

Idaho county names hold some surprising origins

There are 25 counties in the United States named Franklin, but the one in Idaho is the only one not named for Founding Father Benjamin Franklin.

Our Franklin County takes its name from the town of Franklin, named for Franklin Richards, an apostle in the Mormon church. It was settled by Mormon settlers in 1860, and was the first permanent town in what would become Idaho Territory in 1863, even though its founders thought they were in Utah. Not until a boundary survey was made in 1868 was it discovered that Franklin was north of the line in Idaho.

Idaho has lots of counties named for famous men, but only one county named for a female. Ada Riggs was only 8 years old when she received that honor, because her father, Henry Chiles Riggs, led the effort to create the new county in 1864.

He then was successful in getting the capital moved from Lewiston to Boise.

Perhaps no myth is as persistently repeated as one found in a few books and a dozen Web sites (including one sponsored by Ada County) that Ada Riggs was "the first pioneer child born in the area." Other sources phrase it "the first white child born in the area." Both are wrong.

In 1870, when the first federal census of Idaho was taken, Ada was 14 and her place of birth is listed as California. Brother Henry Jr., born in Oregon, was 8, and two younger brothers, Boise, 5, and a 3-month-old infant, who had not been named yet, were both born in Idaho. The claim that someone was "the first white child" born in a certain locality is often made, but can rarely be substantiated by records.

The most popular county name in the United States is Washington, named for President George Washington. There are 31 of those, including ours, founded Feb. 20, 1879.

The second most popular name is Jefferson, and we have one of those, too. Ours was one of a batch of new counties created by the Idaho Legislature in 1913, including Franklin, Madison, Minidoka, and Power.

Madison, with Rexburg as county seat, is named for President James Madison.

The name Minidoka has a more interesting origin, although as is the case with many words that sound American Indian, its exact meaning is disputed. Most agree that it is a Sioux word, like Minnesota or Minnehaha, and that the first syllable may mean "water" or "spring," but there are no such features in the sagebrush desert where Minidoka was located.

When the Oregon Short Line Railroad was built in 1883 across southern Idaho, Indian, or pseudo-Indian names for watering stops and sidings along the way were chosen. Kuna and Nampa are other examples of names chosen by the railroad. Power County, with American Falls as county seat, was named for the power plant at American Falls dam.

Twenty-five states have a Jackson County. Idaho doesn't, even though Jackson Day, the anniversary of Andrew Jackson's celebrated victory over the English at the battle of New Orleans in 1815, was still being celebrated in Boise by a few patriots as late as 1898.

Abraham Lincoln, whose 200th birthday we celebrate next year, has many counties named in his honor. Idaho's was created by an act of the Legislature on March 18, 1895, with Shoshone as its county seat. Originally about three times as large as it is now, its area was reduced with the creation of Gooding County in 1913 and Jerome County in 1919.

Frank R. Gooding, an Englishman who became one of Idaho's most prosperous wool growers, was elected to the Legislature from Lincoln County, and was later elected governor and United States senator. He is the only Idaho governor to have both a city and a county named for him.

Jerome County, with Jerome as county seat, was named for Jerome Hill, a Pittsburg investor in early reclamation projects in the area.

Presidents John Adams and James Madison, two of our Founding Fathers, have Idaho counties named for them, and so do two men who were candidates for the presidency but didn't make it.

Can you name them? I'll answer that, and share more county name lore next week.

Arthur Hart writes this column on Idaho history for the Idaho Statesman. It appears each Tuesday in the Life section. Reach him by e-mail at life@idahostatesman.com.