

REVERSED PLACENAMES

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Many years ago, I worked for a company which had been founded by a man named Joe Grebe. Mr. Grebe had passed away a few years before and some of the employees wanted to name something after him. They finally persuaded one of the railroads to rename a train stop at one of the company plants Eberg, the reverse of Grebe. With this reversal they joined in what is probably the most common form of wordplay used in forming placenames.

The following survey of reversals (also known as inversions) in placenames is primarily concerned with those that were deliberately reversed to form a new, usually distinctive name. The survey is limited to the United States and Canada and includes any locality, even those that no longer exist. Two-letter abbreviations for states and provinces have been used; those unfamiliar with Canadian abbreviations should note that NT is Northwest Territories and not a mistake for MT.

Like Eberg, most placename reversals are of personal names. Although most of these are of ordinary people, some honor better-known people. A place in Oklahoma sought to honor Admiral Thomas Dewey of Spanish-American War fame but there was already a Dewey in Oklahoma, so it became known as Yewed. Retsil WA was named after Ernest Lister, a governor of Washington Territory, and Sniktaw CA was named after W.F. Watkins, a journalist in the 1850s who used Sniktaw as a pseudonym.

The names of ordinary people make up the bulk of reversals. Lebam WA, Nagrom WA, Namorf OR, Reklaw TX, Remlap AL, Remlig TX, Sacul TX, Setag TX, and Trevloc IN are all known to be named after local residents. Retlaw OR, though, is named after a railroad official, and Rolyat OR is thought to be named after a post office official. Two brothers named Corum settled near a dry lake in southern California and founded Muroc. This place later gave its name to Muroc Field, where the Air Force tested new planes. It's now much better known as Edwards Air Force Base.

Following is a list of placenames that are most likely reversals of personal names. It's impossible to know the origin of every placename, so a certain amount of judgement was applied. If a name is the reversal of a common name and it is not itself a common name, it is included here. The PhoneDisc was used to determine if a name was common or not. Several seemingly-good reversals were thus rejected including Neslen UT, Sellow CA, and Sivert TN.

Adnaw CO	Nocam VA	Redan GA	Seloc SC
Darnoc TX	Nortac MS	Redart VA	Senrab GA
Esrom MO	Noswad WV	Remlik VA	Siwel MS
Mahlep AL	Notarb CA	Retrah OR	Snevets IN
Mahned MS	Notnac LA	Retrop OK	Trebloc MS
Nitram LA	Odlaw TX	Retsof NY	Trebor GA
Nivloc NV	Ramal CA	Revilo KY	Yelgar LA

Not all are necessarily inversions of personal names. Nocam and Notnac could be reversals of city names, and Redart could be the reversal of a common English word.

Ynot MT is one place where judgement was not sufficient. It could be a reversal of Tony, or it could be a variant of names like Whynot or Wynot which are found in several other states.

Sometimes inversions don't come out quite right. A town in Idaho wanted to honor Pierre-Jean deSmet, the well-known missionary, but there was already a DeSmet in Idaho. Their application for a post office to be named Tensed was somehow modified during the approval process. Perhaps a typo crept in, or possibly the postal bureaucrats did not realize that it was a reversal and 'corrected' it. For whatever reason, the town is now known as Tensed.

Other imperfect reversals are Yesmar AL, which was a modification of Ramsay, the name of a local family, and Revillo SD, which is a modification of Oliver. Enola NE is Malone reversed without the M.

The longest personal name inversion is Nostrebor VA, a name discovered by Dmitri Borgmann (Word Ways, Aug 1973, p 178).

Not all reversals are of personal names; other geographic names are sometimes inverted. When the name reverses the state or county it's in, a palindrome results. Adaven Nevada has long been known to logologists. Others in this category are Adanac Canada (in western Saskatchewan) and Saxet Texas, a locality in Shelby County in northeastern Texas. A partial reversal of this sort is Ainrof CA which is a reversal of the last six letters of California.

An unusual reversal is represented by Ti OK. Ti was founded when that area was still known as Indian Territory, and its name comes from reversing the abbreviation of the territory.

Sometimes the reversal is of a nearby town. Revloc and Colver are a few miles apart in Cambria County PA, and at one time there was a place near Salem OR named Melas. Dotsero and Orestod CO are localities at opposite ends of a short railroad connecting line.

Nikep and Pekin are two names for the same Maryland town. The original name was Pekin, but there was another Pekin in Indiana. In the days when most letters were addressed in longhand, the abbreviation Md

was similar enough to Ind that mail was sometimes sent to the wrong town. To rectify this, the post office arbitrarily reversed the name of Pekin MD. Many residents of the town didn't cotton to the new name and continued to call it Pekin. The railroad also kept the name Pekin.

Robat SC, which was formerly known as Mount Tabor, was possibly also the victim of an arbitrary reversal. Also in South Carolina, a place named Alone had its name inverted to Enola.

Common English words are also reversed in placenames. Egnar CO, Ekah FL, Lennut TN, Nolem FL, Radec CA, and Tesnus TX are good examples. The longest common name reversal is Rotavele CA, discovered by Dmitri Borgmann (Word Ways Aug 1973, p 178).

On the Rogue River in southwestern Oregon, some residents came up with a distinctive name for their post office by reversing 'cigar' to get Ragic. Shortly thereafter, a place upriver continued with this theme by getting approval for a post office named Ekoms. Alas, neither of these places still exist. The Ragic post office was only open for a couple of years, and Ekoms, despite getting approval, never had an actual post office established.

There are three reversals that don't fall into any of the above categories. Etlah MO is thought to be from the German word 'halte', and Notla TX is from a company name, the Alton Grocery Company. Wabasso FL is a reversal of an Indian word or name found in other geographic names such as Ossabaw Point in Georgia.

Deliberate reversals are also found in Canada. Besides Adanac mentioned above, Maharg BC, Netla NT, Nilrem ON, Redan ON and Sekip MB are all likely to be reversals.

Up to this point, almost all the reversals mentioned are known or strongly suspected to be deliberate. A number of names are apparent reversals, but are fairly certain to be accidental ones. Ukiah CA, Selah WA, and Ydalpom CA ('mop lady') are all derived from Native American languages. Detah NT and Retah MT have strongly negative meanings when inverted, indicating that they probably are not deliberate. Separ NM was originally Sepas, which perhaps comes from the Spanish 'cepas', translated as 'stumps'.

Other accidental reversals are places named after personal names which happened to be reversals of common words. Soled VA, Devol OK, Elbon PA, Leber WA, Levan UT, Regna TX, Reisor LA, Seman AL, and Swarts AR are some of the more interesting ones.

The placenames in this article come from a variety of sources. George R. Stewart's books *American Place Names* and *Names on the Land* are excellent resources for finding the origins of names. The origin of most Oregon names can be found in *Oregon Geographic Names* by Lewis A. McArthur. Many names were culled from various atlases published over

the last 100 years as well as the Geographic Names Information Service, a web site (mapping.usgs.gov/www/gnis/gnisform.html) provided by the US Geological Survey.

The astute observer may have noticed two interesting facts about the distribution of reversals. Geographically, those in the US tend to be located in the South and the West, with only a handful in the Northeast and Midwest. For some reason, people in the South and West are more likely to engage in wordplay with placenames. (The same geographic distribution holds for border names--blends of two or three state names such as Texarkana.)

Alphabetically, those starting with letters from the last half of the alphabet outnumber those from the first half. This effect is especially pronounced for reversals of personal names. This makes this set unlike most other similar collections which are typically skewed toward the beginning of the alphabet.