Introduction

Since 2013, I have made it my goal to visit all 59 of the United States National Parks, and as many state parks, national monuments, and other U.S. places of interest and significance that I can. The first park I visited was our largest, the Grand Canyon, and to this day, it remains my favorite. The U.S. park system contains every type of terrain possible in the United States, from islands to mountains, beaches to volcanos, and deserts to forests. The sheer size of the U.S. makes it possible to have such vast ranges in topography and geography.

As these features have been here since long before English-speaking people landed on our shores in the 17th century, I thought it would be interesting to learn the English word origins those first people used to define these geographical features, words they brought from lands very different to ours. The incident that really prompted me to want to explore these origins was my visit to the United Kingdom this year. Having seen much of the physical beauty of the USA, I was excited to see Britain's features, and one of the most striking differences was that between the sizes of the mountains in the U.S. compared to those in the U.K. I then began to wonder about those first settlers and their naming of features similar yet also vastly different from those of their home world.

I expected many of the words to be borrowed, replacing older Germanic words because of their geographical importance in the business and academia circles permeated by French and Latin borrows. It was interesting to discover that while my synopsis was correct, some Germanic words prevailed, which was especially true if they were dominant features of Britain's terrain.

Native Germanic Origins:

Hill

"A natural elevation of the earth's surface rising more or less steeply above the level of the surrounding land" (hill, n.)

Hill comes from Germanic origins and was originally written as *hyll*; it went through some spelling changes throughout Middle English before settling on its current form of *hill*. As the Old English, *hyll*, or the more common form, *hylle*, changed throughout Middle English, it dropped its final *-e* and changed from the Old English 'y' spelling to the Modern English 'i' spelling, though the |ɪ| sound remained the same because the Old English embedded 'y' made the |ɪ| sound.

Historically, a hill has been difficult to distinguish from a mountain. In the beginning, all raised elevations were hills, but when English borrowed *mountain* from French, local speakers began to distinguish that mountains were slightly higher and more rugged than hills; however, that distinguishment was subjective, and what for one region might have been a mountain, for another could have been a hill. Eventually, the two were scientifically designated in Great Britain, with "heights under 2,000 feet...generally called *hill*" (hill, n.); this differentiation was not globalized, though, as in India, with its vast Himalayan range, "ranges of 5,000 and even 10,000 feet are commonly called 'hills'" (hill, n).

The words *hill* was first seen in writing in c1000 in Ælfric's Homilies, "Hi huntiað hi of ælcere dune and of ælcere hylle" (hill, n).

Island

“A piece of land completely surrounded by water...[f]ormerly used less definitely, including a peninsula, or a place insulated at high water or during floods, or begirt by marshes, a usage which survives in particular instances” (island, n.)

Island comes from Germanic origins, with variations being found in Old Norse (*eyland*), Old Frisian (*eiland*), and others. Its Old English forms are *ígland/íegland*, *íland* and *egland/-lond*. It was originally a compound of the Old English *íeg/íg* (isle) and *-land*, and *íeg* derives from the Old High German *auwa/ouwa,* meaning, “water.” In Middle English, the word transformed into *iland/yland*, and so “began to be associated with the synonymous *ile, yle* (of French origin), and sometimes analytically written *ile-land*; and when *ile* was spelt *isle*, iland erroneously followed it as *isle-land, island*” (island, n). As *ígland*/*íegland* changed in Old English, the beginning syllable underwent palatalization and the |g| velar became fronted, turning into the |ʒ| sound, and then in Middle English it changed again by merging with the initial |i| sound to become the diphthong of its current pronunciation, |aɪ|.

The first written mention of *island* comes from the c888 Old English translation of *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, attributed to King Ælfred, “Ðæt iland þe we hatað Tyle” (island, n).

Sea

“The continuous body of saltwater that covers the greater part of the earth's surface. Often poetic with epithet as broad, deep” (sea, n.)

Sea is one of the older English words, as it is Germanic in origins, and it was originally written in Old English as *sǽ,* with the plurals *sǽs, sǽas,* and *sǽ*. Most Germanic-based languages have some form of the word, such as the Old Saxon *sêo, sêu,* and *sêwa*, which, being synthetic, are nouns with case and gender specificities, *sêu* is dative and *sêwa* is masculine. Interestingly, “since Early Middle English [*sea* is] always with prefixed article, except in phrases with prepositions,” i.e. “the sea” (sea, n). In some early pronunciations, the vowel, ash (*ǽ),* went through a breaking to become the diphthong, |æɑ̯|. *Sea* went through the Great Vowel Shift toward the latter end of the Middle English, so the most commonly used vowel sound of |ɛ| was still used through much of the period before finally turning into the |i| form of its modern pronunciation.

