

Lake Ontario/Lake America: What happens when a place has two different names?

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Open the same map in the US and Canada and you may see two different names for the same lake. So, who decides what a place is really called?

Open Google Maps in Toronto and you may see one name for a place. Open it in New York and you may see another. Increasingly, the map in your pocket can depend on where you're standing.

That is what's happening with Lake Ontario, the smallest of the Great Lakes that lie on the US-Canadian border. After President Trump [ordered the US government to rename it "Lake America"](#) following failed trade talks between the two nations this summer, the lake began appearing under different names on different maps.

But changing a name on a government database doesn't necessarily change what the rest of the world calls it. From digital maps to tourism organisations and local communities, the Lake Ontario dispute shows how complicated it can be to rename a place – and who ultimately decides which name sticks.

Who decides what goes on a map?

Unsurprisingly, Canada has not entertained a change. In the US, the modification began with the federal [Geographic Names Information System](#) (GNIS), the database used to standardise geographic names for federal use. Trump's executive order required "Lake America" to be added to the system and the former moniker removed.

Google reflected the change in line with its long-standing policy of using official government naming sources, meaning US viewers now see "Lake America" while Canadian viewers continue to see "Lake Ontario". Apple Maps has also adopted the new name [after pressure from Trump](#).



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President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order renaming Lake Ontario as Lake America (Credit: Getty Images)

But private mapping companies are not legally required to follow the federal designation. [MapQuest](#), best known for being one of the earliest digital mapping tools, has refused to adopt the new name – and its refusal subsequently propelled MapQuest to [number one overall](#) on Apple's US App Store, with the

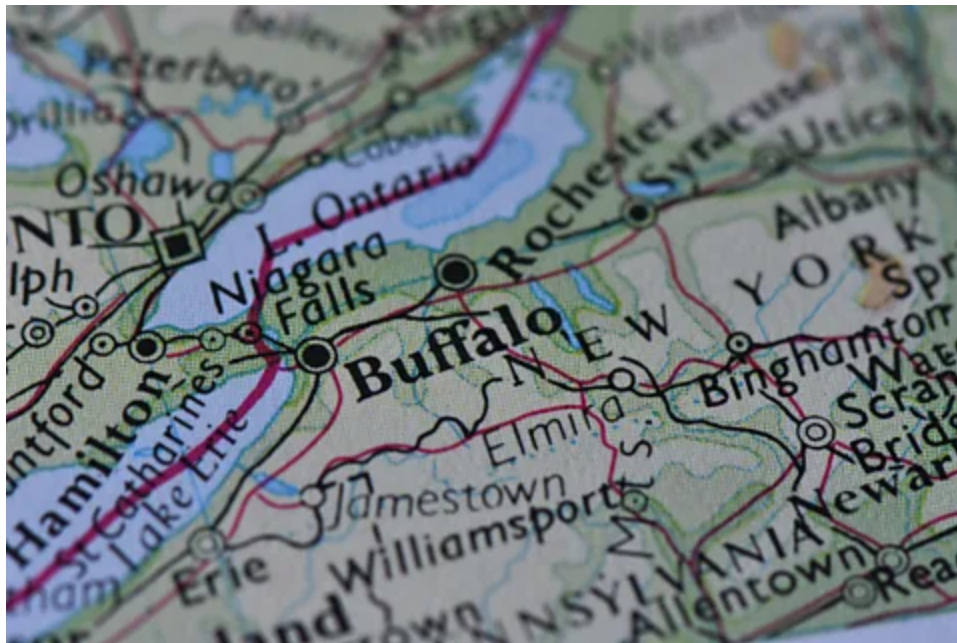
company saying it had recorded more than 1.5 million installs across the US and Canada since the executive order was issued.

"MapQuest focused on maintaining a name that people are familiar with," said Doug Berger, general manager at MapQuest. "When people need directions, they seek familiarity. It was an easy decision."

What's in a name?

The differing responses show how a federal name change can quickly produce multiple versions of the same geography.

Oswego County in New York, which borders the lake, [has chosen to retain Lake Ontario](#) in its official and business materials, citing the historical significance of the name and expense to taxpayers and business owners for the cost of rebranding.



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Unlike digital maps, printed maps cannot be instantly updated when place names change (Credit: Alamy)

The Seneca Nation [also issued a statement](#) opposing the action, citing the indigenous roots of the lake's name and the lake's history in Indigenous diplomacy.

"In our traditional Seneca language, its name is *sga:nyodai:yoh*, meaning 'beautiful lake'," said J Conrad Seneca, Seneca Nation President. "To us, Lake Ontario is not a political pawn. It does not separate the countries of the United States and Canada. It is all Indigenous land, which has been occupied by Indigenous people since time immemorial."

When two names coexist

But beyond the US and Canada, the impact of the name change may be limited. "The naming of bodies of water typically falls within national jurisdictions," explained Taufiq Rahim, senior fellow at non-partisan think tank New America and author of [Trump 2.5: A Primer](#). "While there are international bodies like the IHO [International Hydrographic Organization], they do not have any authority to adjudicate disputes and typically when there is a dispute, two or multiple names can be used."

A longstanding example is the dispute over "Persian Gulf" and "Arabian Gulf". Persian Gulf remains the standard name used by the UN, the IHO and most world atlases, while Arab states bordering the waterway – including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman – generally use Arabian Gulf and have encouraged allies to do so as well since the 1960s.

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A more recent example is Trump's January 2025 decision to rename [the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America"](#). The new name was adopted on US federal maps and by some digital mapping services, while Mexico and international users continued to encounter "Gulf of Mexico" or both names. In Mobile, Alabama, the National Maritime Museum of the Gulf of Mexico had only recently spent nearly \$100,000 (£74,000) rebranding when the federal name changed, leaving it with a newly minted identity tied to a now-disputed place name.

At the time, [its director told BBC Travel](#) that another name change would require "a complete redo of the entire museum" and that she would follow the lead of city officials. Its website now identifies it simply as the National Maritime Museum of the Gulf.



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Lake Ontario straddles the US-Canada border with New York State to the south and Ontario to the north (Credit: Getty Images)

A similar issue is now playing out on the US side of Lake Ontario. The Lake Ontario National Marine Sanctuary, a federally designated protected area covering 1,722 sq miles (4,460 sq km) of waters and lakebed along the eastern New York shoreline, is retaining its name. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, which comanages the sanctuary with New York State, says [in a statement](#) that the executive order applies to federal references to the lake itself but did not change the sanctuary's separately designated name. The agency is updating its materials to refer to the lake as "Lake America", while the sanctuary remains the Lake Ontario National Marine Sanctuary.

A diplomatic wedge

The organisational and financial burden of the name change will likely fall on the United States and its taxpayers. "This adds another unnecessary line to US expenses which in total can exceed hundreds of millions of dollars annually," said Usha Haley, Barton Distinguished Chair in International Business at Wichita State University. "People have to divert time, another important resource, to manage these changes for different audiences."

While the change will have practical impacts, it's the symbolic implications that will likely have the most lasting effects. "Geographic naming becomes a proxy for sovereignty and power. It's geopolitical signalling on who controls national and bi-lateral narratives," said Haley. "The downstream symbolic and diplomatic consequences of a name change such as this can be much larger than the immediate commercial calculations."

The change is likely to continue the erosion of diplomatic trust between Canada and the US, says Haley, hindering a [weakening trading relationship](#) between the two nations. Canada has long been a top destination for US exports, and the third-largest source of US imports, following Mexico and China. She said that symbolic disputes like this can become proxies for larger conflicts.

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