

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 14 (2002)

**Artikel:** From Columbia to the United States of America : the creation and spreading of a name  
**Autor:** Smorag, Pascale  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99986>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 08.02.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# From *Columbia* to the *United States of America*: The Creation and Spreading of a Name

Pascale Smorag

When the Philadelphia delegates gathered in General Congress on July 4, 1776 and under the guidance of Thomas Jefferson proclaimed their independence vis-à-vis Great Britain, they were not only professing their faith in a democratic republic, but they were also claiming their right for a proper national designation. If the endorsement of the federal nation is a well-known fact, the Declaration also amply contributed to the adoption of the name *United States of America* to designate the new born country, the name officially appearing on that occasion. As the final lines of the secessional document unequivocally asserted:

The Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in GENERAL CONGRESS, Assembled [...] solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES.

A few years later the federal Constitution turned the temporary designation suggested by the Declaration of Independence into an official denomination for the Young Republic (Burnett 79-81). Yet, controversy over the pertinence of the name *United States of America* soon showed that the appellation might not be so appropriate. Although the name may seem a logical combination of geographic and federative principles, the path which confirmed such adoption was a complex one. Proposals other than the present name included celebrations of Christopher Columbus as well as enthusiastic calls for a sacrosanct liberty. If the first explorer to sail along American coasts eventually lost support and *Fredonia* became too abstract and elaborate to be maintained, *United States of America* confirmed its supremacy despite continuous – although minor – dissent. Whereas the chosen denomination prophesied sovereignty and progress, the uncertainty about the work-

ability of such a lengthy denomination, on the one hand, and the cohesive forces of the Union, on the other, greatly testified to the practical, cultural, and ideological difficulties the name encountered.

## PRAGMATISM

Although Jefferson may be credited for coining the nation's official name, the origin of the name seems to be prior to his phrasing. Jefferson himself used other denominations, calling the colonies *British America*, as he did in 1774 in a pamphlet entitled *Summary View of British America* (Kaplan 8). Another frequently used expression was *the united colonies*, which obviously contained the seeds of a united front against the British Crown, even though the name might not have been initially brandished as a political banner. With time the expression was capitalized as *The United Colonies of America*, with *The United Colonies of North America* as a variant (Stewart, *NL* 173). However, when American colonists showed an increased determination to throw off the British yoke, *Colonies* became a blatant archaism. The escalation of the American insurrection thus imposed an urgent reconsideration of the status of the colonies. Resolved to discard all anachronic terminology, American Revolutionaries, who refused being called *Englishmen of America* any longer, engaged in debates on a proper national denomination. As a participant called Candidus asserted a few months before the Declaration of Independence was adopted:

The American States are neither Provinces,<sup>1</sup> Colonies, nor children of Great Britain. (Stewart, *NL* 170)

Beyond republican principles, what the name *United States of America* underlined was the sacrosanct notion of indivisibility. The designation seemed a reasonable compromise, somehow guaranteeing Jeffersonians that state rights would be respected and, conversely, reassuring Hamilton's Federalists about the importance of the confederation. As George Washington said in 1785:

We are either a united people under one head, and for federal purposes; or we are thirteen independent sovereignties, eternally counteracting each other. (qtd. in Bowen and Rezé 40)

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, the adoption of the term *Provinces* by the British Dominion of Canada was to evidence an attachment, both institutional and cultural, to the British crown.

Yet, whereas the name asserted how inseparable the thirteen states were, insistence on American indivisibility may have actually been an indication that the Confederation was somehow insecure. Since there is generally no need to over-qualify what is perfectly evident, it is not unthinkable that the claim concealed potential flaws in the union. This corroborates historian Daniel Boorstin's thesis in *The Americans, The Colonial Experience*, that Independence created not one nation but thirteen. Moreover, *United States of America* displays possible fragmentation, which names like *Spain* or *Great Britain*, for instance, do not express, although Spain, as a country, is composed of autonomous provinces, and Great Britain is subdivided into England, Wales, and Scotland. In comparison, the national unity advocated by a name like *United Kingdom*, when one considers the Irish question, is far from offering guarantees against division. Names, as they are, therefore tell more of men's ambitions than of reality.

