Place Names

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Lesson Overview: Students analyze place names on maps to gather information about the people who named the features in an area. In doing so, they gain an appreciation for the persistent influence of the colonial era in Latin America, as well as the value of linguistic clues in trying to learn about the historical geography of a place. The Activity also allows students to explore questions about cultural diversity, official languages, and the problems of governing a country that contains people who speak different languages.

Essential Question:
• What can place names tell us about colonial occupation?

Objectives: The student will be able to
• Read maps and find place names that can provide clues about the people who occupied an area.
• Classify generic place names (e.g., point; pointe; punta) according to the languages of the major colonial powers of the 16th-18th centuries.
• Divide an area into regions based upon the place names on a reference map.

Subject/Grade Level: World Geography and History, Language Arts, grades 6-8

Duration: 1-3 Class Periods (alternative procedures)

Student Materials: Placenames in a Region map; optional: copies of transparencies F2, F3.

Teacher Materials: Transparencies; Clues about Territorial Claims; Glossary of Terms; FAQ-a sample dialog; optional: Teaching Geography CD

Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations:
• 6 – G2.2.1 Describe the human characteristics of the region under study (including languages, religion, economic system, governmental system, cultural traditions).
• 6 – G4.1.1 Identify and explain examples of cultural diffusion within the Americas (e.g., baseball, soccer, music, architecture, television, languages, health care, Internet, consumer brands, currency, restaurants, international migration).
• 6 – G4.3.2 Describe patterns of settlement by using historical and modern maps (e.g., coastal and river cities and towns in the past and present, locations of megacities – modern cities over 5 million, such as Mexico City, and patterns of agricultural settlements in South and North America).
• 7 – G4.3.2 Describe patterns of settlement by using historical and modern maps

National Geography Standards
• Standard 1: using maps and other geographic representations
• Standard 5: use criteria to define regions; how regions change over space and time
• Standard 12: factors involved in the development of cities
• Standard 17: how geographic contexts have influenced events and conditions in the past
**Background Information: Historical setting**

This is not a hypothetical situation – the maps show the northern coast of South America. The Response Sheets are anonymous because some teachers treat the identity of the place as a “mystery” to heighten student interest. Even if you don’t use that approach, it is useful to have students compare their regional maps with a political map of South America to see how accurately their borders coincide with the actual borders. The abundance of native-language place names suggests that colonial influence was mainly in coastal regions. The colonial borders are still important, since this region has valuable aluminum mines.

**Procedures:**

**Note:** This lesson could take from one to three class periods, depending on whether students start with the map with all of the place names on it (Transparency F9) or divide the task and do separate maps with different sets of names (Transparencies F6 to F8), and whether they look at other parts of the world

1. **Introduction** (See also Alternative Introductions at end of lesson): Get student attention with setup questions about place names. If desired, show the unit on Place names found on the Teaching Geography CD, which deals with toponyms in different languages in Switzerland. (This CD unit is set in Switzerland, in order to explain the skill used in this Activity without giving away the location of the Activity). Other optional presentations on the CD are: Hyderabad (place names in South Asia), Pulaski Road (use of names on signs), Languages in the Past (spread of languages in Africa), Regions in Africa and Micro-Regions of Cancun (about the division of area into regions)

2. **Guided Practice:** Hand out the Placenames in a Region map (Slide 3) and ask students to find any place names that they think are English, French, Spanish, or whatever other languages they may happen to know well. Be sure to explain that this area was originally inhabited by native peoples, but European colonial powers claimed territories during the 16th-18th centuries.

   Explain “Toponym” (Slides 4-5 or Transparencies F1 and F4). Conduct class discussion about generic place names, such as physical features (bay, river, mountains, etc.) or town names (Saint, Ville, Port, etc.) (Slides 6-7 or Transparencies F2 –F3)

   Also, see Clues about Territorial Claims in Teacher Resources. Optional: show maps of mountains, rivers and towns (Slides 8-10 or Transparencies F6-F8)

3. **Group Work:** If desired, hand out two clue sheets (Saints –F2 and Generic Place names-F3) to help guide the discussion and complete the activity. Have students examine the map and identify place names that they think are Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, or Spanish. Asking students to write a large D, E, F, P, or S directly on specific places on a map gives a teacher an easy way to see if students “get it,” since the responses can be seen and evaluated from quite a distance. Students can then use their best judgment to draw boundaries that separate the regions claimed by each country.

