, Denali (formerly Mt. McKinley), in Alaska, uses one of the early Athabaskan names for the mountain—a link to, and continuation of, the millennia-old history of Alaska Natives in the region.

But because place names have such power, they have often been wielded by the place-namers to harmful ends, or to celebrate ugly ideas and events.

The U.S. still contains thousands of geographic features bearing racial and sexual slurs, or the names of figures who killed, expelled and enslaved Native Americans and Black people.

Left intact, these names can perpetuate racism, endorse hateful views and encourage a discredited or skewed telling of history. For example, when we continue to use names of geographic features that honor people who perpetrated atrocities against Native Americans—like Mount Evans in Colorado, which honors John Evans, facilitator of the Sand Creek Massacre—we tacitly endorse a story in which colonial expansion, conquest and genocide is honorable. That story heroizes people who sought to exterminate the Native American men, women and children who have lived for time immemorial on these lands. Similarly, when we recognize Confederate leaders like Jefferson Davis, an avowed racist and white supremacist, we tacitly affirm Davis’ racist views and his defense of slavery.

The U.S. still contains thousands of geographic features bearing racial or sexual slurs or the names of figures who killed, expelled and enslaved Native Americans and Black people.

The same holds true for place names that borrow slurs or racist terms. As research on Native American mascots has shown, derogatory names and images dehumanize people and influence opinions about, and treatment of, disenfranchised groups. That's not to mention the very direct impact on the targeted communities. Imagine a Cheyenne child visiting Mount Evans, named after the man who facilitated the massacre of her ancestors; a Native woman visiting Squaw Creek; or an African-American man visiting Jim Crow Island in Missouri.

A naming regime—and an accounting of history—that is more honest and inclusive and less tolerant of cruelty could recognize important figures and events in our nation's history while also acknowledging the pain and perseverance of communities of color and other groups often forgotten in these retellings. That includes Native Americans, the first people to inhabit this great land; enslaved people of African and Indigenous descent; and Asian and Latinx immigrants who suffered due to unfair policies and political systems. Further, it would make public lands more accessible and welcoming to more people.

Current place names: frequent offenders

The following is a brief survey of offensive and inappropriate place names now on the books.

Racial or sexual slurs and other offensive terms

In 2015, Vocativ conducted a [comprehensive survey](#) that found 1,441 places named with racial slurs, the vast majority of which are geographic features under the purview of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Examples include:

- 558 places named with words or references offensive to African Americans, including places named “Uncle Tom,” “pickaninny,” and “Jim Crow.”
- 30 places named “Chinaman.”
- More than 600 places named “squaw,” a sexual and racial slur against Native American women.

Confederate leaders

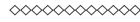
The Wall Street Journal identified [more than 100 place names on public land](#) that honor Confederate leaders, including Robert E. Lee Creek in Idaho, Stonewall Jackson Lake in Georgia and Jeff [Jefferson] Davis creeks in Montana, California and Oregon. They and other Confederate leaders were responsible for the enslavement of millions of Black people, including accompanying abuse, torture and murder. Davis, the president of the Confederacy, defended slavery and the Civil War until his death, once [declaring](#) that “African slavery, as it exists in the United States, is a moral, a social and a political blessing.” In recent years, many Confederate memorials and place names have been reconsidered, and some changed or removed.



In 2019, Nevada's second tallest mountain was renamed Dosó Doyabi, which means “white mountain” in Shoshone. The previous name, Jeff Davis Peak, honored the segregationist leader of the Confederacy, who declared war on the United States to defend slavery. © Mitch Barrie, Flickr.

Racist historical figures

As more history is uncovered and public awareness grows, the number of land units and geographic features named for racist historical figures is increasingly evident. For example, the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in Washington honors a forester who was also a eugenicist and served on the advisory council of the American Eugenics Society; the Stikine-LeConte Wilderness in Alaska is named for avowed white-supremacist Joseph LeConte; and the Hayden Valley in Yellowstone National Park is named for Ferdinand Hayden, who advocated for the extermination of Native people.



Contrary to some popular rhetoric, renaming racially insensitive or otherwise inappropriately named geographic features or land units is not “canceling history.” Rather, it is an opportunity to provide a more honest accounting of America’s past and a gesture toward healing historic wounds.

Of course, renaming geographic features is not a complete solution. It won’t undo the harm done to African Americans, immigrants, Native Americans and others by white settlers and the U.S. government. It certainly won’t undo slavery or the colonial takeover of Native lands. But it is a vital step nonetheless, and one that can initiate a broader conversation about our past, and how that past informs our present. In this way, renaming places plays a key role in the national discourse about racism and privilege.

How places are named (and renamed)

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is the official naming authority of the United States. With oversight from the secretary of the interior, the board is responsible for naming and renaming geographic features—physical sites like lakes, mountains, rivers, cliffs and valleys—throughout the country.

The board allows anyone to propose naming or renaming a geographic feature. This allows us to address historic injustices by replacing disparaging and otherwise offensive place names.

The board renaming process is not complex, although it can be time-consuming. It starts with a proposal submitted to the board, which then forwards it to a state naming authority. That state entity then makes a recommendation back to the board, which decides whether to rename the geographic feature.

Who can rename a place

By law, the secretary of the interior has joint authority over place names with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. In practice, however, the board dictates the process. First established by executive order by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890, the board is in charge of developing principles and policies regarding place names; standardizing place names; and making determinations of place names (which are subject to the review and approval by the secretary of the interior).



