



DISCOVER >

SENSE OF PLACE

# What's in a Name?

A mural in Kaktovik (with the Inupiaq spelling), a town that derives income and prestige from its polar bears.

## Laying claim to Alaskan monikers

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

**M**OUNT SHISHALDIN. VALDEZ. LA PEROUSE GLACIER. Afognak. Anaktuvuk. Chalkyitsik. Paradise Lake. Spoken like mantras, place names conjure Alaska's mixed heritage: Russian, Spanish, Aleut, Eskimo, Indian, and Anglo-American. The state's name itself derived from an Aleut word, *Alaxsxaq* (also spelled *Alyeska*); normally translated as "mainland," it is shorthand for "the object toward which the action of the sea is directed."

Today, such linguistic time capsules entice dreamers with visionary topographies. In earlier days it was the absence of names that drew men eager to fill in blank spaces on their maps. As late as 1899, the industrialist Edward Harriman and his entourage scattered monikers throughout Prince William Sound as if they'd created those ice-bound bays—thanks to them, seven glaciers abutting College Fjord evoke elite universities. But travelers arrived here long before, peppering "terra incognita" with names. This land became first known when hunters crossed Beringia 13,000 years ago.

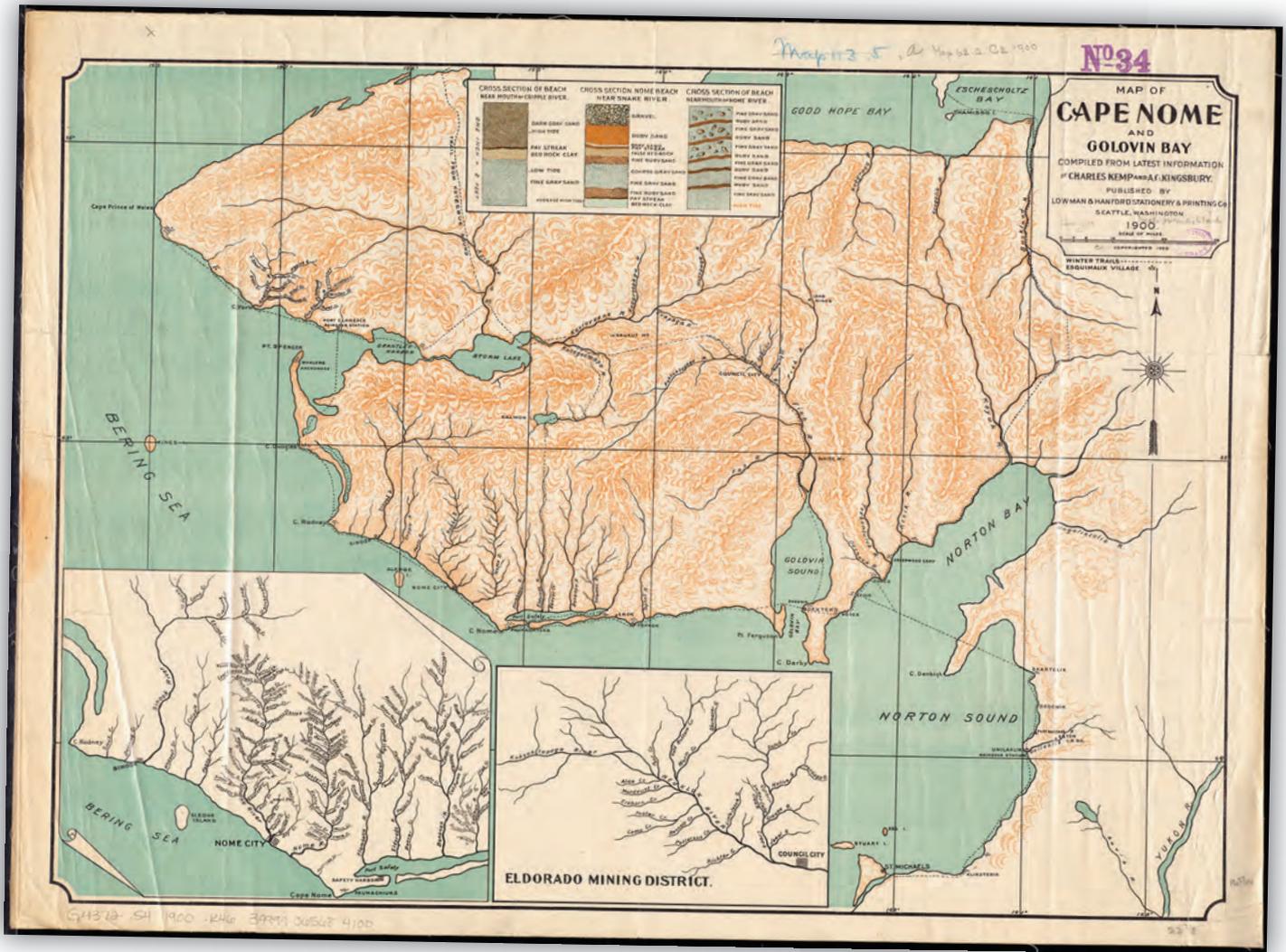
I discovered storied landscapes as a University of Alaska Fairbanks anthropology student. Accompanying Native elders on hunting and fishing trips, I shared in the place-based experience of people who'd maintained literacy in nature's idiom to an unequaled degree. Each slough, each mountain pass, each bend in a valley or river spoke to them of a past that is also

