



Reconciliation in Place Names: Why Principled Frameworks Always Matter, But Especially Now at this Political Moment

Derek H. Alderman, **University of Tennessee**

Christine K. Johnson, **Council of Geographic Naming Authorities & Nevada State Board on Geographic Names**

A WATERSHED MOMENT IN AMERICAN PLACE NAME REFORM

On November 19, 2021, Deb Haaland, secretary of the interior, issued two orders that launched a watershed federal effort to confront and begin healing from the harmful legacy of derogatory place names on federal lands across the United States. Through Secretarial Order 3404, Haaland formally identified “*Squaw*” as a derogatory term and acted to remove the long-time slur against Native women from more than 660 geographic features nationwide (Secretary of the Interior 2021a). Secretarial Order 3405 established a mechanism to continue and expand this work by creating the Federal Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names, tasked with addressing derogatory place names more broadly and systematically and facilitating their replacement in partnership with Tribal Nations, states, local communities, and the public (Secretary of the Interior 2021b). We were honored to be appointed to the committee, given our experiences in the academic and applied dimensions of place (re)naming.

A central premise underlying Secretary Haaland’s orders was that place names are not merely labels on maps; they are enduring markers of history, culture, and identity, with the power to either work against or advocate for a more equitable society. For generations, many geographic

features, trails, and federal land units bore, and continue to bear, names rooted in colonialism, racism, and sexism. Such names implicitly signal to some people that they are less valued or unwelcome on their own lands. These place names convey narratives that exclude, stereotype, and demean

In response to Secretarial Order 3404, the site of the 1960 Winter Olympics in California, formerly known by the derogatory name “*Sq-Valley*,” has been renamed “*Olympic Valley*.” LEFT DIMITALEN / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; CENTER, RIGHT CHRISTINE K. JOHNSON



Indigenous Peoples, Black Americans, and other historically marginalized groups. As public advocates and researchers have argued, offensive names communicate subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) messages that exact social and psychological harm and become sources of recurring trauma for communities long subjected to discrimination (McGill et al. 2022; Wilderness Society 2022).

The Federal Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names was the first of its kind in the United States, arriving somewhat late relative to the national place-name reconciliation efforts in countries such as Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and Australia. The committee was established to identify the broader array of derogatory terms that persist across the American landscape, recommend to the secretary of the interior possible pathways for removing those names, and develop improved governmental processes for soliciting, managing, and supporting public proposals to change derogatory geographic names. Between 2022 and 2024, the committee convened four public meetings in which members, selected from across the country, participated in listening sessions, public presentations, and open deliberations leading to recommendations to be forwarded to Secretary Haaland.

Like many newly established federal advisory bodies, the committee required time to organize, establish internal procedures, engage stakeholders, and build the relationships necessary for effective collaboration, which delayed the issuance of early recommendations. By the summer of 2024, however, the committee's work reached a highly productive phase. The committee submitted a set of robust recommendations to Secretary Haaland that called for renaming Wyoming's "Devils Tower," long seen as offensive by many Tribal organizations, to "Bear Lodge," and identified over 600 additional locations nationwide as having derogatory names requiring possible replacement. The committee also advanced broader recommendations to strengthen public education and engagement related to place-name reconciliation and to improve the US Board on Geographic Names' handling of derogatory place names (National Park Service 2025).

Our committee's recommendations reached Secretary Haaland amid the intensifying 2024 presidential election, when public support for place-name reform in the United States was more uneven and increasingly polarized than during the broad momentum seen in the wake of nationwide racial justice protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. To our knowledge, our

Two views of Bear Lodge, the centerpiece of Devils Tower National Monument, a unit of the National Park System. Sacred to a number of Tribes, the striking geological formation has many Indigenous-language names. "Bear Lodge" is the preferred consensus rendering in English. LEFT, RIGHT CHRISTINE K. JOHNSON



recommendations were not acted upon by Secretary Haaland, although she reappointed many of the committee's members, including us, to serve another two-year term. That reappointment proved short-lived, as Donald Trump was soon elected to a second term as president. In February 2025, under Executive Order 14217, "Commencing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy," the National Park Service—acting on direction from the Trump administration—terminated the committee with a simple phone call to its members (Federal Register 2025).