Lt. Henry O. Flipper, the first Black graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In 2021, a summit in Texas was renamed “Henry Flipper Hill” after the federal board approved the removal of an offensive term from more than a dozen place names in the state. *Photo by Kennedy, ca. 1877, Center for Legislative Archives, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, National Archives and Records Administration.*

The board maintains comprehensive policies regarding place names. These are found in its “**Principles, Policies, and Procedures**,” a governing document that provides direction on name-change development and review.

The board is made up of representatives from the departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Interior, Defense, Homeland Security and State, with additional representation from the U.S. Postal Service, Library of Congress, Government Printing Office and Central Intelligence Agency. A directory of board members is found [here](#).

What can be renamed by the U.S Board on Geographic Names.

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names has jurisdiction to name or rename any geographic feature in the United States, whether on federal or non-federal land.

However, geographic names and the names of federal land units established by an act of Congress, executive order, treaty or federal proclamation may not be changed by the board. These include Native American reservations, national monuments, national forests, designated wilderness areas, wildlife refuges, national historic landmarks, national recreation areas and other similar designations.

For cities, counties, streets, highways and administrative facilities like ranger stations, the board defers to the administering agency and intervenes only if agencies disagree over the proper name. Renaming these places requires a different process and is outside the scope of this guide. The board does not name structures on private property, either.

In addition to renaming geographic features, the board has the authority to name geographic features that don’t yet have a name. Names can be proposed for any unnamed geographic feature except for those within federal wilderness areas. Within wilderness areas, the board does not approve names for unnamed features without an overriding need. The process for naming unnamed features is similar to the one used to rename features.

What **Can** and **Cannot** be Renamed

Can

Mountains

Rivers

Streams

Creeks

Buttes

Other geographic features

Cannot

Wilderness areas, national parks, forests, monuments, or other land units

Geographic features on Indian reservations

(unless proposed by the tribe)

Currently unnamed features in designated wilderness

Administrative buildings

Cities and counties

Streets and highways

Structures on private property

In brief: the naming process

The renaming process is fairly straightforward, although it can be slow.

It begins with a proposal to rename a geographic feature, which is submitted to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, either online or via direct mail.

Upon receipt of a proposal, the board takes three actions:

1. The board includes the proposal on its [quarterly review list](#).
2. The board solicits feedback on the proposal from federal agencies and all federally recognized Native nations.
3. The board forwards the proposal to the appropriate state geographic naming authority for a recommendation.

Some states have a formal committee that makes recommendations to the board. In other states, the state naming authority is an individual person. Once the board has received a recommendation from the state naming authority, it takes final action to accept or reject the proposal. The board's decisions are official for federal use, which means they are used on all federal maps and products.

Once it receives recommendations from all interested parties, the board adds the proposal to the next monthly docket for a final decision. The amount of time a state naming authority, local government or federal agency will take to provide input can vary widely, from months to years.

THE BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

Renaming Process Overview

1

RESEARCH

Conduct research on racially offensive names and suitable replacement names (including original Native American names).

2

OUTREACH

Conduct outreach to build local support for the name change proposal, including consultation with Native American Tribes.

3

SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL

Submit your proposal to the Board of Geographic Names to rename a geographic feature.

4

STATE APPROVAL

Secure a favorable recommendation from the state naming authority.

5

FINAL DECISION

Secure action by the Board on Geographic Names.



Step-by-step: How to rename a place

In 2020, the Board on Geographic Names approved a proposal by the Hung-A-Lei-Ti Woodfords Washoe Tribe in Nevada to change the name of Jeff Davis Peak to Da-ed Dow Go-et Mountain. The new name means “saddle between two peaks” in the Washoe language. © *Tim Berger, Flickr*.

Researching offensive place names

There are several resources available to catalog and verify offensive place names:

- **U.S. Board on Geographic Names database:** The board maintains a comprehensive database called the Geographic Names Information System. You can use the database to find all the geographic features with a specific name. To search the [Geographic Names Information System](#), enter the name of the geographic feature you seek and select the state in which it is located. You should see a list of features with that name. Click on the feature you are interested in for details.
- **Vocativ survey:** In 2015, Vocativ identified geographic features in the United States with names featured in the crowd-sourced Racial Slur Database. The [Vocativ website](#) includes a map, sortable by state, of geographic features named with a racial slur. Some features included in the survey are outside the board’s scope for renaming, but it’s a good resource nonetheless.
- **Wall Street Journal:** The Wall Street Journal has identified [over 100 place names on public land that honor Confederate leaders](#), many of which would fall under the board’s naming purview. An additional list of resources for researching place names can be found in [APPENDIX C](#).

Proposing a new name

The renaming process begins in earnest with your proposal. The board offers an online application form as well as a [downloadable version](#) to get started. We recommend the downloadable version so you can maintain a hard copy for your records. Always submit forms via email if possible, as a physical mailed copy may be delayed.

Several state geographic naming authorities also have their own name change proposal forms. You can find links to these forms in [APPENDIX B](#). To start the name change process, you will need to complete the board proposal form or, if appropriate, a state proposal form. In general, you can start with the board proposal form.

You can read about the information you need to complete the board form and how to find it in [APPENDIX A](#). Once complete, you should submit the proposal to the board either by mail or email.

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How the board makes place-name decisions

The board has developed [comprehensive policies](#) on the naming and renaming of natural features. Many of the policies are not relevant to efforts that address racist and offensive place names (for example: don't name a geographic feature after your pet), but some are important to consider.

Whenever possible, the proposed name should retain a link to the history of the place. As described below, consulting with, and learning from, Native nations is an important step in understanding the history of a place.

You may also consult online resources, historical societies, early maps and place-name books. Resources for conducting this research are included in [APPENDIX C](#).