Possibly because this union was waved as a token of rebellion and might against the former motherland, and also because it seemed a perfect remedy to adversity, it found echoes in the nomenclature bestowed upon towns. *Uniontown*, Pennsylvania, for instance, was given for obvious patriotic considerations. From the 1830s onwards the political atmosphere increased the citizens' consciousness of the necessity of preserving the Union (Stewart, *AN*). The Civil War period saw a peak in such rallying cries, especially in the Northern and Western states, with 89 *Unions* in 1855 and 110 in 1862. It is fascinating to see that a name which prophesized the union of the nation was contradicted by history, or maybe, on the contrary, it acted as an antidote to division.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Union was still undecided as to the proper name to adopt for the country. Despite Virginia's and New Jersey's support for a shortened name, like *United States*, on September 17, 1787, "The People of the United States [. . .] ordain[ed] and establish[ed] [the] Constitution for the United States of America." Had there been any hesitations as to the pertinence of the name, the federal Constitution was to dispel them.

Yet, many Americans – and Europeans alike – held the designation as stylistically inadequate. For most late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century people the name displayed an unusually long, if not awkward, sequence of words and concepts. A shortened *U.S.A.* did exist, but was actually relegated to military spheres as a useful abbreviation on army supplies, and even then it was soon replaced by *United States* (Stewart, *NL* 170). For the ordinary citizen, how-

ever, resorting to acronyms was not a customary practice and therefore offered no alternative to the lengthy designation.

Why then were early Americans clinging to such a name and why did the name have to be so descriptive? The motives might be found in some kind of pragmatism which accompanied the birth of the nation, a pragmatism which actually did not contradict, but rather balanced, the idealism that fashioned American destiny. This is why, beside eloquent denominations that were suggested for the Young Republic, such as *Columbia* or *Fredonia*, as shall be studied later, Americans might also have reflected upon Thomas Jefferson's words: "What is practical must often control what is pure theory" (qtd. in Bowen and Rezé 131). Because practical intelligence in reality prevailed over abstractions and since the spirit of the Enlightenment nurtured Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, the proper denomination for the new country was to bear witness to that faith in reason and a perfectible society.

The other linguistic dilemma the name raised was finding a euphonious adjectival form to qualify the citizens of the new nation. The proposed *United Statesian*, the abridged *United Statian*, and the even more elliptical *Unisian* did not offer satisfactory developments and were soon rejected. It is interesting to note the debate was pursued far into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, offering such jewels as *Usona* (an acronym of *United States of North America*) or *U-Station* (for *U.S. nation*), and, to designate American citizens, substitutes as elaborate as *Usonans*, *Usian*, *Statesian*, *Washingtonian*, *Usonians*, *Uesican*, *U-S-ian* (pronounced *you-ess-ian*), *United Statesers*, *United Statesards*, or *United Statesese* (Mencken, 242-245).

As Miriam Allen de Ford wrote in *American Speech* in 1927:

Had the government, after the separation from Great Britain, given this nation a name susceptible to such a derivative, it would have conferred a favor on posterity. Local jealousy and lack of cohesive feeling of course prevented this. (315)

"THE AMERICAN IS A NEW MAN" (Crèvecoeur, "Letter 3")

Whether jealousy and individualism prevailed over judicious choices, Jefferson's fellow citizens in general were rather supportive of *American*, or *North American*, as the treaty with France indicated *United States of North America* (Stewart, *NL* 170). But this proposal raised a political debate – that of defining the spatial limits of the country. What geographical entity was the name *United States of America* to describe? As an anonymous satirist writer of the *American Monthly* wrote in 1837:

What is the name of our nation? Are we *North Americans*? So are the Cherokees. Are we *Anglo-Americans*? So are the Canadians. *Americans of the United States*? So are the Mexicans. We have no distinctive name. This is a thing which Congress might set right with a word, and that word they ought to speak. (qtd. in Mencken 242)

