

LATINO AMERICANS

What's in a Name? (For use with Episodes 1 and 2)

Lesson Overview

This fun activity introduces students to the idea that place-names around North America tell the story of indigenous, Spanish and Mexican settlements that pre-date the United States' presence. The investigative questions can be used alone or in conjunction with the map analysis and plotting activities.

Grade: 4 – 8 (Can be adapted for upper grades, matching activity can be converted to a “hook” or game for older grades)

Time: 30 – 45 minutes

Materials

- **What's in a Name Activity Sheet**
- Web access for research
- [Map of North America, early 1800s](#)
- Current map of North America or Google map projection
- **Blank map** of North America for student work

Lesson Objectives

- Compare and contrast maps of what is now the contiguous 48 states from the early 1800s to today.
- Identify territories of the United States, Mexico and European powers in the early 1800s.
- Problematize the absence of indigenous territories or cultures on the historical map.
- Use historical, linguistic and geographical clues to identify and plot settlements and physical features whose place-names have Spanish, Mexican and indigenous origins.

Lesson Procedure

Optional Pre-Activity: Compare and contrast maps of what is now the United States from 1830 to today. Identify the territories held by the United States, Mexico and other powers. Consider the implications of what is absent from the map as it relates to indigenous cultures.

Activity: Use the clues to locate place-names and plot them on the blank student map. Depending on the desired level of challenge, list the answers for students to match against the clues, or let students work from scratch.

[ANSWERS, NOT IN ORDER]

- California
- Nevada
- The Alamo
- Montana
- St. Augustine
- Los Angeles
- Colorado
- Texas
- San Francisco
- Kansas
- San Juan Islands
- Rio Grande
- Florida
- Santa Fe
- Tucson

What's in a Name? Activity Sheet

American history is often presented through the perspective of westward expansion into a great wilderness. But, one person's wilderness is often another's home. The places in the story of U.S. expansion already had people living in them and names describing them.

Much of what is now the central and western United States was explored and colonized by the Spanish, French and British. Even earlier, most of these lands were settled by indigenous cultures such as the O'odham, Apache, Tongva, Miwok, Yaqui and many others. The names of states, mountains, rivers and towns can give us clues to the history of our nation.

Pre-Activity: Map Analysis

Examine the [map of North America from the early 1800s](#) and compare it to a current **map** of North America.

- Can you identify areas that are now part of the United States, but which used to be part of Mexico or New Spain?
- The historical map documents claims by the United States, Mexico and Great Britain, among others. What is missing from the map? What cultures and civilizations — which predate any of the other claims — are completely invisible?
- Glancing over the contemporary map, list several place-names that you think may have come from Spanish, Mexican or indigenous origins.

Use the following clues to identify places around the United States.

Activity: Identify and plot historical place-names.

1. Although borders have changed, the land holds clues to the past. Using the following hints, identify cities, states and geographical features whose current names come from Spanish and Indian roots. You may need to do a little extra research using an atlas or the Internet!
2. Plot the locations on your **blank map**.

What's in a Name? — Clues

- Originally called Yerba Buena, this city is famous for its cable cars.
- This southern state was supposedly the location of the fabled "Fountain of Youth" and was named for its flowers.

- This city is the second largest city in Arizona and its name is the Spanish version of the O'odham indigenous name.
- Successive Native American cultures inhabited this area. When the Spanish found the Tongva (Gabrieleños) there, they renamed the settlement "El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles."
- This central-west state is famous for its high mountains, but is named for the reddish color of the river that runs through it and then eventually drains into the Gulf of California.
- This "Big River" forms the present-day border between the United States and Mexico.
- This state is known for its "Big Sky," but its name is an English derivation of the Spanish word for "mountain."
- The root of this state's name is indigenous. It is central to an old *corrido* — or song — about cowboy life, sung by Mexican vaqueros as they moved cattle north from Texas. The song is called "El Corrido de Kiansas."
- Occupied by Pueblo Indians since at least 1000 CE, this city was named "Holy Faith" by the Spanish 9 years before the English established Jamestown in Virginia.
- Named by explorers sailing from what is now western Mexico in the late 1700s, this group of islands named for St. John is located in waters near British Columbia and the mainland of Washington State.
- This largest of the contiguous 48 states is named for a Spanish word that was in turn based on a word from the indigenous Caddo culture, meaning "friend" or "ally."
- This Florida city is the oldest continually inhabited settlement founded by Europeans in what is now the United States. It was established in 1565, more than 50 years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock.
- Most people think of the desert and casinos when they think of this state, but it is actually named for snow.
- This far western state is named after a mythical land from a story popular in medieval Spain.
- Originally a mission, this San Antonio building was the site of an important battle between the Texas rebels and the Mexican army. Its current name refers to a poplar tree.