

WHO NAMED THE MOUNTAINS

Southern Arizona has many mountain ranges or “Sky Islands”. Some of these mountain ranges have received their names relatively recently while others received theirs many years ago during the Spanish era. Many of the ranges have gone through a series of names. This article attempts to present a little history behind the naming of some of the Sky Islands.

Huachuca Mountains – The name Sierra de Huachuca (or Guachuca) for these mountains was used by Captain Juan Mateo Manje in 1694 when he accompanied Padre Kino through this area. Guachuca was the name of a Pima village they visited and translates to “Thunder” Mountain. In 1863, a map maker used the name Sierra Espuela for these mountains but that name never stuck. To everyone else it has always been the Huachucas.

Chiricahua Mountains – General Juan Fernandez de la Fuente called these mountains the Sierra de Chiricahua (or Chiricahui) when he was scouting them in 1695. In the Opata Indian language, Chiricahua means “mountain of the wild turkeys”.

Pinaleno Mountains – These mountains have gone through a series of names. General Fernandez de la Fuente called them the Sierra de Santa Rosa during his expedition of 1695. Captain Juan Mateo Manje called them the Sierra de Santa Rosa de la Florida when he scouted the area in 1697. For the next 150 years they were known as either the Sierra de la Florida or the Sierra Bonita. US Army Lt. William Emory called the mountains “Pinon Lano” when he came through the area in 1846 as a topographical engineer with General Kearny’s Army of the West. This was later modified to Pinaleno on later maps. On a side note, Lt Emory also applied his name to one of Arizona’s Oak trees, the Emory Oak.

Dragoon Mountains - In 1695, General Fernandez de la Fuente camped in a canyon (currently called Middle March Pass) in the southern portion of the mountains and referred to them in his report as the Sierra de la Penascosa (a very rugged range). A 1780 Spanish map also referred to these mountains as the Sierra de la Penascosa. However, local Hispanic residents informed Archaeologist Alfred Francis Bandelier who was conducting research in the area that only the southern portion of the mountain range was called the Sierra Penescosa. The northern portion was called the Dragoon Mountains because a Mexican Dragoon had died there. Since the late 1860s, the entire range has been identified on maps as the Dragoon Mountains.

Catalina Mountains – These mountains may have been named by Padre Kino in the late 1600s but there is no evidence or documentation to prove this. It appears that Kino may have given the name Santa Catarina de Cuytoabucam to an Indian Rancheria on the Santa Cruz River and the name of the mountains may have come from there. The mountains were called the Sierra de la Santa Catarina (St. Catherine) during the late 1700s and most of the 1800s. Around 1880, Catarina became Catalina and the range has been called the Catalina Mountains ever since.

Rincon Mountains – In the late 1700s, the range was called the Sierra de Tres Alamos. The name was derived from the name of a Sobaipuri village located along the San Pedro River. In the mid-1800s the range was called the Sierra Colorado. Around 1880, maps of the area began to call them the Rincon Mountains. The term rincon refers to a physiographic feature, the prominent elbow or corner on the southeast side of the range. Rincon means corner in Spanish.

Santa Rita Mountains – Spanish records referred to this range as the Sierra de Santa Rita as early as the 1760s but the origin of the name is now unknown. Maps of the mountains dating from the middle 1800s continued to call them the Santa Rita Mountains. But to the Tohono O’odham people the name of these mountains for thousands of years has been and continues to be **Ce:wi Duag** (pronounced “choo duh awg”) which translates to “Long Mountain” in English. In recognition of the long historical association of the Tohono O’odham with these mountains the Arizona Trail Association is installing information boards at several Santa Rita Mountain trailheads of the Arizona Trail. These information boards celebrate the local indigenous language, culture and connections to the land of the Native Americans. The Western Apaches name for the Santa Ritas is **Dzif enzho** which means “Beautiful Mountain”.