Cherokees, who had assimilated at a stupendous speed, adopting a written constitution after the American model as early as 1827, were atrociously deported to western territories the year which followed the publication of the *American Monthly* statement, a fact which denied the southern tribe any right to be called North Americans, not to mention that American Indians were refused US citizenship until 1924. The name *Anglo-Americans* brought up a different problem, since the young Republic was resolved to take its distance from British Loyalists; two wars of Independence had been amply sufficient to officialize that distinction. Under those circumstances, *Anglo-Americans* was not specific enough. Furthermore, it would by definition exclude people of Pennsylvania-Dutch or French Huguenot ancestry, for instance, just as *Latin-Americans strictu sensu* excludes indigenous and African descendants. As for Mexicans, who had gained their independence from Spain in 1822, it was undeniable that they were part of the North American continent. In the 1830s, this geographical perception was doubled by an ideological one, since a number of American citizens had settled in Texas – a Mexican territory – for speculative and expansionist reasons. The creation of the Texan Republic in March 1836 was to confuse people's minds even further as to the official ownership of the southern tip of North America. In this context *Americans of the United States* was, quite obviously, not sufficiently distinctive.

Of course, *North American* suited all those who were expecting to place the North American continent under the “protection” of the Star Spangled banner. *American* could even herald a fully achieved hegemony when referring to the entire North and South American continent. Wasn't this nation destined to an exceptional future and assigned a role to lead its citizens, and the whole world, to a better order? Convinced that more justice, democracy, liberty, and happiness were synonymous with *America*, US citizens were ready to extend the prophecy beyond their current boundaries.

In the decades following the American Revolution, however, possible extension of that territory was not yet clearly envisaged. *American*, therefore, sounded improper, all the more so since the new-born South American

republics might also claim such a name. As Henry Louis Mencken confirmed in “Names for Americans” as late as 1947:

The right of Americans to be so called is frequently challenged, especially in Latin-America. (241)

It must nevertheless be acknowledged that Latin Americans have rarely called themselves *Americans*, referring instead to their respective nationalities. In addition, 17<sup>th</sup> century cartographers had already imposed our modern interpretation of *South America* and *North America* (Farkas 12), a distinction which was to be echoed by *South/Latin Americans* and *Norteamericanos*, the mutual designations of North and Latin Americans.

In the post-revolutionary period, however, confusion remained, as underlined by John Pickering who wrote in his American glossary in 1816:

The French (as a correspondent observes) extend the appellation *Americans* (*Américains*) to the inhabitants of the West Indies. Their writers accordingly sometimes distinguish us by the name of *Anglo-Americans*. (qtd. in Mencken, 242)

The inadequacy of the name was echoed in 1839 by Washington Irving in the following terms:

In France, when I have announced myself as an *American*, I have been supposed to belong to one of the French colonies; in Spain, to be from Mexico or Peru, or some other Spanish-American country. (qtd. in Mencken 243)

In that case the question was to know whether *American* covered a geographical representation, and therefore applied to the inhabitants of the French West Indies, for instance, or referred to a national identity, and was consequently the exclusive usage of the citizens of the United States. Whereas John Pickering’s understanding of *American* was exclusively that of “an inhabitant of the United States, and is so employed except where unusual precision of language is required” (qtd. in Mencken, 242), all in all, the designation seemed a perfect indication that the Young Republic was focusing on its own specificity – the New World. Yet, for some, like Washington Irving, *United States of America* was not sealing the future of New World specifically enough and the writer suggested that the name should be abandoned for *United States of Appalachia* or *Alleghania*. As he stipulated:

I want an appellation that shall tell at once, and in a way not to be mistaken, that I belong to this very portion of America, geographical and political, to which it is my pride and happiness to belong; that I am of the Anglo-Saxon race which founded this Anglo-Saxon empire in the wilderness; and that I have no part or parcel with any other race or empire, Spanish, French or Portuguese, in either of the Americas. . . . The title of *Appalacian* (sic), or *Alleghanian*, would still announce us as Americans, but would specify us as citizens of the Great Republic. Even our old national cypher of *U.S.A.* might remain unaltered. (qtd. in Mencken, 243)

This argument, therefore, raised the question of assessing the appropriateness of *America*, as the denomination referred to the past – a European past – and, what is more, to a European explorer who hardly “discovered” the New World. Yet, back in 1507 when Martin Waldseemüller, a German professor of geography at the University of Strasbourg, published his *Cosmographiae Introductio*, the consecration of Amerigo Vespucci was unequivocal. As Waldseemüller explained :

The fourth part of the world was discovered by Americus Vespucius[...] therefore I do not see for what reason should be objected, that this land after Americus – the discoverer and a man of sagacious mind – Americus’ Land or America should be called, since Europa and Asia are also named in feminine form. (qtd. in Farkas 11)