The first mention of the word is found in one of English’s oldest text, Beowulf, “Ofer sæ side.” It is also found in Laʒamon’s *Brut*, “On þare sæ [c1300 Otho see] brade” (sea, n).

Swamp

“A tract of low-lying ground in which water collects; a piece of wet spongy ground; a marsh or bog” (swamp, n.)

Swamp is the only word in this collection whose originally recorded use was in North America, in a Virginian colony, and in that instance (see below), it meant, “a tract of rich soil having a growth of trees and other vegetation, but too moist for cultivation” (swamp, n). This usage intimates that it may have been a more locally used word in England and thus of Germanic origins. Old German has the form *swampen* (“quaking of boggy land”) and versions of *swamm-*, meaning “sponge,” “fungus,” or “mushroom.” It’s possible that this is an early Greek borrow, as Greek has a word, *σομφός* (*swombhós*), which means” spongy, porous” (swamp, n).

The Virginia recording was in a 1624 historical document that said, “Some small Marshes and Swamps there are, but more profitable than hurtfull” (swamp, n).

Waterfall

"A cascade of water falling from a height, formed when a river or stream flows over a precipice or ledge" (waterfall, n.)

Waterfall is a compound Old English word, *wætergefeal*, that may have been developed purely from within by combining the Germanic *water* (*wazzar*) with the Germanic *gefeall*, meaning "fall." Other Germanic languages during Middle English seem to have adopted their own forms of the word, such as Dutch's *waterval*. In the beginning, it was used "chiefly in place names, local surnames, and related topographical contexts," such as Waterfall, North Riding, Yorkshire and Herbert de Waterfale (waterfall, n). *Wætergefeal*'s initial ash, '*æ*,' is replaced by 'a' as the word adapts to Middle English. It also undergoes a consonant deletion in getting rid of the middle 'g' between the two compounds. Additionally, the diphthong 'ae' becomes open vowel |a| before the liquid, |l|.

The first mention of *waterfall* in Old English is found in D. Hooke's *Warwickshire Anglo-Saxon Charter-bounds*, a collection of early Anglo-Saxon topographical boundary clauses and charters, "*Æ*fter heafdan to þam wætergefeal æfter streame" (waterfall, n).

Woods

"Senses relating to trees or woodland" (wood, n.)

Wood stems from Old Germanic (*widuz*) and Old Norse (*viðr*), and in Old English was written as *widu*, *wiodu*, and eventually *wudu*. It originally meant "tree," which is how it is used in the first written instances recorded below, but today it has developed more derivational definitions, either through narrowing - meaning only the material substance of the tree - or, in the plural form, through widening - becoming a synonym for "forest," or a large cluster of trees. As the Old English, *wudu*, became the Modern English, *woods*, it went through some changes, including a Middle English spelling change from the 'u' into a double vowel, 'oo.' Also, beginning in Middle English, the plural form embraced the -s ending.

In the c725 *Copus Glossary* where it is first recorded, it lists the "Pinus, furhwudu," or "fir tree." The word is also found in *Beowulf*, "Wudu wyrtum fæst" (wood, n).

Borrowed Origins:

Mountain

“A large natural elevation of the earth's surface, esp. one high and steep in form (larger and higher than a hill) and with a summit of relatively small area” (mountain, n).

Mountain originates from the post-classical Latin *montana*. English borrowed the word from Old French, and when it did, it replaced the Germanic-based Old English word, *beorg*. This is likely due to it being a more specialized word, as United Kingdom is not overly mountainous. The modern variation of the Old English, *berg*, is still used in Modern English as a short form of the word, *iceberg*, meaning “a (floating) mountain or mass of ice” (berg, n.). The original Anglo-Norman form, *montain* is spelled similarly to its modern counterpart, *mountain*; however, many spelling variations of it existed in Middle English, such as *monetain, monetan, mowntane, movtan, mountaigne, and mowntayng,* before Modern English standardized its form. As the word shifted throughout Middle English, it dropped its commonly used final -*e* and underwent the Great Vowel Shift in its first phase, rounding the initial /u/ vowel sound to the diphthong /aʊ/.

The first written English reference to *mountain* is found in the *La ʒamon Brut* (a lengthy poem written by the British priest Layamon), “Bi þe montaine of Azare,” translated, “by the Azare mountain” (mountain, n).

