

Mapping Changes to Geographical Names Over Time in Canada

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Abstract:

Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), in support of the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC), introduces a new interactive map: *Canada's Evolving Geographical Names*. The GNBC is Canada's national coordinating body responsible for establishing standards and policies regarding place names, and is composed of representatives from federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions. To highlight the historical and cultural significance of Canada's geographical names, NRCan and the GNBC have released a series of interactive maps to showcase significant subthemes of toponymy, including [place names that commemorate Canada's involvement in armed conflicts](#)¹, [place names that honour women's contributions to Canadian society](#)³, and [names that recognize Indigenous cultures, languages and naming practices](#)⁴. The newest map in the series (Figure 1) presents a curated selection of official geographical names that have changed over time, for various reasons, illustrating the evolution of place naming throughout Canadian history.

Geographical names, or toponyms, are a fundamental element of geospatial data, and a key component of most cartographic products to ensure a map is authoritative and understandable. Official geographical place names—whether referring to populated areas, bodies of water, or landforms—are formally recognized and published by government authorities in maps, databases, and public documents. Accurate, official place names and their locations are also critical for providing services related to emergency response, communications and navigation systems. The process of adopting an official place name requires extensive consultation, research, and the establishment of standards, policies, and procedures. Approved names are recorded in the jurisdictional databases of GNBC members and in the [Canadian Geographical Names Database](#)² (CGNDB), the authoritative national repository of place names.

Changes to official geographical names recognized by the federal, provincial, and territorial members of the GNBC may be made periodically. Members of the GNBC, each with jurisdictional authority, do not take the decision to change the official name of a place, location or geographical feature lightly or without significant consideration regarding the impact of the change. Actions to change official geographical names are not common, and require a strong, supported rationale. Changes are taken through formal processes maintained by Canada's naming authorities, typically requiring extensive discussion with stakeholders and partners, comprehensive research and consultation with local communities to ensure that the new name is culturally appropriate and supported, as well as final approval by senior levels of government. While naming jurisdictions strive for long term stability, consistency, and standardization in official geographical names, names can and do change over time for a variety of reasons.

Canada's historic and contemporary maps, as well as the official GNBC archives maintained by NRCan, provide numerous examples of changes to geographical names across the country. For instance, records indicate that in 1916, a referendum led to the renaming of [Berlin](#)², Ontario, to [Kitchener](#)² (Figure 2) to avoid association with Germany during World War I. In 1967, in British Columbia, a creek that was originally assigned a derogatory term was renamed to [Goodeve Creek](#)². In 1972, environmental changes due to the construction of a dam in Manitoba resulted in flooding, and the rescinding of the name of the feature [Dropmore Bridge](#). In 1987, [Frobisher Bay](#)² in Nunavut was renamed [Iqaluit](#)² to reflect the name used by the local Inuit population. In 2010, the [Queen Charlotte Islands](#)² off the coast of British Columbia were renamed [Haida Gwaii](#)², meaning "Islands of the people" in the local Haida language. In 2021, the name of the town of [Asbestos](#)², Quebec was changed to [Val-des-Sources](#)² via a municipal referendum to remove association with the toxic mineral formerly mined in the area.

These periodic changes to official geographical names recognized by Canada's naming authorities provide an interesting study on various aspects of the historical evolution of Canada. To explore this evolution further, the GNBC employed the following methodology to examine changes to place names and naming practices across Canada over time: (1) a

comprehensive query of over 350,000 records from the CGNDB and associated jurisdictional databases to identify places and geographical features that have undergone name changes, (2) analysis of the records to identify the patterns and trends in toponymic changes over several decades, and (3) visualization of the spatial distribution of the records across Canada. The results identified a sample of more than 350 geographical names that have undergone modification in the last 100 years.

This research revealed several possible factors that may contribute to changes to geographical names in Canada, including linguistic shifts, orthographic revisions, evolving societal attitudes, changes in physical geographical features, and the formal adoption of place names in Indigenous languages. Further investigation identified four primary drivers of toponymic change: (1) addressing derogatory terminology, (2) socio-political and administrative changes, such as the amalgamation of communities and shifts in naming conventions, (3) the restoration of Indigenous place names which supports the revitalization of Indigenous languages, and (4) environmental factors resulting in physical alterations to geographic features.

The results of this work are depicted on an interactive map entitled *Canada's Evolving Geographical Names: Over a Century of Place Names Changes*. The map provides a cartographic representation of a sample of geographical place name changes across Canada over time, and discusses the drivers behind those changes, combining interactive mapping with narrative and visual content. The ongoing evolution of place names in Canada reflects the nation's broader commitment to acknowledging its rich and diverse cultural heritage. This includes the restoration of Indigenous names, and the recognition that certain terms once considered acceptable are now seen as harmful or discriminatory. The GNBC's interactive maps play an essential role in educating the public about the significance of place names, the cultural and historical narratives they embody, along with the formal and comprehensive processes in place to change official geographical names. As Canada continues to reflect on its past and move toward a more inclusive future, understanding and respecting the stories behind place names—including how and why these names change over time—remains a crucial aspect of this process.