For Jefferson’s contemporaries, patriotism and the ebullience generated by the Revolution confirmed that the New World had indeed acquired a name of its own. As Philip Freneau wrote in “The Rising Glory of America” in 1772:

Fair fruits shall bloom,  
 Fair to the eye, and grateful to the taste;  
 [...]
 Such days the world,  
 And such, AMERICA, thou first shalt have,  
 When ages, yet to come, have run their round,  
 And future years of bliss alone remain.  
 (“RGA”)

In 1926, more than a century after the revolutionary excitement, Heinrich Charles was still asserting in *The Romance of The Name America*, that *America* was “the shortest, the most popular, and the most enduring poem ever composed” (4). Madison S. Beeler, who in “America – The Story of a Name” investigated the linguistic history of the name, showed that it derived



partly from the Old High German root *-rich*, which means “power/powerful, labor, ruler, empire” and connotes an idea of strength and leadership. This interpretation, which was little known among Jefferson’s contemporaries, is worthy of interest as it unconsciously conveys the idea that this nation was to extend beyond the original Appalachian Mountains, ultimately fulfilling its dream of economic and political strength. Clearly enough, the American nation was telling the world that it displayed the most outstanding characteristics and had an exceptional origin, one not to be confused with European circumstances.

## REDISCOVERING COLUMBUS

Some recalcitrants, however, considered the designation *United States of America* to be not only a linguistic anomaly, but also a historical abduction, since it deprived the Genoese explorer of his discovery. Despite Christopher Columbus’s conviction that he had reached *The Indies* – not America – the citizens of the Young Republic wanted to pay tribute to their “American” hero. That Columbus’s greatest exploit may have been to find something he was not pursuing in the first place was only incidental. Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the American “Messiah” thus became a portentous symbol for the young nation, a recognition which contrasted with the view held by British colonists earlier on. Several hypotheses for this denial may be advanced.

If British America had wished to commemorate an explorer, it would not have been a man in the service of Spain; Anglo-Saxons preferably would have honored the Cabots for their explorations of the northern shores of America, as they did when they named the channel between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia *Cabot Strait*. In addition, the attachment to the motherland, and above all, to the sovereign, had a strong influence on colonial naming. Didn’t Britain’s navigator Sir Walter Raleigh baptize the *terra incognita* he discovered in 1584, *Virginia*, in honor of Elizabeth I whose poetic name was Virgin Queen (Stewart, *AN*)? Britain’s first colony settlement in America was likewise called *Jamestown* “in honor of the king’s most excellent majesty” (Stewart, *NL* 31). This naming practice in reality set a precedent for other designations, such as *Carolina*, named after King Charles, in 1629, and *Maryland*, chosen in honor of Queen Henriette Maria in 1632 (Stewart, *NL* 43-44); the adoption of *Georgia*, inspired by King George II, in 1732 (Stewart, *AN*), testified to the persistence of the naming convention in the next century.

Three hundred years had therefore elapsed since Columbus's discovery when American insurgents decided to do justice to an explorer they held as a visionary and a paragon of determination and faith. While sailing along the coasts of the New World on the occasion of his third voyage (1498-1500), the discoverer claimed that he "believe[d] that the earthly Paradise lies here, which no one can enter but by God's will" (qtd. in Lauter 128). What a wonderful parallel could thus be drawn between a man who affirmed that "God wanted him to be the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth as He described them in St John's Apocalypse" (Boorstin, *Découvreurs* 232) and New England colonists and their descendants whom the Lord had led to the predestined – American – land! Columbus embodied the pilgrimage along the coasts of America which his North American heirs were to undertake inland.

