

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES
BULLETIN

How Did Kenow Mountain Get its Name?

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Abstract

This brief article identifies the federal and provincial organizations in Canada responsible for authorizing official place names (toponyms). Included are suggested resources relevant for locating both official and historical Canadian place names. A search for Kenow Mountain, British Columbia is used to illustrate the challenges encountered when attempting to determine naming origins.

Keywords: toponymy; place name; Kenow Mountain (B.C.); names, geographical -- Canada

In late August, 2017 an intense lightning and thunder storm ignited a wildfire on remote Kenow Mountain in the Clark Range of the southeastern corner of British Columbia about ten kilometers from the boundary with Waterton Lakes National Park (WLNP) in Alberta. Hot weather, strong winds and exceptionally dry conditions fueled the fire as it raced northeast along the Cameron Valley and into the park. This extreme wildfire eventually burned a total of 19,300 hectares within Waterton Lakes and destroyed or damaged a significant amount of the park's built infrastructure (e.g., visitor centre, campground, stables, bridges, guardrails, hiking trails). It became known as the Kenow Mountain wildfire.

About a year later, in September, 2018, WLNP Archivist Mr. Edwin Knox mentioned to me that he'd had no luck tracking down details about the origin of the name Kenow Mountain which he suspected might be the surname of an early mineral prospector. At first I believed it might be possible to find the answer quickly with some creative Googling but the task proved somewhat trickier than I'd anticipated. I thought it might be interesting to summarize what I discovered while researching Canadian geographic names in case others get these types of questions.

Decisions About Official Place Names are Authorized by the Geographical Names Board of Canada

The [Geographical Names Board of Canada \(GNBC\)](#) officially authorizes geographical names and is comprised of members from each province and territory as well as various federal departments concerned with mapping, archives, defence, Indian reserves, and national parks. From 1897 until 1961 the GNBC was responsible for all of Canada's naming decisions although provinces and territories were invited to provide advice on the use, spelling and application of names. After 1961

naming responsibility was largely transferred to the provinces. The GNBC indicates on its web site that provincial and territorial names authorities rarely initiate the naming of geographical features themselves. Instead almost all names are either gathered through their field survey programs or they're submitted by the public. Currently approved official and historical place names for all 350,000 named places can be found in the Board's [Canadian Geographic Names Database](#).

Correspondence with GNBC about Kenow Mountain confirmed what I'd found in their database which was that its official naming decision date was April 6, 1950. Unfortunately, at that time, the origin of a name itself, or the reason why a name was chosen, was not recorded.

Provinces and Territories Provide Services Related to Geographic Names

Each of Canada's provinces and territories have offices responsible for administering geographic names. They represent their jurisdictions as [members of the GNBC](#). Provincial web sites typically include information about how the public can propose new names. Some also provide functionality for finding the origins and histories of existing ones. For instance, the [BC Geographical Names Office](#) provides an excellent [geographic name search application](#) with a map-like interface that can be searched in various unique ways (e.g., name changes by date, names shown in map area, etc.).

Unfortunately, my query for Kenow Mountain in the BC database originally returned "Work in Progress: Origin Notes for this name have not yet been transferred from paper records and maps to the website." My direct inquiry confirmed that the name Kenow Mountain was officially adopted on April 6, 1950 but little else in the way of naming rationale.

Use Museums, Libraries, Archives and Local Historians as Sources for Finding Name Origins

Geographic naming boards are certainly amongst the most comprehensive and respected sources for locating name origins of Canadian places. In the event that they don't have these details available for a particular location of interest it becomes necessary to look further afield. Fortunately, many libraries collect Canadian toponym books and eBooks. These resources explain the meanings behind names of places and features from different regions of the country. A good starting point for identifying place name books (e.g., *Canadian Mountain Place Names: The Rockies and Columbia Mountains* by Glen Boles, Roger Laurilla and William Putnam) is within the Canadian Encyclopedia's fascinating entry about [Place Names](#).

In addition to books, there are national, regional, and specialty museums and archives (e.g., Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff, Alberta) that can also be sources of background information. Similarly, historians and contact persons at historical societies may have recommendations about potentially relevant items for unearthing details concerning local name origins.

My own investigations of the naming of Kenow Mountain utilized locally-available toponym books, local histories and historians, boundary surveys, and enquiries to several archives though these were initially fruitless. After several weeks of on-again off-again searching, I slowly came to the realization that this mountain might have been too far out-of-the-way for its name origins to have been documented. Luckily it turned out I was incorrect as soon after resuming my search I was rewarded with a scrap of detail about Kenow Mountain. It appeared as a single sentence in an obscure book published in Montana entitled *Place names of Glacier/Waterton National Parks* by Jack Holterman.

The Uncertainty of Name Origins

My attempts at tracking down details about Kenow Mountain in British Columbia was definitely frustrating but I gained some useful insight about how and why Canadian places end up with their official names. As one might suspect, the earliest names applied to the mountains of the Canadian Rockies were given by First Nations peoples. A handful of these names were retained by early explorers but they were frequently disregarded, misinterpreted or even re-named as explained in *Canadian Mountain Place Names*.

The brief mention of Kenow Mountain I'd found on page 73 of Holterman's book stated that Kenow was the name for "eagle" in the Chippewa language. I was able to verify this using the online version of the [Ojibwe People's Dictionary](#) which further indicated that the English translation of the word "[giniw](#)" was "golden eagle." Additionally, the dictionary's audio pronunciation of giniw sounded remarkably similar to the word Kenow which led me to suspect that there might indeed be a connection.

Interestingly, it also turns out that something called the [Golden Eagle Flyway](#) passes directly above Kenow Mountain. The flyway is a migration route that links the eagle's wintering grounds in the western U.S. to their breeding grounds in northwest Canada and Alaska.

So might this evidence answer Edwin's question about the origins of the name Kenow Mountain? Unfortunately, it's not possible to ever determine with absolute certainty that the origin of this particular mountain's name is derived from the Chippewa word for golden eagle... but the little evidence I did find certainly make it a distinct possibility!