INTRODUCTION

There is little in our daily lives that seems more ordinary than streets and their names. We encounter and refer to them daily as we travel the landscape and repeat our addresses. Our addresses are part of who we are. We internalize street names as we locate, orient, and organize ourselves in space. Indeed, street names are full of meaning, tell stories, and give insights into a community’s history, values, and identity. As a cultural construction embedded in the human landscape, street names show us more about ourselves than we readily imagine. Geographers point out that landscapes can be treated as texts. As such, landscapes are produced (“written”), contain meaning, and consumed (“read”) with various interpretations (Knox and Marston 2016).

Motivated and guided by The Address Book: What Street Addresses Reveal About Identity, Race, Wealth, and Power (Deirdre Mask 2020), our study examines Eau Claire, Wisconsin's street names in an attempt to uncover and understand the significance of street names in a community’s lives. Our initial analysis of Eau Claire's 1000 street names shows locally and nationally significant historical figures, regional environmental characteristics, and dominant cultural heritages. Spatial and temporal patterns suggest shifting cultural values and practices and a fragmented, sometimes indifferent, approach to street naming. And, just as telling are the street names that are not found on the landscape.

METHODS

To orient ourselves and structure our approach, the students of Paul Kaldjian’s Fall 2020 GEOG 111 Honors section read Deirdre Mask’s (2020) award-winning book on the history, power, and significance of street names. The City of Eau Claire Assessor’s Office provided us with a list of Eau Claire’s streets, organized by parcel (based on the historical wards of Eau Claire). Each student member of our research team was assigned a group of streets to analyze. We identified 10 specific categories of names (see Graph 1).

While many street names were easy to characterize (plants, animals, former presidents, famous places, personal names), others were ambiguous or could have multiple connections or meanings. Streets without a clear categorization were placed into an “Ambiguous” category. After refining the categories, research members were assigned categories of street names to analyze for meanings, patterns, and tendencies. That is, as one might do with a book or other text, we conducted a content analysis of Eau Claire City's street name landscape. After each phase of individual work, we compiled our findings for collective review and discussion.

RESULTS

Not surprisingly, the majority of Eau Claire’s street names are related to Wisconsin and the Midwest region. The largest category of street names are personal names; we identified 395 both first and last names. Of the 126 names categorized as first names, 65 are conventionally female and 61 are male (see Graph 3). The 269 streets with personal last names include many who were notable land or business owners from Eau Claire’s formative years, and nearly 75% of all of Eau Claire’s street last names originate in the United Kingdom, mostly English, but many with Irish and Scottish links (see Graph 2). Eau Claire’s oldest and central streets include many named after past Wisconsin Governors and all the city’s street names after plants, animals, and natural features are native to Wisconsin or found in the region.

Of the streets named after places, the most prominent sub-categories are cities in Wisconsin, the United States, and the United Kingdom. For the street names with historical references and ideas/values, we found that many of them had an American theme to them. Many of the historical references are to US presidents or generals while the biggest sub-category for ideas and values were patriotic/American ideas such as Declaration, Freedom, and Liberty. We found that streets named after things and objects were largely random, but with occasional localized patterns. For example, in addition to the cluster of streets named after WI governors, US Presidents are also clustered in older neighborhoods; a residential district developed in the 1960s and 70s has 12 streets named after planets and other celestial objects.

MAP ANALYSIS

Streets named after historical figures (WI Governors and US Presidents and Generals) are in their greatest concentrations in the older districts of Eau Claire. Meanwhile, streets named after plants and/or animals appear in looser concentrations away from the center wards. Streets in the plant-named streets are widely spread across the city. This analysis of names is expanded, it appears as though inspiration for the street names came from local environmental features and plant-themed, invented street names intended to capture perceptions that may sound attractive to the expanding population.

DISCUSSION

Mask (2020) argues that street names are a part of our collective memory. And, when people see streets’ names repeatedly, they are reminded of the virtues or people they name (ibid.). Because of this, we feel that it is important to take street naming seriously. Even though they might fade into the background, street names are an integral part of our daily and lived geography. They are a kind of monument and can be used to highlight a community’s values and priorities. As shown in Graph 2, most of Eau Claire’s personal names are Anglo-Saxon. Notwithstanding renewed recognition that Eau Claire sits on land originally inhabited by the Ojibwe peoples, they are not represented on Eau Claire street names. Historical street names of governors, governors, and presidents emphasize white males. Neither locally nor nationally renowned people of color and women are not noticeably represented among Eau Claire’s street names. While some streets have Native American names (Omaha, Menomonie, Chippewa), we could not make a distinction on whether these streets were named after tribes or after the city or river which already bore that name. There is, however, a Xiong Boulevard just outside Eau Claire’s western city limit, named when members of the local Hmong community built a road as part of a development project.

CONCLUSION

What a community chooses to name its streets indicates what they think deserves to be remembered and promoted. And these change over time. While it makes sense that people in a community would want the street names to represent themselves, in the form of historical figures, ideals, and animals, we also need to recognize that these public monuments need to represent the experiences, values, and aspirations of all people in a community. They are an opportunity to be inclusive and welcoming, and should not be left, simply, to land developers or other powerful persons and their own individual interests and perspectives. The streets in public and private reflect the public’s interests and values. Further, as city and diversity in Eau Claire acknowledge that our institutions occupy the sacred and ancestral lands of Indigenous Peoples, we might consider the symbolic and educational value of acknowledging as much on the street namescape. Similarly, we can look for ways of acknowledging the powerful but ignored contributions of women and people of color.

Our research suggests a history of who is able to tell their story by naming streets. As suggested by Mask, this story is written by wealthy people. In Eau Claire, our research has shown that the story is not just about who and what appear on our street signs, but who doesn’t. While street signs tell a story, it is an incomplete and skewed story, determined by who can tell the story, in turn determined by wealth, power, race, and gender. Over the course of our project, our research group discovered the importance of addresses and how we use them daily in our awareness, existence, identity, opportunity, and navigation. Our street names, as the foundational features or our addresses, reflect who we are, have been, and want to be.

We encourage the City of Eau Claire to seriously evaluate its process of street naming in ways that assign names to represent what the people of the city desire and not just what limited powerful interests want to ensnare. Given the power and permanence of street names, we conclude that street naming is an opportunity that should be taken with conviction and intentionality.

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REFERENCES


WISCONSIN GEOGRAPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CENTER.