*Columbia*, preferred to the masculine *Columbus*,<sup>2</sup> gradually met with wide support among Americans. Sometime in the mid-1770s, simultaneously in Philip Freneau's revolutionary poems and Phillis Wheatley's poetry, the name made its first appearance. In 1775, while Boston was under siege, the "Poet of the Revolution" wrote in "American Liberty":

What madness, heaven, has Britannia frown?  
Who plans or schemes to pull Columbia down?  
(“AL”)

The African-American poetess likewise designated North America by referring to the Genoese explorer, as she did in her 1775 address to General George Washington :

Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,  
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.  
(qtd. in Lauter 1108)

In reality, *Columbia* reflected current poetic conventions, which generally favored refined constructions like *Britannia*, *Gallia*, *Carribiana*, *Germania*, *Iberia*, *Albion*, *Scotia/Caledonia*, and *Cambria*, as designated by P. Freneau and P. Wheatley over standard designations. If Freneau's poems articulated the fervor of rebellion, the poet's ambition was also to place the destiny of America on an equal footing with that of Ancient Greece or Rome. His verse "Hence, old Arcadia – wood-nymphs, satyrs, fawns," a metaphor for Amer-

---

<sup>2</sup> *Columbus* applied more easily to town names.

ica, where modern Romans “lov’d a life/ Of neat simplicity and rustic bliss” (“RGA”), illustrates the need to equate the destiny of the nation with the ideals and virtues of Antiquity. If America had been interpreted as a new Zion, in the late 1780s it certainly embodied a potential Rome, a recovered Athens, or even a reviving Alexandria.<sup>3</sup>

Determined as they were to replace the old monarchical order by a new one, Americans rebaptized *King’s College* in NY, *Columbia College* (to become *Columbia University*) in 1784. Under these favorable auspices, *Columbia* was naturally approved for the new capital of South Carolina in 1786, followed by another major act of naming in 1791. That year, that is one year before the tercentennial anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America, the explorer’s name met again with wide support when the capital’s Commissioners, directed by Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, decided that the new federal district would be called the *Territory of Columbia* and the federal capital the *City of Washington* (Baldwin and Grimaud 153). This symbolic alliance accredited the eagerness of the Young Republic to find heroes who would give substance to its expectations.

Inspired by the explorer’s name, other suggestions made their way into the nomenclature, such as the following proposal anonymously publicized by the *American Monthly* in 1837, at a time when the name *United States of America* seemed an established designation:

The name of Columbus will furnish the best derivative. *Colombia*, indeed, is already appropriated. But *Colon*, the Spanish name of the great discoverer, is yet untouched. I therefore propose to call our republic *Colonica*. *Colonica* is a good name, and not the worse for its reminding us at once that *Colon* discovered our country, and that England colonized it. *Colonic*, will be the tongue, and for the individuals *Colonicans* follows of course as a name designation of them, and you have *Colonic* for the language, *Colonicisms* for its idioms, and *colonicize* as a verb signifying to speak or use it. (qtd. in Mencken, 243)

The 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’s landing in America offered a renewed occasion for commemoration, as illustrated by the toponymic landscape. Around 1892 several streets were indeed baptized *Columbus*, like *Columbus Avenue* in New York City (Baldwin and Grimaud 161). Yet, when the nation was getting ready to celebrate Columbus’s quincentenary, the legitimacy of colonialist legacy had become blatantly questionable. What the anniversary was pointing out in reality was the 500 year old betrayal of the Indian people

---

<sup>3</sup> Apart from names like *Philadelphia* and *Annapolis*, classical designations had been rather occasional during the colonial period

in what the white man was calling the “New World.” As Kiowa-Cherokee novelist N. Scott Momaday wrote with the approach of 1992:

I have done three large paintings, acrylic on canvas, of what I call the Columbian triad. . . . The third one is “San Salvador,” a depiction of Columbus in a full figure adjacent to an Indian child; Columbus is an emaciated, death-like figure, and the child is pure, innocent, small and naked. It’s a confrontation of the old world and the new world. (Nabokov 437-38)

The fate of Columbus in the late second millenium had somehow been anticipated by the position of the citizens of the young American Republic who eventually relinquished *Columbia* as the official name of their nation. This renunciation actually served a newly independent Latin American state. Under Simón Bolívar’s leadership, in 1819 *Nueva Granada* indeed became *Colombia*. If the North American nation had failed to retain the denomination, at least the Colombian decision ensured a continuity in the reverence due to this significant figure of the New World. In South America the name was repeatedly given to streets, as illustrated by the innumerable *calles Colón*, not to count all the *calles 12 de Octubre* which commemorate the day when the navigator reached Guanahani Island in 1492.