Derogatory and offensive terms

The board generally supports names that are already actively used to refer to a place locally. However, board policies prohibit it from approving a locally used name that is determined to be “offensive to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group.”

How Congress blocks place-name changes

The board will not act on a name change proposal that “is also being considered by the United States Congress.” The board will wait until the end of the second session of Congress (even numbered years), and then another six months into the next session of Congress, before acting on such a proposal—but only if no new legislation has been introduced in the meantime.

This means that a member of Congress can effectively block a name change by introducing and reintroducing legislation affecting the name of the place in question. This is exactly what Wyoming's congressional delegation has done to prevent a name change to Devils Tower, whose name is offensive to

many Native Americans. In 2014, a Lakota Nation spiritual leader proposed renaming the feature as “Bear Lodge,” which was a translation of one of its original names.

Members of Wyoming's congressional delegation introduced legislation in 2015 to permanently call the site Devils Tower. The same proposal was reintroduced in 2017 and 2019, causing the board to defer action on the Lakota petition. The National Park Service recommends that people interested in changing the name of Devils Tower send comments to “your respective congressional representative or the White House.”

There are only three terms automatically considered by the board to be offensive and therefore barred from appearing in place names (a recent secretarial order added the third term to the list—see sidebar on page 17). Otherwise, name change proposals that remove offensive or derogatory names receive no special treatment and are handled in the same manner as any other name change proposal.



In Maryland, there is a proposal to rename Negro Mountain after Malcolm X, a Black civil rights movement leader. © Marion S. Trikosko, Library of Congress.

Naming places after people

The board has several policies regarding naming places after individuals. The most important are:

- They must have been deceased for at least five years.
- They should have “either some direct or long-term association with the feature, or have made a significant contribution to the area, community, or state in which it is located.”
- An exception may be made for people with “outstanding national or international recognition,” even if they are not tied directly to the geographic feature.

A proposal to name a place after a person should include biographical information about that person, including their connection to the feature proposed for naming or renaming.

Consulting with tribal nations

Since time immemorial, Native Americans and their respective tribal nations have lived on and stewarded the lands and waters we now call the United States. These places were—and are—used for traditional and ceremonial purposes, and Native people maintain deep spiritual, ancestral and cultural ties to them.

Significant areas may include burial grounds; places to gather traditional medicines; locations of historical events; and areas that feature prominently in tribal religious tradition or creation stories. Often, Native access to these places is vital to the continuation of cultural and spiritual practice.

It is important to understand a tribal nation’s connection to, and if applicable, Native name for, a geographic feature before proposing to rename it.

Many tribal nations are already pursuing a return to the original Native names they or their ancestors gave to geographic features. Other times, where the Native name of a geographic feature is unknown, tribal nations are developing new Native names or names that honor Native leaders.

In addition to representing a more apt and authentic connection to the land, these names are a great opportunity to educate the public about the history and culture of tribal nations.

New or restored Native place names often represent a more apt and authentic connection to the land and offer a great opportunity to educate the public.

It is essential that tribal nations with historic or current connections to geographic features be consulted in naming or renaming those places. This must be done early in the naming process, so that tribal nations can play a lead role if desired and incorporate traditional Native names.



Colorado's Mt. Evans is named to honor former territorial governor John Evans, who facilitated the Sand Creek Massacre. In 2019, the Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes and The Wilderness Society proposed renaming the peak "Mt. Blue Sky" to honor the Cheyenne and Arapaho people.
© boilerintown, wikimedia

Identifying appropriate tribal nations to consult

Determining which tribal nations have a connection to particular geography can be challenging, but there are several sources to help guide you:

- Native Land Digital has produced an [online map of the ancestral territories of American tribal nations](#).
- The U.S. Forest Service has created a [searchable map of current Native American reservations and ancestral territories of U.S. tribal nations](#). The map allows the viewer to click on a location and discover Native American connections.

Other sources of information about tribal homelands include the [National Atlas: Indian Tribes, Culture, and Languages](#) and the website [Native Languages](#).

Although maps of ancestral Native territories can be helpful in guiding your outreach, tribal boundaries are not necessarily static. It may be wise to reach out to tribal nations directly for clarification. This can also be helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the history surrounding a certain landscape or site.

After you identify which ancestral homelands encompass the geographic feature, you should reach out to the relevant tribal nations. Every tribal government is organized differently, so it is important to ensure that you work with the tribal government that represents the tribal nation, not an individual or non-profit affiliated with the nation. A tribal members may have views on whether a certain name is appropriate, but that doesn't necessarily mean they speak for the tribal nation's government.

Typically, the best person to talk to when you reach out to a tribal nation is their tribal historic national preservation officer. These officers are in charge of information about cultural ties to certain places. If the tribe has such an officer, you will be able to find their contact information through the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers' [online directory](#).

If the affected tribal nation does not have an officer, you should contact their culture department or tribal council. Many tribal nations have a dedicated website with directory information for these offices.

Resolving disagreements between tribal nations over place names

Many places within what we call the United States are part of the shared ancestral homelands of multiple tribal nations. Each of those tribal nations may have their own distinct names for a geographic feature. This can lead to conflict.

Unfortunately, there is no universal guidance for navigating these disagreements. It's best to work closely with the involved tribal nations and facilitate direct communication between them so they are empowered to make decisions themselves rather than ceding to government agencies to choose from among tribal proposals.

One option for resolving conflicts is to advance renaming efforts for multiple places at once. Doing this can honor the connections of multiple tribal nations to a landscape at the same time.