The committee's charter formally ended on February 27, 2025, with new Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum quoted as saying that our advisory committee, along with five other Biden-era panels, were "unnecessary" and "have fulfilled the purposes for which they were established" (Streater 2025, n.p.). For the committee members and the many communities advocating for the removal of derogatory and hurtful place names, it was a stinging and deeply flawed judgment, given the lack of action on the committee's recommendations and discussions.

FROM DISSOLUTION TO INTERVENTION: CARRYING THE COMMITTEE'S WORK FORWARD

Rather than seeing the committee's dissolution as the end, we view it as a critical moment for intervention. The statement that the committee's work was "unnecessary" and finished sharply contrasts with the ongoing and increasingly urgent need for place-name reconciliation in the United States, especially given the current political climate. It is precisely because the committee's efforts were ended prematurely—despite the rising politicization of place names—that its core principles, processes, and lessons warrant careful explanation, sharing, and preservation. Our motivation for writing this piece is to protect, share, and highlight some of the committee's achievements, particularly at a time when public access to data, websites, and document archives may be restricted, especially under an administration that has shown an unscrupulous tendency to control information, communication, and education tightly.

Within the Federal Advisory Committee, several subcommittees were formed, each performing distinct tasks and producing its own set of innovations and recommendations, which, as of this writing, are available on the committee's official webpage through the National Park Service (2025). We believe these innovations can and should play a role in ongoing efforts to reform place names and thus may have a broader life and career beyond the committee's now-terminated work. We focus here on the Subcommittee on Principles and Processes, on which we served. The subcommittee developed a working definition of a "derogatory place name" to help shape

the scope of the committee's work. It recommended processes to improve federal renaming practices and enhance transparency, accessibility, efficiency, and public participation for Tribal Nations, state authorities, local governments, and members of the public. However, one of the most significant and transferable innovations of our subcommittee was the creation of a document titled *Place Name Reconciliation: Guiding Visions and Principles* (National Park Service, n.d.).

Place Name Reconciliation: Guiding Visions and Principles is offered to readers in full at the end of this article, and is also published separately in this issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* to boost its findability in web searches. In summary, the document draws on testimony heard by the committee from many public groups about the harms of derogatory place names and an expanding body of scholarship in critical place-name studies (Rose-Redwood et al. 2017; Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch 2022). The Subcommittee on Principles and Processes developed these guiding principles to educate the public about why derogatory place names represent barriers to democratic equality, social belonging, and historical truth, and the necessity of a reparative approach that is participatory, research-driven, and accountable to communities most affected by naming harm, while pairing renaming with public education. Together, these principles offered a reconciliation framework that balanced respect for history with a forward-looking commitment to dignity and inclusion, particularly for communities historically marginalized in federal policy and public-space naming. *Place Name Reconciliation: Guiding Visions and Principles* was formally approved by a vote of the overall Federal Advisory Committee at a public meeting in June 2024.

Over the past year, the current presidential administration has demonstrated the fragility of place-name governance and highlighted the urgent need for robust, principled frameworks grounded in commitments to equity and inclusion, public engagement, transparency, cultural respect, and careful, evidence-based practices. The White House is not just actively ignoring or delegitimizing the importance of place name reconciliation in America; it is also weaponizing the naming process in the most obvious way to settle political scores and to stoke the grievance politics of a reactionary movement. From restoring Confederate-linked names to Army bases to replacing the Indigenous-supported name of the country's highest mountain, Denali, with its previous official version, Mount McKinley, Donald Trump's unilateral approach to place renaming treats geographic names as blunt instruments of political power and nationalistic branding, openly used to oppose reforms for racial inclusion and to reinforce an exclusionary, settler-colonial view of the United States that perpetuates harm



In early 2025, President Trump replaced the Indigenous-supported name of the country's highest mountain, Denali, with its previous official version, Mount McKinley.
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against marginalized communities (Alderman et al. 2025; Girault 2025; Kannarr et al 2025).

Given these challenges, it is important to emphasize that our subcommittee and the larger committee aimed to establish reconciliation principles that recognize named places as ethical representations of public heritage, shared spaces for reckoning with and healing inequality, and communal areas for honoring diverse identities and connections to history and land. Even if public groups and government actors do not adhere to *Place Name Reconciliation: Guiding Visions and Principles*, we strongly encourage Americans to pay attention to and challenge the growing weaponization of place names, which we consider neither socially responsible nor sustainable. One significant downside of leaders imposing name changes with little participation from government agencies, scholars, and public groups, such as we see now, is that the names can be easily replaced in a tit-for-tat fashion once the next regime takes power.