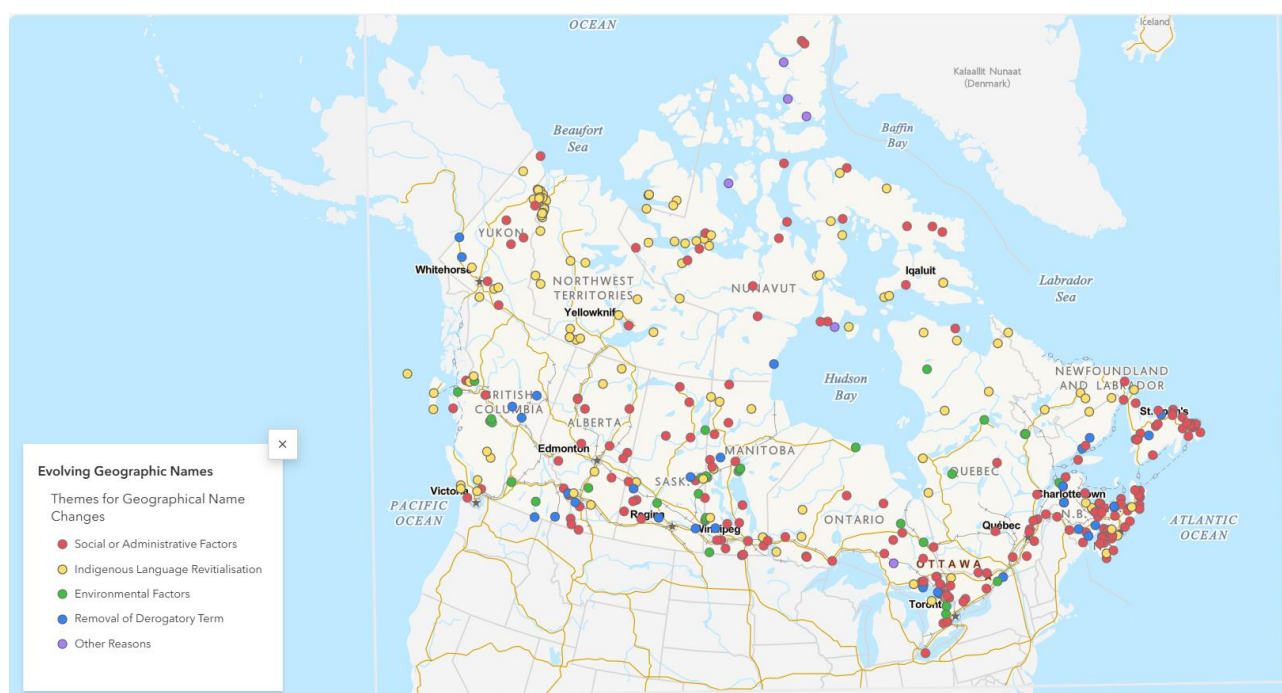


Figure 1: Interactive map example: *Canada's Evolving Geographical Names: Over a Century of Place Names Changes*.

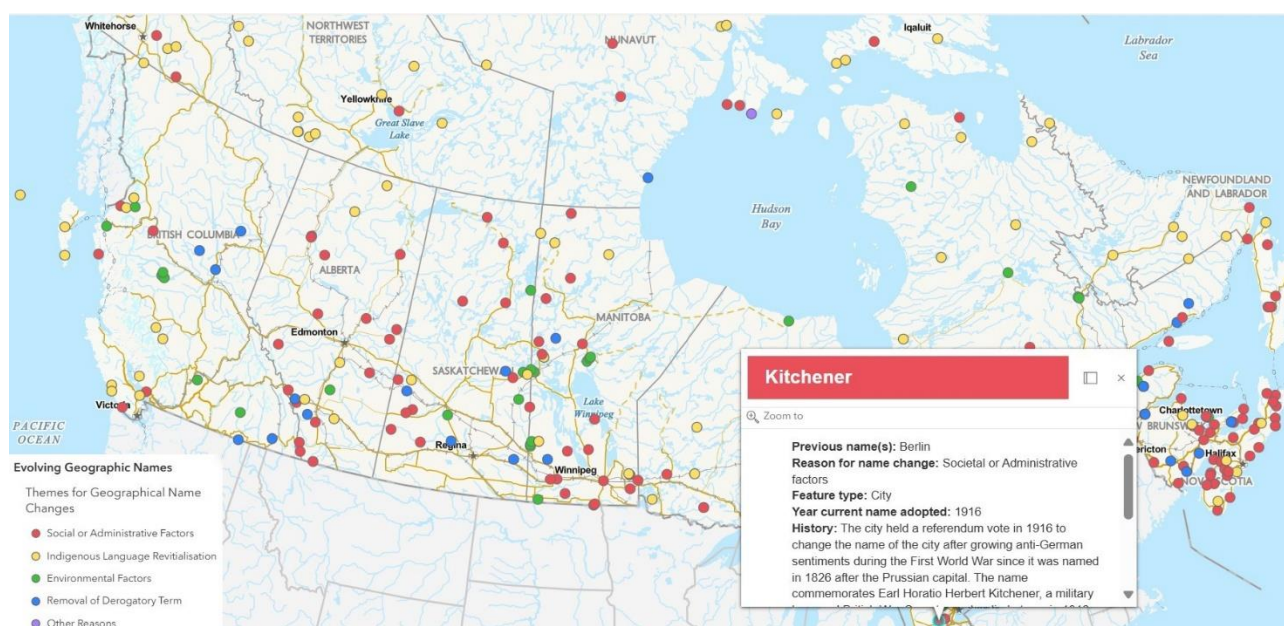


Figure 2: An example of attribute data selectable in the interactive map providing context to a geographical name change to the City of Kitchener, Ontario.

References:

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