THE CHEMISTRY OF PLACENAMES

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When asked about the relationship between the chemical elements and placenames, those knowledgeable in etymology will point out the several elements that derive their names from those of cities or towns. Holmium is derived from Stockholm, Sweden; lutetium comes from Lutetia, the Roman name for Paris; berkelium from Berkeley, California; and strontium indirectly comes from Strontian, a village in Scotland. No less than four elements--erbium, terbium, ytterbium, and yttrium--are derived from Ytterby, a Swedish mining town.

But naming elements for towns is only one relationship. The reverse, naming towns for elements, also happens and has been discussed in Word Ways before. In the August 1970 issue was a wide-ranging article on U.S. placenames written by Leslie Card. Among other topics, Card suggested that it would be interesting to find places that are named the same as chemical elements. He then listed 17 elements which were also placenames, although he didn't indicate where they could be found. In the Colloquy of the following issue, Darryl Francis added six more for a total of 23.

Feeling that this was an inadequate coverage of the topic, I embarked on an extended search for additions. I did not limit the list to American places only, although U.S. places were given precedence. My final list contains 39 places covering 38 elements (tungsten and wolfram are two names for the same element). Any placename with the same spelling as an element was eligible for inclusion, even though in a couple of cases the town was named before the element.

Throughout the rest of this article, the number in parentheses following a placename indicates the reference (see list at end); for U.S. places, the county name follows the number.

Aluminum AR (7, Saline)
Antimony UT (1, Garfield)
Argon IA (5, Franklin)
Arsenic VA (11, Floyd)
Barium NC (4, Iredell)
Bismuth, New South Wales, Australia (2)
Boron CA (1, Kern)
Calcium NY (1, Jefferson)
Carbon IN (1, Clay)
Cobalt CT (1, Middlesex)
Copper AZ (9, Yavapai)

Curium, Cyprus (2)
Fluorine NM (12, Socorro)
Gold PA (1, Potter)
Helium ND (9, Rolette)
Iron MN (1. St. Louis)
Krypton KY (1, Perry)
Lead SD (1, Lawrence)
Lithium MO (1, Perry)
Magnesium CA (5, San Bernardino)
Manganese MN (9, Crow Wing)
Mercury NV (1, Nye)
Molybdenum NM (14, Taos)
Neon KY (1, Letcher)
Nickel TX (1, Gonzales)
Platinum AK (1, Bethel)
Radium CO (1, Grand)
Radon, France (15)
Silicon AL (13, Elmore)
Silver SC (1, Clarendon)
Sodium WY (1, Natrona)
Sulphur LA (1, Calcasieu)
Tellurium CO (8, Hinsdale)
Tin NC (10, Henderson)
Tungsten NV (2, Pershing)
Uranium CO (6, Montrose)
Vanadium NM (1, Grant)
Wolfram, Queensland, Australia (2)
Zinc AR (1, Boone)

Conspicuous by its absence from the above list is the most common element on the surface of the Earth: oxygen. We shall have to be satisfied with its allotropic form, Ozone TN (1, Cumberland).

Anyone who has perused a list of the elements will note that some have symbols that are not related to their English name. These elements have Latin or Neo-Latin names from which their symbols are derived. Six of these Latin names are found among placenames:

Argentum KY (1, Greenup) [Ag silver]
Aurum NV (1, White Pine) [Au gold]
Cuprum ID (1, Adams) [Cu copper]
Ferrum VA (1, Franklin) [Fe iron]
Natrium WV (1, Marshall) [Na sodium]
Stannum, New South Wales, Australia (2) [Sn tin]

When elements occur in simple compounds, chemists use suffixes and prefixes on element names to denote the relationship between the compounded elements. Two of these chemical suffixes, -ide and -ate, show up in several placenames:

Borate CA (6, San Bernardino)
Bromide OK (1, Coal and Johnston)
Carbide WV (1, Wetzel)
Chloride AZ (1, Mohave)
Hydrate CO (5, Routt)
Oxide NC (13, Transylvania)
Phosphate MT (1, Powell)
Telluride CO (1, San Miguel)

Element names are also converted to combinative forms for various uses. One of those uses is to construct the names of families of compounds such as Hydrocarbon KY (1, Greenup). Another use is in the names of chemicals more complex than those that are designated by suffixes (e.g., nitroglycerin). Several of these combinative forms are also placenames:

Hydro OK (1, Caddo and Blaine)
Nitro WV (1, Kanawha and Putnam)
Oxy CA (1, San Bernardino)
Phospho SC (7, Charleston)
Silico WA (3, Douglas)

The next step upward in complexity of chemical compounds (at least as represented in placenames) is those of minerals. Some of them, such as Alum, Calcite and Silica, are related to element names and are also placenames. However, I've chosen not to pursue mineralogy in this article but to just stay with basic Chemistry MA (8, Middlesex).

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