What is at stake is not just disagreements over individual names, but also the potential loss or weakening of

principled governance. The public deserves a consistent set of national principles for managing place renaming—principles rooted in respectful consultation, transparency, and evidence-based decisions—whether in federal naming standards, academic discussions, or state and local government policies. Such principles would prevent the ambitions of a single leader or party, focused on gaining power and exacting revenge on adversaries, from overshadowing the connections between place names and the lived experiences and well-being of ordinary people. Names embedded within the landscape influence how people see themselves and others in their communities. When names carry legacy harms, their impacts are real and long-lasting. These principles would also acknowledge that place names are more than just locational markers; they are a vital part of our national storytelling. Place names convey stories about who and what values we honor and why. The “name game” that we now see at work in Washington, DC, undermines trust in thoughtful public policy and damages the integrity of public lands as shared civic spaces (Kannarr 2025). Finally, without these guiding principles, weaponized renaming practices can harm tourism, education, and

local economies by causing confusion, increasing logistical costs, and fostering resistance that hampers impactful community engagement.

Although the Federal Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names was dissolved, *Place Name Reconciliation: Guiding Visions and Principles*, developed through its deliberations, remains one of its most durable contributions, with the potential to drive broader conversations about respectful, inclusive naming practices. As there is no public or federal platform to continue promoting these principles, presenting them here reflects an effort to recognize the committee's work and outline a framework for how state and local authorities, advocacy organizations, and the public can move forward.

PLACE NAME RECONCILIATION GUIDING VISIONS AND PRINCIPLES, AS APPROVED BY THE FEDERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE IN JUNE 2024

Place name reconciliation works to align the nation's place name landscape with the nation's ongoing progress toward the values of truth and justice. The emphasis of place name reconciliation is reform. It is not about erasing names and histories from the American landscape, but correcting the use of derogatory place names and addressing the harm they inflict upon discriminated groups along with how they damage wider possibilities for cohesive social relations in the nation. Reconciliation emphasizes that the nation needs public name symbols that help citizens adequately understand and mutually respect the country's socio-cultural differences.

- Place name reconciliation acknowledges that derogatory names work against democratic principles of equality and fair treatment. Derogatory place identifiers have transmitted insults, stereotypical images, and misinformation about certain historically marginalized groups for many generations that present long-time, reoccurring sources of trauma for those groups. These harmful names negatively affect the public identities and sense of belonging of discriminated groups and in some cases ignore and disrespect the names these groups originally gave to and continue to use for these places. Derogatory names also work to make places appear hostile or unwelcoming to marginalized groups and thus can create inequities in access and use of those locations and their resources.
- Place name reconciliation recognizes that derogatory place names arise out of specific national, state, and local histories of inequality and violent social exclusion of groups based on racial, ethnic, or sexual identity.¹ Derogatory names have often accompanied and supported these larger systems of discrimination,

displacement, and violence against certain groups. The reconciliation process is about reforming specifically identified names, but it is also a broader call for all Americans to discuss and come to terms with the broader historical legacies of oppression operating behind derogatory names. Reconciliation is not a superficial reform of place names but an important step among many steps toward healing.

- Place name reconciliation embraces a reparative approach. This repair process is not just about removing derogatory names that have offended the rights and well-being of discriminated groups. Rather, a reparative approach stresses the significance of replacing derogatory identifiers with names that more fully honor the nation's cultural diversity and advance the dignity and contributions of traditionally marginalized communities. Reconciliation stresses the value of choosing replacement place names that tell the story of the groups that experienced systematic exclusion through violence, subjugation, or marginalization and, ultimately, derogatory naming of places. Reconciliation also sees value in replacement names that recognize figures, events, and themes historically important to communities of color, women, and other social groups long underrepresented on the American landscape.
- Place name reconciliation should be participatory. The replacing of derogatory place names alone is not sufficient if not accompanied and guided by public consultation. In particular, it is imperative that the place renaming process be informed by and accountable to the views and experiences of those groups negatively impacted and excluded by derogatory names. The participatory goal of reconciliation is also about ensuring that government actors and agencies involved in naming at various levels—local, state, and national—are communicative and collaborative with each other. These government bodies should be responsive to public concerns about derogatory names and engage in active and continual examination and improvement of procedures for requesting, reviewing and changing names. The traumatic effects of many derogatory place names come not just from the harmful name itself but also from a history of governmental leaders maintaining these names, even after the harm created by them is known and after repeated ignored requests to change.
- Place name reconciliation is a research driven process. It recognizes the importance of citizens and citizen organizations helping government actors and agencies identify and reform derogatory references by conducting audits or inventories of place names in their own communities. This research can and should greatly inform and possibly facilitate official name