4. **Concluding the Activity:** If you wish, expose the secret, or have students try to identify the area shown by the map: (Slides 11-14 or Modern Country Border Transparencies). The area is northern South America, which was the site of colonial ventures by four European powers that left different imprints on the landscape; it also is a region with some of the best deposits of aluminum ore in the world, and therefore the legacies of past colonialism have an impact on present-day economies.

The summary should focus on five major points (Slides 15-17):

- Place names were usually assigned by people who thought they had (or were trying to claim) ownership or political jurisdiction in an area.
• As a result, place names can often tell us which people had control of an area.
• Place names often persist even when ownership or political jurisdiction changes
• As a result, place names can tell us something about the history of a place, particularly those places where European or other colonial powers asserted control at some time in the past.
• Efforts to change place names often reveal changes in the political economy of an area.

5. Evaluation: It is important to focus on the logic and plausibility of reasons, not just on whether students classified the places correctly. It is possible to have perfectly good reasons for making a “wrong” classification. Moreover, a correct classification can be pure luck, since linguistic clues are often ambiguous. For example, the feminine-gender Santa does not discriminate between Spanish and Portuguese, whereas the masculine form San and São are clearly distinguishable. Likewise, Saint could be either English or French, but Sainte could not, because English does not have a separate feminine form of nouns like this.

Extension and enrichment
• Many other parts of the world can be examined through the place-name “lens.” Good candidates include India and Pakistan, the coasts of Malaysia and Indonesia, or parts of East or Southwest Africa. It may be necessary to add columns to the data table. This is a good use of the Internet, since there are on-line translation dictionaries for most common languages (and some quite uncommon ones!)
• Some useful web sites that we found when we entered to words “patron saints” or “language translation” into a search engine:
  o saint.catholic.org/patron.html
  o www.yourdictionary.com
  o www.ectaco.com/online/
  o www.linguasphere.org/
• The process of place-name analysis can operate at several scales. This activity is at a “sub-continental” scale, but the same skill can work with streets in a city – they often provide clues about the people who lived there, the aspirations of the builders, and the politics of the city when the neighborhood was built.

Alternative introductions
• Ask students what meaning they can infer from a generic but language-specific place-name, such as Alpine, Deep Gap, Death Valley, or Newport (the ARGUS CD has an interesting section on the meanings of “Newport” in the unit on the Erie Canal)
  If all you knew was this place-name, what could you tell me about the surrounding country?

  In some cases, the answer is “not much” – names are not always chosen to describe an area (For example, “Newport” could mean “not-old place to land a boat” or it could just mean that a family named Newport decided to stop here and build a town.) But in many cases, the place names in an area can provide valuable clues about the people who were there at the time the places were named (or, in many cases, renamed!).
• This Activity can also be started:
by asking students to think of places that had been renamed (for example, many cities have streets that were renamed after Martin Luther King shortly after his death.) Why do you think people wanted to rename those streets? Imagine that you were an advisor for the government of a country that had just gained independence from a colonial power. Would you consider renaming some of the places in your country? If so, which ones and why?

by describing the arrival of some Spanish conquistadors in the New World. What did these people do? (give thanks, fight, steal, negotiate, run . . . and give names to features they see!)

by organizing students into small groups, giving each group a handful of names from different languages and asking them to choose some criteria and put them into groups. In many cases, some students in each group will already know enough about languages to start doing the classification according to language of origin. In the ensuing discussion about the process of classification, try to get students to think about what kinds of criteria lead to classifications that are useful in trying to “read” the history of a region through the place names.
Placenames in a Region Colonized by Several European Countries

Instructions

Try to identify which group of people gave each place its name on this map.

Use a color marker and write a large letter on top of each name, following this letter code:

D - Dutch
E - English
F - French
N - Native
P - Portuguese
S - Spanish
X - other

Optional: lightly color each language region a distinctive color.
Frequently asked questions about place names: a sample dialog

Student: How do I know whether this was named after a town in Europe?

(Mistaken response: "You should check if it is on the list in the Instructions, or if it is in the dictionary or atlas. Look under Holland or Netherlands." (These are not bad suggestions, but they tend to reinforce the notion that there is "a right answer." The preferred strategy is to urge students to be persuaded by the weight of evidence rather than a single fact.)

Redirection: Why not put a question mark by that one and check other places? If you see a lot of other names in the surrounding area, it's more likely that the name you found is of Dutch origin.

Student: Is there any other way to check?