Until the 18th century, *mountain* (and its variations) was used to describe even “elevations of moderate altitude,” and so when I visited the U.K. and saw their small size compared U.S. mountains, it made sense that the English-speaking settlers would label them using their only word to describe large land elevations, even if the U.S. ones were so much more immense. *Mountain* is often used metaphorically, especially the Biblical “to move mountains” and the idiom, “to make a mountain out of a molehill” (mountain, n).

Valley

“ A long depression or hollow lying between hills or stretches of high ground and usually having a river or stream flowing along its bottom” (valley, n.)

Valley originated in Latin but was borrowed into English from the Old French, *valee*. It bears similarities to the word *vale*, which shares its etymological formation, but “in ordinary use a valley is distinguished from a vale by having less width and a steeper slope on either side” (valley, n.). Throughout Middle English, it underwent a series of spelling and pronunciation changes, some of which were distinct to specific regions. For example, in Scotland, it was spelled three different ways during the Middle English period - *walei, wale, vale, valle, walle,* and *valaye.* As an early loan, the French *valee* is very similar to its English version, something that occurs often in Old German and modern English.. Some of the Middle English derivatives replace the ‘v” with a ‘w,’ which is common to those consonants, and eventually it comes back to the ‘v’ spelling.

Valley first appeared in English in the 14th century in Robert of Gloucester’s *Chronicles*, “Þo he com nei kaunterburi In a *valeie* biside He sei þe emperours ost” (valley, n.)

River

“A large natural stream of water flowing in a channel to the sea, a lake, or another, usually larger, stream of the same kind” (river, n.)

The English, *river*, was borrowed from the French, *rivere*. It first showed up in French with the modern meaning of a large body of flowing water in the 12th century, but the English version had already begun to showcase that definition. *Rivere* may have developed out of Old French’s *riu, rieu, ru, ri*, which meant more a stream than a large body of water and seems to have derived from the post-classical Latin *r īpa.* River became important in the English and French languages, and it was common to find variations of it in surnames, such as Gozelinus Riuere, and compound words, such as riverbank. In changing to its Early Modern English form, it drops the final -e and the ‘u’ version in the example below changes to the voiced fricative, ‘v.’

The first mention of the English word is found In the 14th century book, *Childhood Jesus*, “Huy wenden forth to þe *Riuer*, þare huy founden þat watur cler” (river, n.)

Ocean

“The vast continuous body of salt water covering the greater part of the earth's surface and surrounding its land masses; the sea, esp. the open sea. (In early times, when only the one great mass of land, the Eastern hemisphere, with its islands, was known, the ocean was the ‘Great Outer Sea’ of boundless extent, everywhere surrounding the land, as opposed to the Mediterranean and other inland seas)” (ocean, n.)

Ocean has a long history, first appearing in the 5th century in classical Latin as ōceanus and Hellenistic Greek as Ὠκεανός. Its English variation is a French-borrow, from the Old French occean and then again from Middle French’s océan. Its English form has undergone many spelling and pronunciation changes, from occianne to oachans to oxiane and more. It’s meaning has remained subjectively the same, as human understanding of what the greatest body of water on earth has changed with exploration. The Greek version originally meant “the great stream or river...supposed to encompass the disc of the earth” (ocean, n). In its development, *ocean* undergoes a pronunciation change in which the voiced velar |k| sound changes to the fricative |ʃ| sound.

The first instance of the word discovered in writing is in Old French version, occean, from St. Brendan’s writings, “Tel us ȝwat þou hast i-seiȝe..In þe se of Occean” (ocean, n.)

Forest

An extensive tract of land covered with trees and undergrowth, sometimes intermingled with pasture (forest, n.)

Forest is a Middle English borrow from the Old French, forest, which has its own roots in Medieval Latin, forest-em, which meant “the ‘outside’ wood (i.e. that lying outside the walls of the park, not fenced in)” (forest, n).

It’s first written form is from 1375 and recorded in 1867 by William of Palerne, “In þat forest..þer woned a wel old cherl” (forest, n).

Peninsula

“A piece of land that is almost completely surrounded by water; a piece of land projecting into water, such that the greater part of its boundary is coastline” (peninsula, n.)

