



Onoma 57

Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences

ISSN: 0078-463X; e-ISSN: 1783-1644

Journal homepage: <https://onomajournal.org/>

In Memoriam Wolfgang Peter Ahrens (1940–2022)

André Lapierre*

Université d'Ottawa, Canada

To cite this article: Lapierre, André. 2022. In Memoriam Wolfgang Peter Ahrens (1940–2022). *Onoma* 57, 365–368. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.57/2022/28

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.34158/ONOMA.57/2022/28>

© *Onoma* and the author.

Article history

Received on 24 March 2022.

Final form accepted on 26 March 2022.

Published online on 31 January 2023.

* Contact: lapierre@uottawa.ca

In Memoriam Wolfgang Peter Ahrens (1940–2022)

ANDRÉ LAPIERRE



Figure 1: Wolfgang Ahrens, 1993.
© Sheila Embleton.

It is with profound sadness that we learned of the passing of Dr. Wolfgang Ahrens, a pillar of onomastic studies in Canada. Wolf, as he was known to friends and colleagues, was born in Stralsund, Germany on January 4, 1940. After a difficult childhood in his home country due to war and its aftermath, he came to Canada with his family in 1953 and settled in Toronto. He earned a BA in German and Italian from University College at the University of Toronto in 1963 and went on to earn an MA (1965) and PhD (1969) in German from Ohio State University. The same year, he returned to Toronto and joined the newly established York University as a professor of German, teaching a wide range of language, literature and culture courses until his retirement in 2010. He was an engaged member of the York community for many years, serving extensively on

committees at all levels of the University, from department to faculty to Senate and was the founding chair of the new Department of Languages, Literatures & Linguistics. While his scholarly endeavours were initially oriented towards literature and culture, he soon became interested in onomastics and was a determining contributor to the development and advancement of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names / Société canadienne d'onomastique, Canada's scholarly voice in onomastics. Amazingly, for over 23 years he assumed every key position in the organization, from Editor of the newsletter *The Name*

Gleaner/La glanure des noms (1989–1994) to Secretary-Treasurer (1988–1994) to Editor of the journal *Onomastica Canadiana* (1994–2003) to President (2003–2012), an exceptional accomplishment for any scholar and for which CSSN will be forever grateful. On the international scene, he participated in ICOS conferences beginning in 1984, and was one of the organisers of ICOS (2008) in Toronto and co-editors of its digital proceedings. Also worthy of mention is his penchant for Viking and Baltic culture and his involvement in the Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada, best exemplified by his dedicated work as editor of that society's journal *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* from 1992 to 1999. Wolf would often take advantage of the annual meeting of the Learned Societies Congress (now the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences) to attend presentations of both CSSN and AASSC and encourage collaboration between both learned groups.

His contributions to onomastics deserve a particular mention. As a teenager, he developed a sharp interest in travel and as a member of the Canadian Air Cadets, he was able to visit not only Canada but many other countries as well. This attraction to new horizons continued throughout his adult life. In total, he traveled to 94 different countries, many multiple times, and enjoyed out of the way destinations such as Antarctica where he has been twice. His favourite destination however was the Caribbean, taken broadly to include Bermuda and the Bahamas. He had a keen ability to blend his leisure time with his passion for names. He often took advantage of his travels to conduct *in situ* field work in places such as Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao and report his findings, with supporting photographs and documentation, at learned societies. His most important contribution was the establishment of the definitive etymologies of the toponyms *Bermuda* (1999) and *Bahamas* (2015–2016) as a result of his in-depth investigation of multiple written sources, including old maps, and local observations. His last publication, jointly with his wife Sheila Embleton (ICOS President 2008–2011), *Baltic Germans in the Russian Imperial Navy: navigators, explorers, and contributors to place naming*, was presented virtually at the 27th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, Polish Academy of Sciences and Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland, August 23 – 28, 2020. August 26, 2021, and is currently in press.

Wolf was a modest person and would have been uncomfortable at any attempt to extol his accomplishments. Yet, his pointed contribution to name studies and unselfish dedication to the Canadian Society for the Study of Names are fully deserving of vibrant recognition. Thank you, Wolf, you will be sadly missed.

References

- Ahrens, Wolfgang Peter. 2015. Naming the Bahamas Islands: History and folk etymology. (A much expanded and amended version of the paper published in the Proceedings of ICOS 25.) *Onomastica Canadiana* 94 (2), 97–116.
- Ahrens, Wolfgang Peter. 2016. Naming the Bahamas Islands: History and folk etymology. In Hough, Carole & Izdebska, Daria (eds.), *Names and their environment. Proceedings of the 25th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences*, August 25–29, 2014. Glasgow, UK, Volume I. *Toponomastics I*, 42–49. Glasgow: University of Glasgow.
- Ahrens, Wolfgang Peter & Embleton, Sheila. 1999. The naming of Bermuda. *Names* 47(3), 191–204.