One option for resolving these conflicts is to advance renaming efforts for multiple geographic features at once. Doing this can provide an opportunity to honor the connections of multiple tribal nations to a landscape at the same time and ensure none feel neglected.

Engaging with the state naming authorities

Each state naming authority develops its own process for making recommendations on naming proposals, and these processes can vary widely. A few states have boards that hold public meetings and offer opportunity for public testimony. Other states rely on individual members of the community to recommend place name changes (and navigate mysterious bureaucratic processes). Some state authorities conduct outreach to cities and counties and consider public input; most do not. You can find our directory of state geographic naming authorities in [APPENDIX B](#).

New secretarial orders on racist and offensive place names

Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna and 35th generation New Mexican, was one of the first Native American women to serve in Congress. In addition to leading on key issues like climate change, environmental justice and stopping violence against Indigenous women, she introduced legislation to address racist and offensive place names across the U.S.

Once confirmed at the Department of the Interior, Secretary Haaland, the first Native American Cabinet secretary, continued to work on racist and offensive place names, issuing two orders that will make significant progress on the issue.

Secretarial Order 3404 recognizes “squaw” as a racist and misogynistic slur targeting Native American women and establishes a process, based on tribal consultation and public feedback, to replace the names of the more than 650 geographic features currently using the term.

Secretarial Order 3405 creates an advisory committee under the National Park Service that will oversee a process to review and replace racist and offensive place names. The committee will include representatives of tribal organizations, civil rights leaders and anthropology experts, among others.

Centered on public input and tribal consultation, these orders provide an opportunity to remove many of the racist and offensive terms that still litter the American landscape, and could bring about a sea change in place names from coast to coast.

It can be difficult to tell what process a state naming authority uses to make recommendations. We suggest contacting the state naming authority to talk through your naming proposal and gain a better understanding of how they make their decisions (see [APPENDIX B](#)).

Questions to ask the state naming authority:

How does the state naming authority make recommendations on name change proposals?

Who, specifically, is responsible for making those recommendations?

Does the state naming authority conduct outreach on name change proposals?
If so, to whom?

Is there an opportunity for public comment on name change proposals?

Whose support is most important in securing a favorable recommendation?

With this information in hand, you can map out a strategy to secure a favorable recommendation from your state naming authority.

Relationships between tribal nations and state governments

Relationships between tribal nations and state governments can vary widely, as opposed to the “trust relationship” that tribal governments enjoy with the federal government (the federal government is required to support tribal self-government and economic well-being).

Because tribal treaties and tribal nations themselves often pre-date state governments, the core relationship must be with the federal government (i.e., the Department of the Interior or federal courts). Further, tribal relationships and past efforts with a state can differ greatly. Be mindful that there is likely to be history between state and tribal governments that has nothing to do with place-name issues.

Conducting outreach

As we have mentioned, the level of support necessary to receive a favorable recommendation from a state naming authority varies from state to state and depends heavily on which process the state authority uses to make recommendations. However, the descriptions below apply to virtually all naming authorities, so you can use them to guide your outreach efforts.

Tribal nations

As sovereign nations with ancestral homelands that include most geographic features proposed for renaming, tribal nations play a unique role in federal renaming efforts. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names provides an opportunity for all federally recognized tribes to comment on any renaming proposal.

Remember to include tribal nations early in the renaming process—before proposing a new place name. It is equally important to continue to work with tribal nations after a proposal is submitted. Seek the support of as many local tribal nations as possible, focusing on those that have a connection to the geographic feature you seek to rename. The best place to start is with the tribal nation’s tribal historic national preservation officer, culture department or tribal council.

County commissions

A few state authorities solicit the views of local and county governments on renaming proposals. If they don't, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names will do so. For this reason, it is imperative to work with affected stakeholders and seek the support of local governments for your proposal early on. Note that in some states, the county defers to the local government (town, township or borough) on naming matters. Some parts of Alaska don't have a municipal government.

Talk to county commissioners directly and seek an ally on the commission to help guide you. Do your best to understand and address local concerns. Don't be discouraged if the commission opposes your efforts; county opposition won't necessarily doom a naming proposal, but it does mean that you'll need to conduct additional outreach and build more support.

Landowners

For geographic features located on private land, you'll need to reach out to the landowners to secure their support. To find who owns a tract of land, contact the local county tax assessor's office or the county clerk and records office.

For geographic features located on federal land, you will need to reach out to the appropriate land management agency to discuss your proposal and discover any concerns the agency may have. For the Forest Service, start with the district ranger. For the Bureau of Land Management, the field office manager is the best starting point. For geographic features spanning multiple land management agencies, or crossing both federal and non-federal land, you will need to speak with each affected agency. Talking to local land management agency staff is a good starting point, but the official position of each federal agency ultimately is decided by the agency's representative on the board.