Teacher: It’s always possible to argue backwards, by excluding answers that are not likely. Does this name sound like it might be Spanish or Portuguese?

Is it reasonable to expect students to be good at identifying the language origins of place names?

No, of course not! It’s also not reasonable to expect many adults to recognize more than a few of the 6000 languages in the world. But the mere fact that it is impossible to learn them all does not mean that one should deprive oneself of the pleasure of recognizing some common language indicators in the names of people and places! The goal of this Activity is to gain a basic level of familiarity with a skill by applying it (with some guidance) in a part of the world where different origins of place names is very obvious.

Where else can we use this skill?

In a cemetery, war memorial, telephone book, cluster of billboards, or group of restaurants.

What are some other language indicators?

The nature of the alphabet, and the extra marks over or under some letters – œ ç ū ŋ ŷ ò etc.

What are some other places in the world where language indicators are obvious?

South Africa (Dutch (Afrikaans), English, Zulu, etc.)
South Asia (-garh means fort, -abad indicates a Muslim settlement, other regional languages add –pur, -pore, -am, -nagar, and –khan to make place names).
China – look for the regions where rivers are named –ho as opposed to –jiang

How long do these indicators last?

Until people want to change them! The fact that people do want to change place names in some areas, of course, is itself an interesting observation, well worth exploring. For example, look at the locations of streets named after Martin Luther King in the United States. Or the flurry of place-name changes in Russia, as people try to reclaim a pre-Soviet identity.
F. Place names
Glossary of key terms

**Board of Geographic Names:** government agency that has responsibility of keeping track of place names and approving new ones

**Colonial Era:** a period in history when many European countries claimed land and started colonies in other places around the world

**colony:** territory claimed by a country; most parts of North and South America were claimed as colonies by various European countries in the two centuries after Columbus

**conquistador:** Spanish word for “conqueror;” these people went out to conquer other lands for the Spanish Crown in the centuries after Columbus

**dialect:** almost a separate language; a unique combination of vocabulary and grammar that is part of a bigger language but different enough that people can have trouble understanding people who speak a different dialect of the same language

**ethnic group:** group of people who share a common ancestry, language, and place of origin (see the CD unit on Pulaski Road: A Bus Trip through Chicago’s Ethnic Politics)

**generic place-name:** word that a language uses for a typical landscape feature, such as a river, lake, or mountain; saying “Rio Grande River” is therefore wrong, because “Rio” means “river” in the language of the people who named the river

**Germanic languages:** a language group consisting of languages that are based on German; German, English, Dutch, and Danish are examples of Germanic languages.

**language indicators:** groups of letters that are used in only a few languages and therefore are indicators that a word might have come from that language; for example, Dutch names often include the syllable “van” and some unique combinations of vowels (aa, oe, etc.); a name like “van Raalte” thus has two Dutch language indicators

**literacy rate:** the percentage of a population that is able to read (of those old enough to read)

**official language:** the language or languages a country uses to conduct its official business; the official language of the United States is English

**pidgin:** simplified language often used by people who speak different languages but get together occasionally to trade or for other reasons

**renaming:** giving a new name to a place, often to help erase a bad memory

**Romance languages:** a language group consisting of languages that are based in Latin; Romance languages include Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Rumanian

**Saint (Sainte, Santa, San, São):** word used by the Catholic Church to describe particularly holy people; a surprisingly large number of places in North and South America are named for various saints, because many explorers were Catholic missionaries

**toponym:** a fancy word for place-name; “topo” is Latin for “place” and “nym” is Latin for “name” (see the CD unit on place names)
Placenames

Clues about territorial claims in a colonial area

People who give a name to a place are saying that they either own it or have some kind of control over it. That fact gives us a great way to learn about a place: find a good map use the placenames on it as clues.

Clue 1: Saints. Placenames that begin with Saint can indicate a link with a country. Saint Patrick, for example, is associated with Ireland; Saint Cyril with Slavic countries; Saint Laurent with France; etc. Unfortunately, there are thousands of saints, and it’s not easy to memorize the ones associated with every country. Fortunately, there is a simpler but still useful clue: different languages spell the word saint in different ways. San and Santa, for example, mean male and female saints in Spanish. Portuguese spell the same words São and Santa. In French, the words are spelled Saint and Sainte (often abbreviated, as in Ste-Marie, or with a hyphen, as in Saint-Ives).

1) Examine the map and find all places named for saints. Mark them with a large E, F, S, or P if you are pretty sure they come from English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese (or use several letters, like S/P for a word like Santa, which could be either S or P).

