

THE LIFE AND THOUGHTS OF A RETIRED APOSTROPHE

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All Photos by Lan Cheung,
unless otherwise noted

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Since the selling of Governors Island on Jan. 31, 2003 to the residents of the city of New York for \$1, and the subsequent reopening of the island as a public park, copy-editors and amateur grammarians alike have been asking themselves one question (some blogging irately): what happened to the apostrophe!? At long last, this mystery has been solved. While the apostrophe may no longer reside *in* ‘Governors Island’ it has been found living, quite peacefully and comfortably, *on* Governors Island for over 100 years. At the reopening of the island for the 2010 season, the apostrophe has been spotted, enjoying his retirement from anywhere between 63 to 120 years – depending on who is calculating – living today as the island’s only permanent resident.

Although as elusive as Sasquatch, yet slightly more accessible when actually sighted, I did manage to catch up with it for an exclusive interview. Somewhat bashful, yet anxious to tell its story, the apostrophe was happy to oblige my inquiry into the mystery of its disappearance and now reappearance.

DC: Can you tell me about your personal history? When did you first come to Governors Island?

A: Well, as closely as I can pin-point, it was 1698 when the island was named by the British Colonial Assembly as ‘The Governor’s Island’ for “His Majestie’s Royal Governor”. They themselves had their own name for it, which was ‘The Smiling Gardens of the Sovereigns of the Province’, but this was by no means official. So we could say that this is where my personal history begins: I was born in 1698. But, if you want to get technical about it, it wasn’t officially named, “The Governor’s Island” by Act of Legislature until March 29, 1784.



DC: What do you know about the island before that?

A: Only as much as anyone else since I wasn’t here then. According to the history books, the Lenape Native Americans who used it called it ‘Pagganack’, which referred to the hickory, oak, and chestnut trees that covered it. They likely used the island on a seasonal basis for fishing and gathering nuts. When the Dutch arrived in 1637 and Wouter Van Twiller bought it from the Lenape for two axe heads, a string of beads, and a handful of nails, they spent their first winter on the island calling it “Nooten Eylandt” or nut island. Then the British took New Amsterdam, and the island along with it, from the Dutch in 1664, and they initially called it “Nuttan Island” (a mispronunciation of “Nooten”) or Nut Island. The British colonial assembly in New York later decreed that the island was to be given to “His Majestie’s Royal Governors” for their private use. The Governors used the island for various purposes, but not as a permanent residence.

DC: So, if you were born in 1698 or possibly 1784, when did you go out of use? It’s no surprise that you’re no longer printed on the official literature as the island name, which, by grammatical standards, is incorrect.

A: Well, that too is hard to pin-point. For years I’ve been told they needed me, then they didn’t; then they need me, then they don’t. It’s gone back and forth for years. But, with that in mind, the start of my retirement came with the founding of The U.S. Board on Geographic Names in 1890. At the time, there was a surge in the exploration, mining, and settlement of western territories after the American Civil War, and they needed a system for the standardization of names. Inconsistencies and contradictions among many names, spellings, and applications became a serious problem to surveyors, mapmakers, and scientists who required uniform, non-conflicting geographic nomenclature. President Benjamin Harrison signed an executive order establishing the Board and giving it authority to resolve unsettled geographic names questions. Decisions of the Board were accepted as binding by all departments and agencies of the Federal Government.

DC: So then you started your retirement in 1890?



A: Well, technically you might say that, but it was never really set in stone. Grammatically, I still should be working, so people never really got comfortable giving me the time off. In 1913 Reverend Edmund Banks Smith, in his book *Governor’s Island, Its History Under Three Flags*, put me to work. So did Augustus Meyers in his diary chronicling his life on Governors Island, *Ten Years in the Ranks, US Army*.

DC: So you still pick up work here and there – you’re not completely retired?

A: Well, there was a period of years where everyone didn’t know that I was supposed to be retired, so the rules of grammar held sway over the rules of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. But that all pretty much came to an end in 1947.

DC: What happened in 1947?

A: In response to the expanded interest and need to include foreign names and other geographic areas to the United States – a process that accelerated during World War II – in 1947 the US Board on Geographic Names was recreated by congress in Public Law 80-242. I haven’t really worked much since then. Sure, the first time anyone writes about me they put me to work, but once they learn the Board’s ruling they never hire me again.

DC: What exactly are the rules of the U.S. Board on Geographic names; why do they supersede the rules of grammar?

A: Since its inception in 1890, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names has discouraged the use of the possessive form apostrophe, the genitive apostrophe, and the ‘s’. The possessive form using an ‘s is allowed, but the apostrophe is almost always removed. The Board’s archives contain no indication of the reason for this policy. However, there are many names in the GNIS database that do carry the genitive apostrophe because the Board chooses not to apply its policies to some types of features. Although the legal authority of the Board includes all named entities except Federal Buildings, certain categories – broadly determined to be “administrative” – they believe are best left to the organization that administers them, things like schools, churches, cemeteries, hospitals, airports, shopping centers, etc. The Board promulgates the names, but leaves issues such as the use of the genitive or possessive apostrophe to the data owners.

DC: Actually I’ve heard something about that. They say the apostrophe looked too much like a rock in water when printed on a map and was therefore a hazard, or that in the days of “stick-up type” maps, the apostrophe would become lost and create confusion.

A: Those are some theories going around, but the probable explanation is that the Board does not want to show possession for natural features because, “ownership of a feature is not in and of itself a reason to name a feature or change its name.” Ultimately, can anyone own nature?

DC: But what about Martha’s Vineyard? There is always an apostrophe in that.