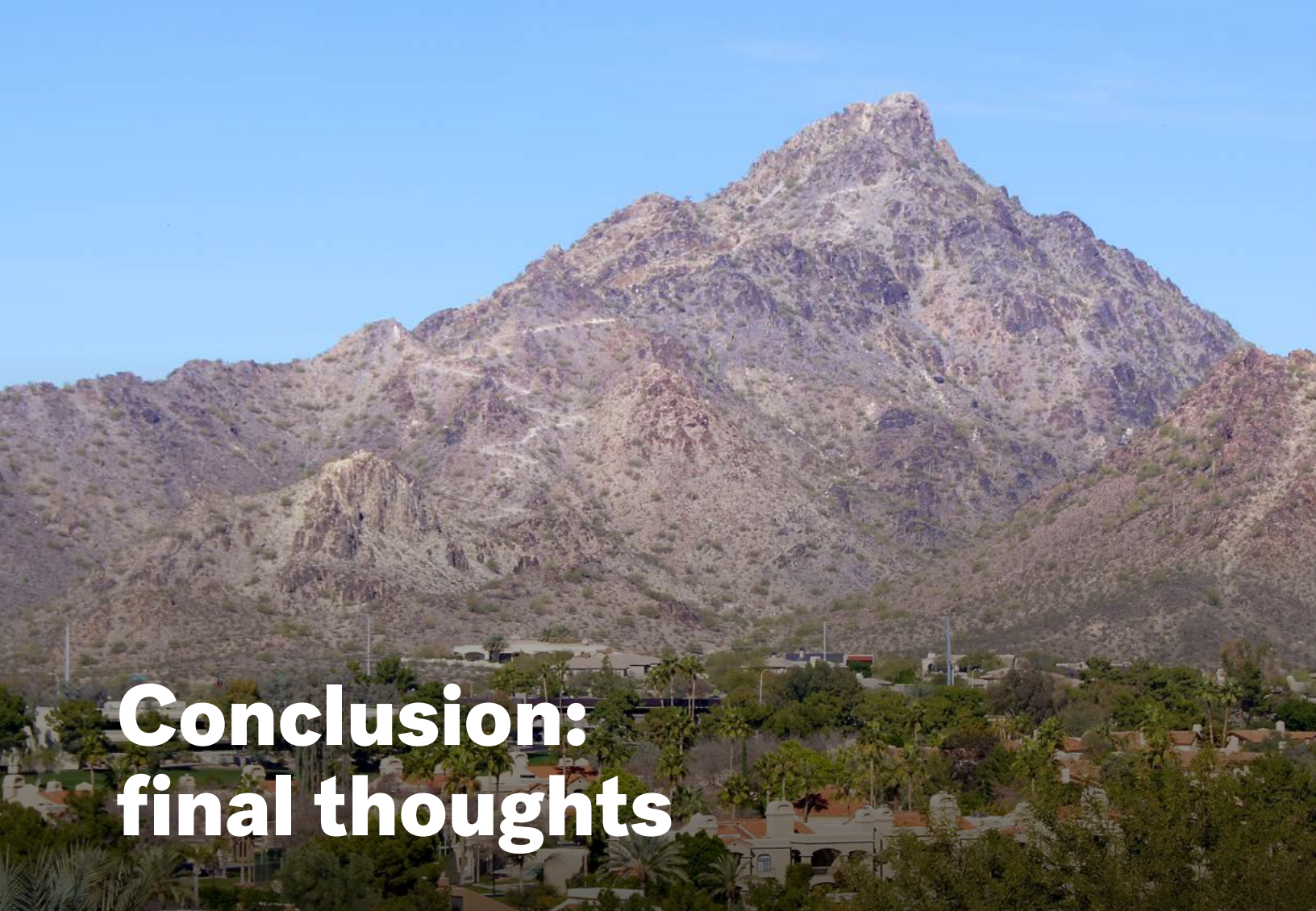
Local residents

Particularly for controversial name change proposals that may generate significant opposition, public support is key. You should have a clear understanding of various perspectives on the issue and reach out to as many community groups as possible for feedback. Consider ways to make it easier for people to participate, including by offering a pre-written letter or template for potential supporters to use. A sample letter is included in [APPENDIX D](#).

Public support is key. Reach out to as many community groups as possible for feedback and consider ways to make it easier for people to participate.

For a more detailed guide to community engagement strategies, see the [Community Planning Toolkit](#) by Community Places.

The board heavily weighs local support in the form of letters or emails. Further, because the board also considers the views of county government and the state naming authority, it is important to make sure any and all support is shared directly with the board, as well as the state naming authority and the county commission.



Conclusion: final thoughts

In 2008, the Board on Geographic Names removed a racial slur from a peak in Arizona, and renamed the peak “Piestewa Peak” in honor of Lori Piestewa, a Native American soldier who died in the line of duty. Piestewa was the first Native American woman to die in combat while serving the United States.
© Ted Eytan, Flickr.

Place names tell important stories about our past and help shape our future. When we use them to honor people who perpetrated atrocities against Native Americans, we tacitly endorse a story in which colonial expansion, conquest and genocide is honorable. That story heroizes people who sought to exterminate the Native American men, women and children who have lived for time immemorial on these lands. Similarly, when we recognize Confederate leaders like Jefferson Davis, an avowed racist and white supremacist, we tacitly affirm Davis’ racist views and his defense of slavery. The same holds true for place names that borrow slurs or racist terms.

A naming regime—and an accounting of history—that is more honest and inclusive and less tolerant of cruelty could recognize important figures and events in our nation’s history while also acknowledging the pain and perseverance of communities of color and other groups often forgotten in these retellings. That includes Native Americans, the first people to inhabit this great land; enslaved people of African and Indigenous descent; and Asian and Latinx immigrants who suffered due to unfair policies and political systems. Further, it would make public lands more accessible and welcoming to more people.

With the resources and information in this guide, you have access to the knowledge you need to understand the renaming process and support your efforts to rename a geographic feature with a racist or offensive place name.

Completing the name change application form of the Board on Geographic Names

This section describes how to complete the U.S. Board on Geographic Names name change proposal form. The titles in bold are questions from the form. Provide as much information as you have available, but don't be dissuaded if you cannot answer every question; just do the best you can. The board will likely accept petitions with sufficient information to determine the geographic feature in question, even if some details are left off the proposal form.

