

Question of the Month: Where do the South's Nuclear Power Plants Get Their Names?

In April 2024, the fourth nuclear reactor at Plant Vogtle in Georgia came online. With the addition of Unit 4, Plant Vogtle is now the largest nuclear power generator in the country. The news of this was reported across the nation, but amidst the facts and figures on how much power Plant Vogtle was now producing, some were still vexed by a simple question: why is the plant called "Vogtle" in the first place?

The 45 active nuclear reactors across 24 sites in the South get their names from various sources. Some are straightforward, like the Arkansas Nuclear One plant or the South Texas Nuclear Generating Station, which get their names from their geographical locations.

When considering how a geographic location gets its name, things get a little more interesting. The state of Arkansas, for example, derives its name from the Algonquian people's word for the Quapaw people¹. Texas also comes from the Native Americans; it means "friend" in the Caddo language.²

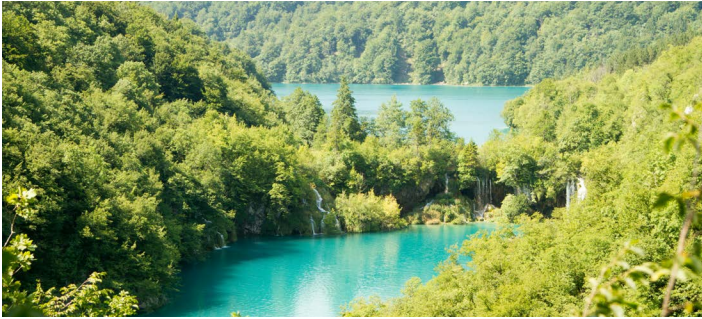
Three other sites also derive their names from the Native American languages. The Oconee Nuclear Station in South Carolina gets its name from the Cherokee word for the area, which means "land beside the water."³ This makes sense, given the site's proximity to several lakes. Farther east in the Palmetto State, the name for the Catawba Nuclear Station comes from the indigenous Catawba people of the area. The same is true

1. Arkansas Secretary of State, "How Did Arkansas Get its Name," sos.arkansas.gov, Accessed June 11 2024; Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Origin of Names of US States," [bia.gov](https://www.bia.gov), Accessed June 11 2024.

2. Fry, Phillip, "Texas, Origin of Name," Texas State Historical Association, 1976.

3. Oconee County, South Carolina, "About Us," [oconeesc.com](https://www.oconeesc.com), Accessed June 11 2024.

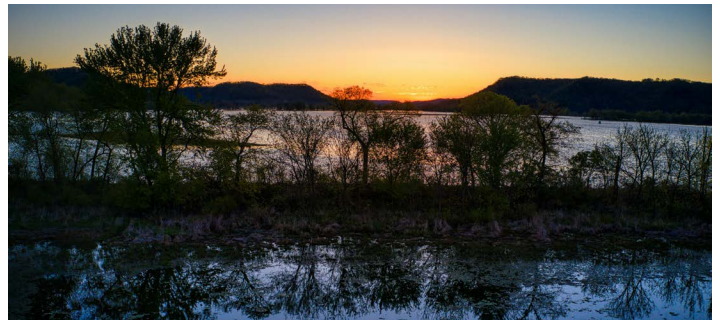
for the Comanche Peak Nuclear Power Plant in Texas, named for the Comanche tribe.



Beyond just language, two Native American individuals - both from the Cherokee Nation - are behind the names of two sites in the South. The Sequoyah Nuclear Plant in western Tennessee was named after Sequoyah, who was born just north of where the nuclear plant sits today and is known for creating the writing system for the Cherokee language.⁴ The name for the Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant in northern Alabama is more indirect as it is named after what the area is commonly called, which comes from the ferry that Cherokee Chief John Brown operated on the Tennessee River during the early 19th century.⁵

Sites like the Grand Gulf Nuclear Station and River Bend Nuclear Generating Station get their names from geographic locations but not from Native American terminology. Instead, their namesakes are a bit more on the nose and come from physical aspects of the Mississippi River. River Bend in Louisiana is named after the nearby bend in the river, and Grand Gulf comes from a nearby spot in Mississippi where a large whirlpool (or "gulf") is formed against a large rocky bluff.

Other sites are also named for aspects of the surrounding area that are a bit more obscure. The Watts Bar Nuclear Plant is named after the nearby Watts Island in the Tennessee River, though no one is quite certain why the island was named Watts.⁶ The same goes for the Turkey Point Nuclear Generating Station. The site lies on the narrow Turkey Point peninsula, though there is no record of why the thin strip of land was named as such in the first place. Waterford Nuclear Generating Station's name comes from the Waterford Plantation, located near where the plant sits today.⁷



One site's name comes from another language, but not one native to North America. The Surry Power Station in southeast Virginia is named after the county where the site is located: Surry County. However, Surry County, Virginia, is named after Surrey County in England. The English County derives its name from the Anglo-Saxon word "Suthrige," meaning "the Southern region," as it was the Southern portion of one of the Saxon kingdoms that existed before the Norman Invasion of Great Britain in 1066.⁸

England's effects on nuclear power plant names do not end there. The North Anna Power Station, also in Virginia, and the Brunswick Nuclear

4. Tennessee Valley Authority, "Sequoyah Nuclear Plant," tva.com, Accessed June 12 2024.

5. Rozema, Vicki, "John Brown Not Part of the Cherokee Removal," Chattanooga Times Free Press, July 17 2021; Tennessee Valley Authority, "Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant," tva.com, Accessed June 12 2024.