## REPUBLICAN IDEALS

Whereas in North America *Columbia* seemed destined for use in local naming, the enthusiasm of the revolutionary period was relayed by other forms of toponymic idealism. Inspiration from the concluding lines of the Declaration of Independence prompted an ambitious, almost ideological principle – Freedom. As American liberty was an intimate product of the Revolution, wasn’t *Fredonia* more convincing than the controversial “*The United States of America*”? In addition, *Fredonia* could easily replace *Columbia* as a poetic paradigm for the nation.

In 1803 in his *Medical Repository* Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill suggested the following names for a nation which “at the distance of 27 years from the declaration and of 20 years from the acknowledgment of [its] independence” was still “destitute of proper geographical and political denominations”:

*Fredon*, the aggregate noun for the whole territory of the United States.

*Fredonia*, a noun of the same import, for rhetorical and poetical use.

*Fredonian*, a sonorous name for “a citizen of the United States.”

*Frede*, a short and colloquial name for a “citizen of the United States”

*Fredish*, an adjective to denote the relations and concerns of the United States.

[. . .]

And the time will be noted carefully when a native of this land, on being asked who he is and whence he came, began to answer in one word that he was a *Frede*, instead of using the tedious circumlocution that he was “a citizen of the United States of America.” And in like manner notice will be taken of the association of *Fredonia* and *Macedonia* and *Caledonia* as a word equally important and melodious in sound.

(qtd. in Mencken 241)

Although Dr. Mitchill’s suggestion could solve the problem of finding an appropriate adjective to designate the citizens of the Young Republic, as early as 1816 John Pickering responded that :

The words *Fredonia*, etc., are never now used in the United States except by ridicule. (qtd. in Mencken, 242)

The name, it must be acknowledged, has never been a serious contender. Its artificial derivation from the English term *Freedom*, to which a Latin ending was added, was probably a major obstacle. *Fredonia* – or *Freedonia* – was nonetheless applied more or less successfully to a dozen towns, as in New York in 1803 and a few decades later in Kansas (Stewart, *AN*), but even then, its occurrences were highly outnumbered by the Latin-derived *Liberty* and the English *Freedom*. When *Fredonia* made a new appearance in 1827 as the denomination for the intended Republic of Texas, it had already lost all its significance (Mencken, 242).

Whereas *Columbia* recalled the New World’s specificity, the young American Republic simultaneously developed a new naming process, one most probably inherited from the French Revolution, and which substituted commemorative naming to colonial practices. This anthroponymic naming system was soon to place the nation’s great patriots on a pedestal. Despite the controversy over his presidential mandate, George Washington was rapidly acclaimed as the “Father of the Nation,” and quite logically his name was bestowed upon hundreds of counties, townships, towns, and many topographical features. As late as 1853, a Pacific state was named in his honor despite protests about the confusion and monotony caused by the innumerable occurrences of the name. As Kentucky Congressman Stanton said:

I desire to see, if I should live so long, at some future day, a sovereign State bearing the name of the Father of his country. (Stewart, NL 287)

That Washington's name could be applied to the nation was, although envisaged, not so easy an attainment. What then would the residents of Washington, D.C., be called, notwithstanding that there might have been no *State* of Washington, as there would have been no easy way of distinguishing the residents of that state from the citizens of the United States?

Whoever they decided to commemorate, Americans were keeping their distances from the British loyalists who lived beyond the Canadian border. Because the latter had remained loyal to the British crown, they had no reason to display a particular toponymic celebration of heroes as Americans had. In Canada not only has Queen Victoria been honored more than three hundred times, with, for instance, *Victoria* and *Regina* the respective capitals of British Columbia and Saskatchewan, but other royal figures and royal symbols have similarly been revered with such names as *Prince Albert*, *Alberta*, *Union Jack*, and *Coronation*. As W.L. Morton confirmed in *The Canadian Identity* in 1972:

The self-governing colonies, having achieved their goal of self-government by adapting British institutions to local needs, had no desire to sever the connection with the United Kingdom. [ . . . ] To Canadians not revolution but empire has meant liberty. [ . . . ] (39)

Needless to say, Americans did not pledge the same allegiance. The War of Independence gave rise to varied forms of patriotism which the toponymic corpus reflected. The national identity, or at least the unifying spirit, which followed the Revolution became a cultural and political tool used to assert that, despite diverging interests, the new states would display identical ambitions.