Peninsula was borrowed during Middle English from classical Latin’s *paeninsula* and is found in various forms in most of the Romance languages, such as the Spanish, *península*, and the Italian, *penisola*. It derives from combining the Latin prefix, paene (*pene*-), meaning “almost,” and the word, *insula*, or *island*, so “almost-island.” In Middle English, its plural form was *peninsulae*, whose ending changed in Modern English from ‘-ae’ to ‘-as’ as plural noun endings standardized with the switch to becoming a more completely analytic language. Also, in its adoption into English, the initial ‘ae’ is changed to the single vowel sound |ɛ| sound.

Its first written form comes from 1552 and was recorded by historian J. Leland in 1711, “This *Peninsula* to cumpace it by the Rote lakkith litle of a Mile” (peninsula, n).

Plain

“A broad tract of land which is comparatively flat; an expanse of level ground; (occasionally) terrain of this kind” (plain, n.)

English borrowed plain from French, but the French origins are a mixture of Old French and Anglo-Norman French, with a classical Latin background, plānum. Variations of plain are found frequently in surnames and in place names. It has also evolved to mean, a flat or level thing” (plain, n). It’s original Middle English form of *playn* undergoes a shift to the spelling to ‘ai,’ while maintaining the |i| pronunciation.

Plain is first mentioned in Chronicles written by Robert of Gloucester in c1325, “Vpe þe plein of salesbury þat oþer wonder is, Þat ston heng is icluped” (plain, n).

Bay

“An indentation of the sea into the land with a wide opening (bay, n.)

Bay derives from the French, *baie*, but as French is a Romantic language, it may have deeper root ties to Latin. In Middle English, it was spelled *baye* before that final *-e* was dropped in its change into Early Modern English.

The first written reference to bay can be found in 1385 in Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon*, “In that grete mouthe and baye, beth ilondes Calchos, Patmos, and others” (bay, n).

Plateau

“An elevated tract of comparatively flat or level land; a tableland” (plateau, n.)

Plateau is a late French borrow and, in singular, is spelled the same as its French counterpart. It was used in military speech and text to “[denote] flat land where troops can easily be deployed or placed” (plateau, n.) before being used by the rest of the populace to describe geography. Plateau is one of the French borrows that maintains its French pronunciation and so sounds “foreign” to native English speakers.

The first written record of *plateau* being used is in 1743 in a military recording of the Siege of Prague, “The 17th we perceived..that they had already begun to form a Parallel, leaning to the Left on the Plateau, and on the Front of the Red-house, the Right descending into the Valley of St. Margaret” (plateau, n).

Cave

“A hollow place opening more or less horizontally under the ground; a cavern, den, habitation in the earth” (cave, n.)

Cave comes from the Romance languages, borrowed from French but originating in Latin. Its Latin form is *cavum* (singular) and *cava* (plural), which becomes *cave* in French. In Middle English, the written from is *kaave* or *kave*. As it was borrowed into English, cave retained the |k| sound before the |a| but changed the spelling from ‘c’ to ‘k’ in order to retain the sound. As it developed, it underwent the Great Vowel Shift, and the |a| became the long *a* sound. It also dropped |ɜ| pronunciation of the final ‘e,’ and the ‘e’ became silent.

The first mention of the word in English is in c1220 in Bestiary, a book about animals and animal parables, “Caue ȝe [the ant] haueð to crepen in” (cave, n).

Desert

“An uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country; a wilderness...now conceived as a desolate, barren region, waterless and treeless, and with but scanty growth of herbage” (desert, n.)

Desert originated from the Old French, *desert*, which comes from the Latin, *dēsertum*, whose meaning corresponds to the current non-geographical definition of the English *desert*, “abandon” (desert, n). In transitioning from Middle to Modern English, desert dropped the ‘ea’ of its second syllable, as shown in the text example below and shifted to the simple ‘e.’

The first written instance found is from c1225 Ancrene Riwle, “In þe deseart..he lette ham þolien wa inoch.”

Undetermined Origins:

Beach

“The shore of the sea, on which the waves break, the strand; spec. the part of the shore lying between high- and low-water-mark. Also applied to the shore of a lake or large river. In Geology an ancient sea-margin” (beach, n.)

Beach’s origins are unclear. Initially, is seems to have been a dialectical word referring to “the shingle or pebbles worn by the waves” (beach, n.) and slowly transferred its meaning to encompass the whole place. Its modern meaning began to show up more frequently in Middle English, and Shakespeare used the word frequently in connection to the modern meaning. Its spelling changed frequently in Middle English, but its meaning didn’t change after its adaptation.

It was first seen in 1535 in *Art Suruey* with its current spelling and meaning, “The smooth hard beach on the Sea~shoares burnes to a purer white” (beach, n.)