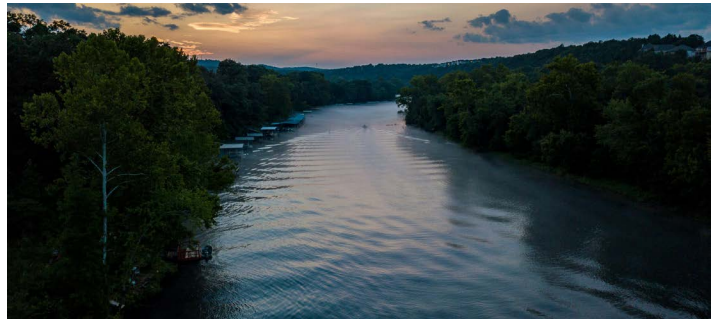
6. Division of Water Pollution Management, "Watts Bar Watershed of the Tennessee River Basin," Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, August 12 2002.

7. St. Charles Parish Virtual Museum, "Killona Town History," scphistory.org, Accessed June 12 2024.

8. BBC, "Surrey, England, UK," bbc.co.uk, June 5 2006.

Generating Station in North Carolina both get their names related to where they are located, but those location names were chosen to honor British monarchs before the United States was even founded. The North Anna site refers to the nearby North Anna River, which honored Queen Anne, who reigned from 1707 until 1714. Her successor (and cousin), King George I, is the namesake for the Brunswick site. King George I was also the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg in Germany, and the colonial Brunswick Town port - and later Brunswick County - was named after him.

Kentucky in 1783, Callaway and his family moved to Missouri in 1798, where he eventually settled in present-day St. Charles County. He served with the Missouri Rangers and was killed in 1815 in a battle with Native Americans.¹⁰



Another person from the Old World who lends their name to a nuclear power site is the Roman Catholic saint Lucia of Syracuse (Syracuse in Sicily, that is, and not the city in New York where President Biden went to law school). It was on her feast day, December 13, that the Spanish founded a settlement in present-day Florida in 1566 and named it after her.⁹ As a result, the St. Lucie Nuclear Power Plant bears her name.

Most of the remaining nuclear power sites were named after modern-day Americans who led different power companies during the last sixty years. Plant Farley in Alabama was named after Joseph Farley, the CEO of Alabama Power from 1969 to 1989.¹¹ Plant Hatch in Georgia gets its name from Edwin Hatch, the president of Georgia Power from 1963 to 1975.¹² William McGuire, president of Duke Energy from 1959 to 1971, is the namesake for the McGuire Nuclear Station in North Carolina.¹³ The South's oldest nuclear power plant, the Robinson Nuclear Plant in South Carolina, was named for H. Burton Robinson, an executive vice president at Carolina Power & Light.¹⁴ Another Carolina Power & Light executive, Shearon Harris, was the namesake for the Harris Nuclear Power Plant in North Carolina.¹⁵ The Summer Power Station in South Carolina was named after Virgil C. Summer, who began working at the South Carolina Electric and Gas Company at the age of 16 as a janitor and eventually rose through the ranks to become the

In contrast to European nomenclatures, Missouri's only nuclear power plant, The Callaway Plant, comes from an American. Captain James Callaway was the grandson of the famous frontiersman Daniel Boone. Born in

9. Lucie County Florida, "St. Lucie County History," stlucieco.gov, Accessed June 11 2024.

10. Eaton, David, "Callaway County," *How Missouri Counties, Town, and Streams Were Named*, 1917, page 267.

11. Southern Nuclear, "Who was Joseph Farley?," southernnuclear.com, Accessed June 11 2024.

12. Southern Nuclear, "Who was Edwin I. Hatch?," southernnuclear.com, Accessed June 11 2024.

13. Nuclear Information Center, "McGuire Celebrates 30 Years of Being an Industry Leader and Devoted Member of the Community," Duke Energy, December 8 2011.

14. Nuclear Information Center, "Robinson Nuclear, a Pioneer in Nuclear Energy," Duke Energy, October 22 2023.

15. Nuclear Information Center, "At 35, Harris Nuclear Plant Continues to Grow Along with the Community," Duke Energy, May 13 2022.

CEO of its parent company.¹⁶

And then there was Alvin W. Vogtle. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1918, he served as the Southern Company's President and Chairman from 1969 to 1983. Before his time in business, however, Vogtle served as a pilot in World War II. After his plane crashed in North Africa, he was sent to POW camps in Germany. He briefly escaped from different camps four times before, on his fifth attempt, he scaled a 14-foot barbed wire fence, made his way to the Rhine River undetected,

and then swam across it to Switzerland and freedom.¹⁷ His daring exploits inspired Steve McQueen's character in *The Great Escape*, and he even dined with McQueen before the film's premiere in 1963. Vogtle, however, never rode a motorcycle during his escape attempts; that was McQueen's addition to show off his motorcycle skills.¹⁸ Little did Mr. Vogtle know that his legacy would endure long into the future, not because of Hollywood but because of four reactors bringing energy to Georgians for decades to come.

16. South Carolina General Assembly, CR 4631, Reg. Sess. 2001-2002 (2002)

17. Saxon, Wolfgang, "Alvin Ward Vogtle Jr., 75, Dies; Led Big Power Supplier in the South," *The New York Times*, April 13 1994; Kirby, Bill, "The Way We Were: Vogtle and McQueen Both Star Performers," *The Augusta Chronicle*, September 7 2020.

18. Jones, Walter, "Vogtle was 'Great Escape' POW Before Augusta, Ga., Power Plant," *The Florida Times-Union*, October 1 2010.