Once complete, proposals should be submitted to:

Board on Geographic Names
Executive Secretary, Domestic Names
 12201 Sunrise Valley Drive,
 MS-523
 Reston, VA 20192
 (703) 648-4550
 Email: BGNEXEC@usgs.gov

Naming basics section

Proposed Name

The proposed name should be in accordance with board policies, which are described above.

Is this name in current local use?

This is typically answered “no,” unless the proposed name is a traditional Native American name that is currently in use.

Is this to change an existing name? If yes, please state the official name and ID number below as it appears in the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS).

To search the Geographic Names Information System, [click here](#). Enter the name of the geographic feature you seek to rename and the state in which it is located. This should result in a list of features with the name selected. Click on the feature you are interested in. At the top of the screen is the feature's name and ID number.

What is the feature type?

Describe whether the feature is a mountain, river, etc. The proposal form includes a drop-down menu. Mountains are listed as “summits”; rivers and creeks are listed as “streams.” If you don't see the feature type listed, go to the [Geographic Names Information System](#) and search for your feature (instructions above). Once you find it, the feature type will be listed.

Location basics section

Where is the feature? (longitude/latitude)

You can find longitude and latitude in the Geographic Names Information System. See search instructions above.

Start and end of linear feature (e.g., stream or valley): mouth/confluence; source/headwater (longitude/latitude)

Longitude and latitude for the mouth/confluence and source/headwater is in the Geographic Names Information System. See search instructions above.

General location (state, county/city, ZIP code):

County and state can be found in the Geographic Names Information System. See search instructions above.

Public land survey systems (section(s), township, range, meridian):

We recommend skipping this section, as this data is optional and difficult to track down. Should you choose to seek this information, the easiest way is to use the Earth Point tool. Open the page and enter the latitude and longitude for your feature from Google Earth. Then click on “VIEW” and the page will call up section, township, range and meridian.

Feature description section

Physical shape, length, width, etc.:

This is primarily for unnamed features. Add as much information as necessary to accurately describe the feature. Helpful information includes elevation (for mountains), miles (for rivers and streams) and adjacent, named features.

Name details

Name information: Please provide relevant information about the proposed name, such as origin, meaning, how long it has been in current use, as well as current or historical significance. Also include why you believe the feature requires a name or name change and why the proposed name is appropriate.

Please provide a list of supporting documentation with details below: Examples: Published sources showing the proposed name or letters of support (local government, historical society, etc.)

Provide basic background here on the proposed name. This is your opportunity to highlight why you are proposing to rename the geographic feature and why you chose the proposed name.

Is the name commemorative?

Answer “Yes” for proposals to rename a geographic feature after an individual. Otherwise, answer “No.”

Honoree’s date of birth; honoree’s date of death:

Enter the date of birth and date of death of the individual after whom you are proposing to name the geographic feature, if it is known.

Short biography:

Enter background on the individual after whom you are proposing to name the geographic feature, if applicable.

Significance or association with the geographic feature:

Describe the connection the person has to the feature. The intended honoree(s) must have been deceased for at least five years and should have had “either some direct or long-term association with the feature, or have made a significant contribution to the area, community, or State in which it is located.” An exception may be made for individuals with “outstanding national or international recognition,” even if the individual is not tied directly to the geographic feature.

Is the feature in a wilderness area or wilderness study area? If yes, please provide your justification for making an exception to the Wilderness Policy:

Review the policies outlined above regarding new names in a wilderness or wilderness study area. Proposals to newly name features in these areas will be rejected. However, renaming proposals are permissible.

Additional information section

Is there any local opposition or conflict with the proposed name? If yes, please explain and describe any opposition:

This question is self-explanatory.

For a proposed new name, please provide evidence that the feature is unnamed, such as a map that shows the feature but no name for it: Document title:

Do the best you can. Often the best source of information is a U.S. Geological Survey topographical map. These can be viewed [online](#).

Directory of state geographic names authorities

Most states have advisory boards to make recommendations on name changes to the Federal Board on Geographic Names. The [Council of Geographic Names Authorities](#) maintains a [directory](#) of state geographic names authorities along with useful information on these boards. The Federal Board on Geographic Names keeps a [directory](#) as well. Below is information on each board.

A note about state naming authorities:

Not all state naming authorities are created equal. Very few have been established as official naming committees. In most states, the state naming authority is assigned to an individual who completes this responsibility in addition to their primary work.

The amount of support and information available varies from state to state, as does the process for managing renaming efforts. What works in Nevada, where there is a diverse board that oversees state renaming efforts, might not work in Montana, where there's no state naming board and name changes are primarily brought about through the efforts of local communities.

Depending on the state contact, it may take multiple requests to receive a response from. Some may redirect you back to the Federal Board on Geographic Names, and some may not respond at all; at least five states didn't respond to any requests made during the creation of this list in 2021.

ALABAMA

Geological Survey of Alabama, Geographic Names Committee. No website.

Contact Dr. Sandy Ebersole, Chairman
205-247-3613 | sebersole@gsa.state.al.us

ALASKA

The [Alaska Historical Commission](#) is the state naming board. The commission is staffed by the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks Office of History & Archaeology. The website includes an [application](#) and [guidelines](#) for naming and name change proposals.

Contact Katie Ringsmuth, Office of History & Archeology.
907-269-8714 | dnr.oha@alaska.gov

ARIZONA

The [Arizona State Board on Geographic and Historic Names](#) is the state naming board. The website includes an [application](#) and [recommendation form](#) for naming and name change proposals.