Before the name *United States of America* became a means of asserting the durability of the Union, it encountered objection as skeptics denounced an over-descriptive, linguistically inadequate phrase which they thought was depriving the nation of its lofty ambitions. *Columbia*, in commemoration of the discoverer of the New World, was an option which assuredly reflected the nation's will and youth. *Fredonia*, for all its elevated symbolism, offered another promising alternative which contrasted with European monarchical régimes. Yet, although extraordinarily nurtured by national ideals, the Young Republic was determined to fulfil its expectations with action and efficiency, and maybe to that extent *United States of America* sounded more rational and was eventually preferred to poetic and grandiloquent designa-

tions. Time confirmed such choice, and pragmatism put an end to the linguistic difficulties inherent in a lengthy designation by abridging the name to *U.S.A.* and *U.S.*, an acronym which has ever since been widely used both as a noun and an adjective. In a similar way, an abbreviated *America* unmistakably identifies the United States, as Samuel Gompers wrote in *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* in 1925, "America is more than a name, America is an ideal; America is the apotheosis of all that is right" (qtd in Bowen and Rezé 109).

France was named after the Franks, the Germanic people, who in 430-450 AD invaded what was then called *Gaul*, and gave the country its first royal lineage; England – *Engleland* – was named after another Germanic tribe, the Engles, who also in the fifth century established their kingdoms in what had been Caesar's *Britannia* and a Celtic country. If one follows similar logic, it could be advanced that the "United States of America" was settled (the indigenous people of North America would rightfully say "invaded") by a new tribe, a new people, "new men," to quote Crèvecoeur. Whether or not this country shows more aptitude than others to reassess the foundation of its principles, debates on the capacity of the "United States of America" to renew itself and to adjust to an ever-changing environment will certainly be kept open for some time. Undoubtedly the most interesting aspect of this whole naming process is the gap between what Americans project and what they attain, an ambivalence which is commonly identified as myth.

*References*

- Baldwin, Lawrence M. and Michel Grimaud. "How New Naming Systems Emerge: The Prototypical Case of Columbus and Washington." *Names* 40 (Sept. 1992): 153-165.
- Beeler, Madison S. "America – The Story of a Name." *Names* 1 (March 1953).
- Boorstin, Daniel. *Les Découvreurs* (transl. from *The Discoverers*, 1983). Paris: Robert Laffont, 1986.
- Boorstin, Daniel. *The Americans, the Colonial Experience*. 1958. New York: Random House, 1972.
- Bowen, Ralf, and Michel Rezé. *Key Words in American Life, Understanding the United States*. 1979. Paris: Armand Collin, 1998.
- Burnett, Edmund C. "The Name *United States of America*." *American Historical Review* 31 (1925): 79-81.
- Charles, Heinrich. *The Romance of The Name America*. New York: published by the author, 1926.
- Crèvecoeur, John Hector. *Letters from an American Farmer*. 1782. London: JM Dent and Sons Ltd, 1971.
- De Ford, Miriam Allen. "On the Difficulty of Indicating Nativity in the United States," *American Speech* 2 (April 1927).
- Farkas, Zoltan J. "The Challenge of the Name America." *Names* 13 (March 1965): 11-18.
- Freneau, Philip. *Poems Relating to the American Revolution*. New York: W.J. Widdleton, 1865. On-line source by the University of Michigan's Digital Library Production Service at the following Internet address: <http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/a/amverse>, "The Rising Glory of America" ("RAG"); "American Liberty" ("AL").
- Kaplan, Lawrence S. *Thomas Jefferson; Westward the Course of Empire*. Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 1999.
- Lauter, Paul, et al. eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 2 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998.
- Mencken, Henry Louis. "Names for Americans." *American Speech* 22 (Dec. 1947): 241-256.
- Morton, W.L. *The Canadian Identity*. 2nd ed. 1961. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972.
- Nabokov, Peter, ed. *Native American Testimony*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Rea, Joy. "On the Naming of America," *American Speech* 39 (1964): 42-54.



- Stewart, George Rippey. *American Place-Names: A Concise and Selective Dictionary for the Continental United States of America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. (Stewart, AN).
- . *Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States*. 1945. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967. (Stewart, NL).