present. The names defined homeland rather than wilderness. Participating in a multiyear land use and subsistence study the park service financed, I collected place names in Gates of the Arctic and Kobuk Valley national parks. Preliminary analysis hinted at Athabaskan roots for some of the mostly inland Inupiaq (Nunamiut) terms. This was exciting, as here, any Native group able to prove historical use of federally protected lands is entitled to hunt, fish, and trap within their boundaries.

Unsurprisingly, place names spark controversy. A 2015 spat about "Denali" versus "Mount McKinley" pitted the importance of a minor, dead president against that of an animate landscape. Mount Foraker and Mount Hunter flank *Deenaalee*, the "Tall One." Perceiving the world as a maze of relationships, old-time Koyukon Athabaskans thought of the subaltern peaks as Denali's wife and child. More recently, the switch from "Barrow" to "Utqiagvik" ("Place for Gathering Wild Roots") approved by a slim margin roused spirits among young, pro-change leaders and elders more at ease with their colonial legacy.

Not all English toponyms commemorate alma maters, politicians, or admirals. Many remind us of pioneer hardship, grim history in the making. There is Misery Island, Cape Deceit, and my favorite, Mishap Creek, where a Unimak lighthouse keeper stripped naked to cross, tried to throw his clothes onto the far bank, failed, and watched them float downstream. Native

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equivalents include “Ridge Where We Cry,” “The Old Lady Made It That Far,” and another classic, “Where Arrows with Excrement Are Shot Down,” an early instance of biological warfare.

The go-to source, Donald Orth’s *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*, lists tongue-twisting doozies like Dakeekathlrimjingia Point or Nunathloogagamiutbingoi Dunes whose gist remains obscure. Others got parroted incorrectly or mangled in translation. Nightmute does not praise nocturnal speechlessness but corrupted the Yup’ik word Negtemiut—“People of the Pressed-Down Place”—which, haiku-like, describes a home battered by mountain winds. Some coinages invite speculation, and the truth can be elusive. Deadhorse was named after haulers whose first contract was for dead Fairbanks livestock; or else, investing in this trucking company was as promising as betting on a dead nag. The gold rush settlement Anvil City was recast as Nome by hasty reading, perhaps; a British cartographer might have mistaken a notation near a landmark on an old map, *Cape [name?]*, for the thing itself. Chicken on the Yukon supposedly was a cop-out by miners who couldn’t spell “ptarmigan;” others blame nuggets small as chicken feed found there.

Transplants projected longings onto Alaska. With its sinuous twists, the Arctic Refuge’s Hulahula River to whalers suggested dances they’d witnessed in balmy, bare-breasted Hawaii. The

quirky mingled with the laconic: “Meyers Chuck” and “Coldfoot;” “Central” and “Flat.”

Each place name is a peephole into the past, a mnemonic juncture of language, history, and geography. Faced with my maps, elders I interviewed spelled out fishing holes, trap lines, hunting camps, trading spots, birthplaces, or graves where ancestral bones, like calcified roots, hallowed the ground. Patterns were obvious. Native toponyms never referenced individuals, who were not important enough to be honored this way in the storyscape of larger, longer-lasting things. Anglos, conversely, employed the possessive case. Given the newcomers’ gender and professional biases it is also no surprise that few names of women or artists grace this topography.

“Landscape,” according to the art critic Simon Schama, “is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.” Place names accrue into veneers of meaning. They anchor territory in our imagination, claiming and taming it. 🗺️

*Michael Engelhard has lived in Moab, Tatlayoko, Terlingua, Lajitas, Flagstaff, Fairbanks, Cordova, and Nome—always eager to delve into the stories behind these names.*