change proposals and decisions. Community-led audits supported by government-provided tool kits and aids should investigate and document the origin of place names believed to be derogatory and follow the principles of sound, evidence-based historical and social science scholarship. Such research examines when places were named historically, who carried out the derogatory naming and for what larger social goals, and whose voices and experiences were strongly reflected or marginalized in these past naming decisions. These audits should also collect community views about place names and whether those names align with the values of truth and justice. Special attention in audits is devoted to the specific ways derogatory place names intersect with and affect the lives and sense of wholeness and well-being of community members negatively impacted and excluded by harmful names.

- Place name reconciliation suggests that education must play a major role in reform, especially after the removal of a derogatory identifier. Reconciliation recognizes that the value of removing and replacing harmful place names is maximized when contextual background about naming and renaming decisions is provided. Place name reconciliation supports the creation of educational programming and literature, archival and database practices, and systems of landscape signage and online products and software applications that tell the history of America's place names. These tools should educate the public about the history of a location's former derogatory name, why name reform was pursued and by whom, along with how and why the replacement name was chosen. Because place name reconciliation seeks a greater social progress by correcting derogatory names, that progress requires acknowledging and learning from rather than forgetting the history of American landscape reform. In addition to more formal educational activities and efforts, communities must commit to ongoing discussion and dialogue about the root causes behind the derogatory identifier. Through ongoing discussion, we can further advance our democratic ideals of truth and justice.

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With the support of grassroots mobilization, such as Coalition for Outdoor Renaming and Education (CORE), lawmakers in Congress have most recently introduced legislation (the "Reconciliation in Place Names Act") to formalize and continue the former committee's work at the federal level, thus recognizing that communities nationwide still grapple with derogatory and discriminatory place identifiers. According to Judith LeBlanc (2025, para.

5), executive director of Native Organizers Alliance Action Fund, the proposed act would be an important step in "creating another Advisory Committee and protecting it from the whims of presidential administrations." A permanent committee would increase the likelihood that a national framework for place-name reconciliation principles would be codified and widely applied. Today, most states have active authorities responsible for researching and managing place names within the state and for seeking local voices (public and Tribal) to inform state-level decisions that, in turn, can and should inform federal actions. The challenge—and opportunity—ahead lies in streamlining work while honoring diverse histories, without weaponizing culture, and emphasizing procedural justice in which place names are treated as a public good, fostering dialogue, upholding respect, and ensuring that place names reflect values of dignity and belonging for all.

Dr. Derek Alderman is Chancellor's Professor of Geography at the University of Tennessee and a former president of the American Association of Geographers. He is a leading figure in critical place-naming studies in the United States and frequently partners with civil rights organizations, media, and city governments on naming issues. Secretary Haaland appointed him to the Federal Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names in 2021. He is the primary author of the Committee's Place Name Reconciliation Principles.

Dr. Christine Johnson serves as the executive secretary for the Council of Geographic Naming Authorities and as the secretary for the Nevada State Board on Geographic Names. She is a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and teaches as an adjunct instructor at the University of Nevada, Reno, in the departments of geography and anthropology. Secretary Haaland appointed her to the Federal Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names in 2021, and as chair of the Subcommittee on Principles and Processes.

ENDNOTE

1. This includes but is not limited to military and settler-led violence and aggression against Indigenous Americans, the sanctioned capture, transport and enslavement of African people, as well as related beliefs and social policies that reinforced them, such as white supremacy, Jim Crow laws, Japanese American incarceration camps, illegal deportation of Mexican American citizens of the United States, and many other injustices. We recognize that this does not capture the totality of oppression across the American experience.

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