



Place Name Reconciliation: Guiding Visions and Principles

Subcommittee on Principles and Processes, Federal Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names

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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.