Clue 2: Home Places. Colonists sometimes name places after familiar places “back home.” For example, New London, Connecticut, was named after London, England. Here are more examples:

   England: Birmingham, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Portsmouth, Wellington
   France: Bordeaux, Cherbourg, Lyon, Marseille, Orleans, Paris, Toulouse
   Netherlands: Amsterdam, Groningen, Haarlem, Lely, Rotterdam, Wageningen
   Portugal: Barreiro, Coimbra, Lisboa, Portalegre, Porto, Santarem, Setubal
   Spain: Barcelona, Cartagena, Cordoba, Malaga, Madrid, Seville, Valencia

2) Can you find any places named after these European places? If so, mark them with a large E, F, P, S, or D (for the Netherlands, where the main language is called Dutch).

Clue 3: Features. Many placenames include words for common landscape features.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Portuguese</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Dutch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>River</td>
<td>Riviere</td>
<td>Rio</td>
<td>Rio</td>
<td>Rivier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake or Sea</td>
<td>Lac, Mer</td>
<td>Lago</td>
<td>Lago, Mara</td>
<td>Meer, See</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay</td>
<td>Baie</td>
<td>Baia</td>
<td>Bahia</td>
<td>Baai</td>
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<td>Cape</td>
<td>Cap</td>
<td>Cabo</td>
<td>Cabo</td>
<td>Kaap</td>
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<td>Point</td>
<td>Pointe</td>
<td>Ponta</td>
<td>Punta</td>
<td>Pun</td>
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<td>Island</td>
<td>Ile</td>
<td>Ilha</td>
<td>Isla</td>
<td>Eiland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Terre</td>
<td>Tierra</td>
<td>Tierra</td>
<td>Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>Mont, Montagne</td>
<td>Serra</td>
<td>Montana, Sierra</td>
<td>Gebergte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>Nord</td>
<td>Norte</td>
<td>Norte</td>
<td>Noord</td>
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<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>Est</td>
<td>Leste</td>
<td>Este</td>
<td>Oost</td>
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<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>Sud</td>
<td>Sul</td>
<td>Sur</td>
<td>Zuid</td>
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<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>Ouest</td>
<td>Oeste</td>
<td>Oeste</td>
<td>West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Blanc</td>
<td>Branco</td>
<td>Blanco</td>
<td>Blank, Wit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Noir</td>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>Zwart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Vert</td>
<td>Verde</td>
<td>Verde</td>
<td>Groen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Rouge</td>
<td>Rubro</td>
<td>Rojo</td>
<td>Rood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) Mark places with a large E, F, P, S, or D if their names include any of these common words:

4) Finally, many words in native languages in this area have a string of four or five consonant-vowel syllables. That makes a smooth-sounding name, like Orinoco or Surinama. Study the map, and put a large N on places with names have no European clue and sound like they might be native.

5) Use your best judgment to draw boundaries that separate the regions claimed by each country. (Your teacher may have a map or atlas that shows the actual boundaries, allowing you to see how well you did).
Toponym

(Latin: topo = place, nym = name)

Place-name; the name people use to identify or describe a place.

Studying place-names can tell us a great deal about the history and geography of a place.

Saint

One of many definitions: Person officially recognized as holy by the Catholic Church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Saint</td>
<td>Saint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Saint</td>
<td>Sainte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>San</td>
<td>Santa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Sao</td>
<td>Santa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generic Place-names
(names that apply to places in general)

English  Dutch  French  Spanish
River     Rivier  Riviere  Rio
Lake      Meer    Lac      Lago
Mountain  Gebergte  Mont    Sierra
Town      Stad    Ville    Pueblo
Road      Weg     Route   Camino
Church    Kerk    Eglise   Iglesia

Toponyms
English and French place-names in Louisiana
A Region With No Place-names

Can you tell which country claims a particular part of this area?
Mountain Names in a Colonial Region

- Serra Pacaraima
- Wilhelmina Mountains
- Orange Mountains
- Kanuku Mountains
- Kayser Mountains
- Serra Grande
- Serra Lombarda
Rivers and Islands in a Colonial Region

Michigan Geographic Alliance                              Place Names 2013
Town names in a Colonial Region

Michigan Geographic Alliance
Place Names 2013
Modern Country Borders in the Guyana Coast Region of Northern South America
Modern Country Borders in the Guyana Coast Region of Northern South America