Contact Betsy Howard, administrative support.
602-926-3602 | bhoward@alibrary.gov

ARKANSAS

Arkansas Geological Commission. No website.
Contact Scott Ausbrooks Director and State Geologist
501-296-1880 | Scott.ausbrooks@akansas.gov

CALIFORNIA

The [California Advisory Committee on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board.
Contact Tiffany Meyer, Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

916 445-5397 | tiffany.meyer@fire.ca.gov

COLORADO

The [Colorado Geographic Naming Advisory Board](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Johnie Abad, Executive Assistant.
303-866-3311 | dnr_cgnab@state.co.us

CONNECTICUT

The [Connecticut Geographic Names Authority](#) is the state naming board and is housed at the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

Contact Margaret Thomas, State Geologist, Chair.
860-424-3583 | Margaret.thomas@ct.gov

DELAWARE

There is no state naming board, but inquiries can be directed to the Delaware Geological Survey. No website. Contact David R. Wunsch, State Geologist and Director.
302-831-8258 | dwunsch@udel.edu

FLORIDA

The Florida State Board on Geographic Names is the state naming board. No website.
Contact Stephen Hodge, Director.
850-644-2882 | shodge@fsu.edu

GEORGIA

The [Georgia Archives](#) is the state naming authority through the University of Georgia.
Contact Kayla Barrett, Deputy Director.
678-364-3781 | kayla.barrett@usg.edu

HAWAII

The [Hawaii Board on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board. The board's website contains [guidelines and instructions](#) on submitting name change proposals.
Contact Arthur Buto, Planning Program Manager.
808-587-2894 | Arthur.j.buto@hawaii.gov

IDAHO

The Board of Trustees of the Idaho State Historical Society serves as the state naming board, and the state also has an advisory council, the Idaho Geographic Names Advisory Council. No website.
Contact Rick Just, Chair.
208-362-9892 | rickjust@rickjust.com

ILLINOIS

The Illinois State Names Board is the state naming board. No website.
Contact Robert Sinclair.
217-356-9285 | rsinclair@illinois.edu

INDIANA

The Indiana Board on Geographic Names is the state naming board. No website.
Contact Megan Compton, Indiana Geographic Information Officer.
317-254-5889 | mcompton@iot.in.gov

IOWA

There is no state naming board.
Contact Kathryne Clarke, GIS Section Supervisor, Iowa Department of Natural Resources.
515-725-8354 | Kathryne.clarke@dnr.iowa.gov

KANSAS

The Kansas Geographic Names Authority is the state naming board. No Website.
Contact Ken Nelson, GIS Section Manager, Kansas Data Access and Support Center.
(785) 864-2164 | nelson@kgs.ku.edu

KENTUCKY

The Kentucky Geographic Names Committee is the state naming board. No website.
Contact Scott Dobler, Geography and GIS instructor, Western Kentucky University.
scott.dobler@wku.edu

LOUISIANA

There is no state naming board.
Contact Darryl Mack, GIS Manager, Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.
225 379-1283 | darryl.mack@la.gov

MAINE

There is no state naming board.
Contact Emily Pettit, GIS Coordinator, State of Maine Office of GIS.
207-624-9539 | Emily.Pettit@maine.gov

MARYLAND

The Maryland Geographic Names Authority oversees renaming through the Maryland Historical Trust.
Contact Jennifer Chadwick-Moore, Historic Preservation Information Systems Specialist.
410-697-953 | jen.chadwick-moore@maryland.gov

MASSACHUSETTS

There is no state naming board.
Contact Stephen Mabee, State Geologist.
413-687-5288 | smabee@geo.umass.edu

MICHIGAN

There is no state naming board.
Contact Anthony Olkowski, Center for Shared Solutions, Department of Technology, Management, and Budget.
517-241-0636 | olkowskit@michigan.gov

MINNESOTA

There is no state naming board, but the state maintains a [website](#) with useful information on naming, including sample petitions and resolutions, and links to state law.

Contact Pete Boulay, coordinator at the MN Department of Natural Resources.

612 390-1301 | pboulay@umn.edu

MISSISSIPPI

There is no state naming board.

Contact David Dockery, State Geologist.

601-961-5544 | ddockery@mdeq.ms.gov

MISSOURI

The [Missouri Board on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board and is maintained through the Missouri Secretary of State.

Contact Brian Rogers, Executive Secretary.

573-526-1981 | brian.rogers@sos.mo.gov

MONTANA

There is no state naming board. The State maintains a [geographic information clearinghouse](#).

Contact Erin Fashoway, State Names Advisor.

406-444-9013 | efashoway@mt.gov

NEBRASKA

There is no state naming board.

Contact Jill Dolberg, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Nebraska State Historical Society.

402-525-4927 | jill.dolberg@nebraska.gov

NEVADA

The [Nevada State Board on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board. The board's website includes some background.

Contact Cynthia Laframboise, Chair, Nevada State Library, Archives, and Public Record.

775-684-3319 | claframboise@admin.nv.gov

NEW HAMPSHIRE

New Hampshire Board on Geographic Names.
No website.

Contact Ken Gallagher, Principal Planner, Office of Strategic Initiatives.

603-271-2155 | ken.gallagher@osi.nh.gov

NEW JERSEY

There is no state naming board.

Contact Ron Pristas, GIS Specialist, Department of Environmental Protection.

609-292-1185 | ron.pristas@dep.nj.gov

NEW MEXICO

The [New Mexico Geographic Information Council's Geographic Names Committee](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Zachary Stauber, Chair, Environment Dept.

505-372-8476 | Zachary.stauber@state.nm.us

NEW YORK

The [New York State Committee on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Brad Utter, Sr Historian, NY State Museum.

518 474-0028 | brad.utter@nysed.gov

NORTH CAROLINA

The [North Carolina Board on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Cam McNutt, North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality.