Lake

“A large body of water entirely surrounded by land; properly, one sufficiently large to form a geographical feature, but in recent use often applied to an ornamental water in a park, etc” (lake, n.)

The word, *lake*, with its current meaning has unclear origins. The word, *lác*, occurred early in Old English, but with the definition of “an offering, sacrifice, a gift,” as did the root lak-, which meant “moisture,” connected with the Old English, lícian, meaning “to please” (lake, n). In Middle English, *lac*, occurs with is present meaning, but it is unclear if that meaning was an accidental confusion with the Old English, *lác,* or if it was a borrow from the Latin, *lacus*. While lake undergoes a spelling change from ‘c’ to ‘k, ’adds a silent ‘-e’ when it moves into Modern English, and, for most of the English-speaking dialects undergoes the Great Vowel Shift that changes its central vowel into a long a, it does not undergo palatalization and maintains the velar |k| sound throughout its English history. Some northern dialects maintain a non-shifted short sound for the central vowel, such as the Scotland pronounced, |lɒk|.

The first time it was recorded with its current meaning was in Laȝamon’s *Brut* c1275, “Ouer þen lac [c1300 Otho lake] of Siluius & ouer þen lac [c1300 Otho lake] of Philisteus” (lake, n).

Creek

“An inlet or branch of a river, and related uses; a narrow recess or inlet in the coastline of the sea, or the tidal estuary of a river; an armlet of the sea which runs inland in a comparatively narrow channel and offers facilities for harbouring and unloading smaller ships” (creek, n.)

The origins of *creek* are complex. It is assumed that the word is Germanic in origins, and the English and French versions derived there; however, that is not entirely substantiated. The common Middle English from of *crike , cryke* (ī) seems to be borrowed from the French *crique*; a second less frequently used form, *creke*, bears more similarity to Germanic-based Dutch and Latin forms, though it could still be a variation of the French word; and then finally, a more recent variation, *crick*, seems to correlate with the Scandinavian language group, Swedish in particular. In moving into Early Modern English, creek dropped its final ‘-e.’ Despite having undergone the Great Vowel Shift’s change of the short |ɪ| to the long |i|, various parts of the U.S. still use the shortened |ɪ| sound.

The first English written mention of the word with the current meaning comes from the Middle English romance, *Havelok the Dane* c1300, “Hise ship..He dede it tere, an ful wel pike, Þat it ne doutede sond ne krike” (creek, n.)

Pond

"A small body of still water of artificial formation, made either by excavating a hollow in the ground or by embanking and damming up a watercourse in a natural hollow" (pond, n.)

Pond is a variation of the word, *pound*, which is firmly Old English and seems to be Anglo-Norman (*ponde, punde,* meaning "pen, enclosure") and/or post-classical Latin (*pondum , pundum*), but which from there has unknown origins. *Pound* originally meant, "An enclosure, and related uses." The word is found in many surnames and place names, but whether it is referring to the "body of water definition or the "enclosure" definition is often unclear (pound, n).

Pond is often used in compounds, such as "fish pond," so much so that its first written reference in 1287 from a "collection of records and documents relating to the hundred and manor of Crondal in the county of Southampton" is in the form of a compound, *pondpenny*, "Reddendo inde per annum viij s. de gabulo, et iij d. de Pondpanny" (pond, n).

Conclusion:

In analyzing the geographical terms that I, as a nature-advocate, esteem so deeply, I discovered the terms are an excellent illustration of the linguistic history of English that we learned this quarter in Linguistics 517. The geographical terms that were more global, large-scale, or associated with academic or business usage - such as *mountain, plateau,* and *peninsula* - were usually French or Latin borrows. The more colloquial, regional, or smaller scale - such as *hill, creek,* and *waterfall* - were usually Germanic in origin. It was fascinating to discover that one of the words, *swamp*, was actually only first recorded in English in North America.

During Middle English, most of the Germanic words and the early loan words went through many spelling changes; however, the later loans seemed to maintain a very similar spelling, and often pronunciation, to their original forms. In specific regions, some words did not change but retained their pronunciations, and sometimes spelling, such as the Scottish *loch*. Many of the geographical words changed pronunciation with the Great Vowel Shift, while others either dropped the pronounced final "-e"in moving out of Middle English and/or added a silent "-e" at the end in moving into Modern English. Overall, it was eye-opening to learn how varied their origins were, and even how, despite the advancement of linguistic studies, we still do not fully know the origins of some of our words.

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