Patagonia Mountains – In the late 1700s, these mountains were called the Sierra de Chihuahuilla and were considered to be part of the Sierra de Santa Cruz of northern Sonora Mexico. This name came from the Spanish Presidio of Santa Cruz located just south of the ghost town of Lochiel Arizona. The Presidio also gave its name to the Santa Cruz River. The range became the Patagonia Mountains in 1858 after a group of officers bought a rediscovered silver mine and named it the Patagonia mine. Lt Sylvester Mowry bought the mine in April 1860 and renamed it the Mowry mine but the name for the mountains and the town on Sonoita Creek retained the name “Patagonia”.

Canelo Hills – What we now call the Canelo Hills was originally considered to be a portion of the Sierra de Santa Cruz (see the explanation for the Patagonia Mountains above). They were not considered to be a separate range until the late 1800s when they began to be called the Canille Mountains by Hispanic Ranchers. “Canille” was gradually replaced by “Canelo” in the early 1900s. Canela is Spanish for Cinnamon, the light brown color of the hills.

Tumacacori Mountains – In 1691, Padre Kino established a mission at a Piman village along the Santa Cruz River and called it San Cayetano de Tumacacori. The mountains to the west of the mission then gained the name Tumacacori. The origin of the name Tumacacori is uncertain but is thought to have evolved from a Piman name for pepper bush. The wild chilitpine pepper still grows on the eastern flanks of the Tumacacori Mountains.

Atascosa Mountains - The origin of the name “Atascosa” is obscure. It was not used on maps prior to the early 1800s. It was probably first used by settlers working their way through the mountains. It could have been derived from the Spanish “Ataska” meaning “an obstruction to passage” or “atascarse” meaning “to be bogged down”.

Galiuro Mountains – These mountains have been called several different names over the years. Spanish campaign journals of the 1780s called them the Sierra de Santa Theresa although Spanish maps of the same period called them the Sierra de Arivaypa. In the 1850s, the El Paso and Fort Yuma Road Project was using the name San Calisto Mountains and in 1859 the army and civilian maps identified the mountains as the Sierra Calitro. The name of the mountain range was gradually changed to Galiuro over the next few decades

Winchester Mountains – These mountains were originally considered to be an extension of the Galiuro Mountains and were not mapped as a separate range until the late 1800s. The name was derived from the Winchester mining district that was established in the early 1800s by mining developer Henry D. Winchester.

Whetstone Mountains – Spanish maps of the 1780s called these mountains the “Sierra del Babocomari”, an Opatan name. The name “Whetstone Mountains” was used for this range by Colonel B.L.E. Bonneville in his report of an inspection tour he had made of the area during May 1859. The mountains contained a deposit of a hard fine-grained rock (Novaculite) that could be used to sharpen knives (in other words, a whetstone). The name Babocomari continues to endure in the area though with the Babocomari River and the Babocomari Ranch.

Pajarito Mountains – How this mountain range acquired the name “Pajarito” is very obscure. Pajarito means “little bird” in English. It was not included in Mexican maps of the early 1800s. In the mid-1800s, they were sometimes referred to as the “Arizona Mountains. After the Gadsden Treaty of 1853, these mountains became part of the USA. The Mexican-United States Boundary Commission surveyed the area in 1854. I have no evidence but maybe the Boundary Commission used the name “Pajarito during their survey.

Roskrige Mountains - These mountains were named for an Englishman named George James Roskrige who was born in Cornwall England in 1845. He emigrated to the US about 1870 and settled in Tucson in 1874. Just how did that justify his name on that Mountain Range? Well, he became a draftsman/mapmaker for the Surveyor General of Arizona and eventually became the United States Surveyor General for the Territory of Arizona. That mountain range didn’t have a name so he used his own when he was updating the maps.

Summarized by T. Johnson in March 2020 from the Coronado National Forest 2005 booklet “Who Named the Mountains”. The paragraph pertaining to the Santa Rita Mountains was updated in July 2022 by T. Johnson to incorporate information from the Arizona Trail Association pertaining to current Native American names for the mountains. Information on the Roskrige Mountains was added in December 2023.