919-707-3690 | cam.mcnutt@ncdenr.gov

NORTH DAKOTA

There is no state naming board.

Contact Claudia J. Berg, Director, State Historical Society of North Dakota.

701 328-2666

OHIO

There is no state naming board.

Contact David Blackstone, Executive Director, Ohio Geographically Referenced Information Program.

614-728-0890 | david.blackstone@das.ohio.gov

OKLAHOMA

The [Oklahoma Board on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Nick Hayman, Director, Oklahoma Geological Survey.

405-325-7968 | hayman@ou.edu

OREGON

The [Oregon Geographic Names Board](#) is the state naming board. The website contains [background](#) on proposing new names, as well as a [name change application form](#).

Contact Bruce Fisher, Board President, The Oregon Historical Society.

503-319-1714 | bruce.j.fisher@gmail.com

PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania Geographic Names Committee.
No website.

Contact Jennifer Staub, Executive Secretary, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.
717-787-7498 | jstaub@pa.gov

RHODE ISLAND

There is no state naming board.

Contact Meredith Brady, Associate Director, Division of Statewide Planning.
401-222-6496 | Meredith.brady@doa.ri.gov

SOUTH CAROLINA

There is no state naming board.

Contact Edwin Breeden, Historical Markers, SC Department of Archives & History.
803-896-6182 | ebreeden@scdah.sc.gov

SOUTH DAKOTA

The [South Dakota Board on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board. The board's website contains an [application form](#) as well as a [guide to public involvement](#).

Contact June Hansen, Chair.
605-773-3540 | June.hansen@state.sd.us

TENNESSEE

The [Tennessee Committee on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Peter Lemiszki, Chair, University of Tennessee Knoxville Library.
865-594-5596 | peter.lemiszki@tn.gov

TEXAS

The [Texas Geographic Names Committee](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Richard Wade, Geographic Information Officer, Texas Natural Resources Information System.
512-463-4010 | Richard.wade@twdb.texas.gov

UTAH

The [Utah Committee on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Arie Leeflang, Coordinator.
801-538-4857 | aleeflang@utah.gov

VERMONT

The Geographic Naming Committee of the [Vermont Board of Libraries](#) is the state naming authority.

Contact April Shaw, Government Services and Reference Librarian, Department of Libraries.
802-318-7889 | april.shaw@vermont.gov

VIRGINIA

The Virginia Board on Geographic Names is the state naming board. No website.

Contact Cassandra Farrell, Map Specialist and Senior Research Archivist, Library of Virginia.
804-692-3617 | vabgn@lva.virginia.gov

WASHINGTON

The [Washington Committee on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board. The committee's website includes an [application packet](#) containing application materials, frequently asked questions, and policies. Contact Caleb Maki, Executive Secretary.
bogn@dnr.wa.gov

WEST VIRGINIA

There is no state naming board.

Contact Ken Ashton, West Virginia Geological Survey.
304-594-2331 | ashton@wvgs.wvnet.edu

WISCONSIN

The [Wisconsin Geographic Names Council](#) is the state naming board. The council's website contains a [proposal form](#), [policies](#), and [answers to frequently asked questions](#).

Contact Max Grueneberg, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.
608-264-9203 | Maxwell.Grueneberg@wisconsin.gov

WYOMING

The [Wyoming Board on Geographic Names](#) is the state naming board.

Contact Shelley Messer, State Engineer's Office.
307-777-5801 | shelley.messer@wyo.gov

Additional Resources

ALABAMA

Foscue, Virginia O. *Place Names in Alabama*. Tuscaloosa, AL. The University of Alabama Press.

[The University of Alabama Placenames Research Center](#)

ALASKA

Orth, D. J., 1971. *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*. U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 576.

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ARKANSAS

[Arkansas Research](#)

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California Native American Heritage Commission. nahc@nahc.ca.gov. (916) 373-3710.

COLORADO

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LOUISIANA

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Douglas-Lithgow, R. A. *Native American Place Names of Massachusetts*. Carlisle, MA. Applewood Books, 1909.

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[Online guide](#) to Montana place names from Montana History.

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[U.S. Board on Geographic Names](#)

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[Council of Geographic Names Authorities](#)

Sample letter of support

Date

Board on Geographic Names
Executive Secretary, Domestic Names
12201 Sunrise Valley Drive,
MS-523
Reston, VA 20192

Dear Board on Geographic Names:

We write to support the proposal to rename Mt. Evans as Mt. Blue Sky. Mt. Evans is currently named after John Evans, who has been roundly condemned for his role in the Sand Creek massacre, and should be renamed.

As Governor of the Territory of Colorado, Evans supported raids targeting American Indians, issuing a proclamation to Coloradoans to “kill and destroy” Native Americans. In 1864, Evans facilitated one of the most brutal massacres in American history, the Sand Creek massacre, in which over 150 men, women, and children were killed by a local militia established by Governor Evans.

Two Congressional committees and one military committee investigated the event, recognizing guilt on the part of the United States. Governor Evans was found culpable and was forced to resign in disgrace. A 2014 report by the University of Denver confirmed Evans’ culpability.

Mt. Evans deserves a name that honors its natural and cultural values, rather than a perpetrator of atrocities against Native Americans. The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes and The Wilderness Society have proposed to rename Mt. Evans as Mt. Blue Sky, which signifies the Arapaho as they were known as the Blue Sky People and the Cheyenne who have an annual ceremony of renewal of life called Blue Sky. We support this proposal and encourage the Board to approve it.

Sincerely,

Cc: Colorado Geographic Naming Advisory Board