A: True. Since 1890, only five Board decisions have allowed the genitive apostrophe for natural features. They are Martha’s Vineyard (1933) after an extensive local campaign; Ike’s Point in New Jersey (1944) because it would be unrecognizable otherwise; John E’s Pond in Rhode Island (1963) because otherwise it would be confused as John S Pond (note the lack of the use of a period, which is also discouraged); and Carlos Elmer’s Joshua View (1995 at the specific request of the Arizona State Board on Geographic and Historic Names because, otherwise, three apparently given names in succession would dilute the meaning – Joshua refers to a stand of trees and not Carlos’ surname). A sixth, Clark’s Mountain in Oregon (2002), was approved at the request of the Oregon Board to correspond with the personal references of Lewis and Clark.



DC: Interesting. So has your community ever tried to make a case for putting you back to work?

A: What community? Ever since 1996 when the Coast Guard left, I’ve had the island to myself. No one in the five boroughs ever gave a thought to the sixth.

DC: So what have you done with yourself retired since 1890 or 1947, and all alone out here since 1996? Have you been traveling, spending time seeing the world?

A: No, not really. I spend most of my time on the island. I can’t really leave because I never know when or if I’ll be called to work. But I’ve been enjoying myself.

DC: What do you do with your time?

A: Whatever anyone who is retired does. I fish, I read, I relax, I do everything I’ve always wanted to do, go where my whims take me.

DC: Some people have a difficult time with retirement – after working a lifetime they find it hard to adjust to a new lifestyle. Do you have any of those feelings?

A: Actually, no. It’s what I’ve always wanted. My whole life I’ve worked in the service of those around me. I’ve never been myself or recognized for myself. I’ve always been there standing

between someone or something and its possessions. Now I can do what I want to do, just be myself.

DC: How do you feel about the island opening up to the public? You've had the island to yourself for fourteen years. Every time you see the ferry unload with more people, do you feel like they're stepping in your backyard, or taking something away from you? Do you ever find yourself wanting to say, "Go back to where you came from, this is mine?"

A: I think that's what people expect, but I don't really see it that way. Possession is overrated. People get really possessive about things that no one can really take ownership of, land especially. "I was here first, so get lost." But nobody was first. Take, take, take; mine, mine, mine. That's how people think. The minute they land somewhere they put fences up and say, "Get your own."

DC: I guess you would have a particular insight on this kind of thing.



A: It's what I've done all my life. Whenever someone takes something, I'm the first one they call. When I retired, my perspective changed. I mean, what does it say about you if the first thing you do when you go some place is mark off territory as "yours"? It's a bit pathetic. The Native Americans had the right idea. Sure, we know that the Lenapes used this land for fishing and gathering nuts, but they never felt like they owned the land. When Van Twiller came in and cut a deal for a couple of axe heads, a string of beads, and a handful of nails, do you think the Lenape really thought the land was theirs to sell? The land allowed them to use it, not the other way around.

DC: But this is a classic New York story; actually it's everywhere, this question of gentrification. Neighborhoods can't hold on to their demographics very long here. It all comes down to economics, poorer peoples getting priced out of neighborhoods they once called their own. But really, who was there first? The next group is always displacing the previous; there never was a first group, but everyone always claims they were either "first" or otherwise own a right to the place.

A: I can't really speak for the other five boroughs; all I know is this one, the sixth, as I like to call it. But I imagine it not being all that different. When I see that boat come in, I face the people, probably not unlike the Lenape did when the Dutch arrived, and say, "Welcome, welcome all; isn't it beautiful?"

DC: If you really think about it, the entire history of the island, after the Lenape, is about occupation and defense. I mean, the island was used as a military fort to prevent invaders from taking away property. It seems a bit ironic for the island to go from such a history of military

defense, which was purely driven by possession, to your position of “welcome all; this is public property.”

A: What can I say? The island is returning to how it was used in earlier times.

DC: Earlier you mentioned a book by Reverend Edmund Banks Smith. In his preface to his 1913 book he says, “May the day never come when it, [Governors Island] shall lose its beauty and its dignity and sink to the level of mere commercialism, swarming with restless crowds on outing bent on disfiguring the noble approach to our Metropolitan city by ranks of cheerless chimneys and a dismal waste of warehouses!” Doesn’t this quote ring in your head every time you see all of those daytrippers disembark from the ferry every twenty minutes? How strong is your confidence – in GIPEC or the current mayor of New York or future mayors, or the federal government for that matter, since its being made public came through federal decree – that the island won’t fall victim to the kind of possession and commercialism that Smith foresaw enough to warn about?



A: I’ve already said all I can say about it: possession is overrated. But since the Lenape, this island has been a battleground. On the one hand, we can believe that it has returned to the use the Lenape put to it, or we can believe that it will never shake its military history. Since the people of New York now “own” the island for the meager price of a dollar, it’s really up to them what happens to it. But it’s going to boil down to the challenges the politicians and organizations that administer the island pose to those public shareholders. Again, it’s hard to escape economics in this day and age. All I can say, is I’ve been happy in my retirement in these last several years. I hope the people respect that and keep me out of work.

DC: We’ll see if that sits well with the grammar-sticklers. As a writer myself, I can’t see them going down without a challenge to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, but hopefully they’ve listened to your perspective and will see that in some cases the rules of grammar don’t supersede all other relevant issues. Thank you for your candid response to these questions and your warm reception of the public.

A: Bienvenue.

David Colosi is an artist-in-residence with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in building 110 on Governors Island. *The Life and Thoughts of a Retired Apostrophe* is made possible by Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s *Swing Space* program; Space in Building 110 on Governors Island is donated by Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation.



photo: Jessica Bruah