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Proposal for Handling Place References

Submitted by: Proctor, Tony

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1. Abstract

This proposal is to treat place references in a hierarchical fashion that is not specific to any single country or time period, and to make use of the hierarchical organisation to launch a federated Place Authority on the Internet.

The elements of the hierarchy must be place entities rather than mere name references.

2. Proposal

Every place is part of some larger-scale place, thus constituting a place hierarchy. Many products treat place references in a hierarchical fashion, although some issues need to be clarified:

- A term such as [US, California, San Francisco] or [England, Nottinghamshire, Nottingham] is merely a formatted place hierarchy. The syntax and the ordering (large-to-small or small-too-large) should be considered locale dependent. In the Data Model, each term should be a place entity, not merely a name.
- The types of entity in a place hierarchy are not only dependent upon the country but also upon the time period. Some older types no longer exist, for instance.
- There are potentially multiple hierarchy types, including geographical, administrative, ecclesiastical, political, and judicial.
- Parent entities are time-dependent. Boundaries and affiliations change over time.

Ideally, hierarchies should be geographical ones rather than administrative ones, religious ones (e.g. ecclesiastical parishes), judicial ones, or political ones (e.g. electoral wards and polling areas). These other aspects of a place may still be important, though, but they can be defined through properties of a place. For instance, a civil birth registration may occur in an administrative area but a baptism may occur in a religious one, but it would still be nice to relate them somehow. Geographical entities would work at the larger scale places (e.g. countries) and at the smaller scale places (streets and households) but administrative entities exist in between. The preferred hierarchy type may therefore be a hybrid of these two.

We notice in the sample reference, above, that England was used rather than UK. This is important because they're not the same. The United Kingdom is not a country, it is a sovereign state, and it hasn't always existed. The valid place types therefore need to cover other time periods as well as the present day. ISO 3166-1 only defines codes for present-day countries. Also, ISO 3166-2 defines codes for the names of the principal present-day subdivisions of the countries in ISO 3166-1 (e.g. provinces or states). This does not include subdivisions such as Shires although they are still historically relevant.

There is a similar standard to ISO 3166-2 developed independently by the European Union and called the Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics (NUTS).

The divisional entities within each country not only have many different names but their relative size and organisation cannot be assumed to be similar in different countries. For instance, if a country has both states and counties, are states a subdivision of counties, or vice versa, or are they relative equals? This is not a big problem though. What is needed is a list of entity types that is valid not just in the present age but in the past too. From this, we can define something called a "controlled vocabulary" which can be applied to all countries. For instance:

> Authorities, Boroughs, Counties, Departments, Dependencies, Districts, Islands, Municipalities, Parish (Civil), Provinces, Regions, Republics, Shires, States, Territories, Townlands, Townships

Each country would then have a selection of these names that are applicable to it, and a relative ordering specified between them.

3. Not Covered or Not Required

This proposal does not suggest how to deal with overlapping entities. It assumes every place has a unique bounding place at any given time. However, a country may be split due a political change, or a property may be split during inheritance, or a street may be completely torn down and the area redeveloped with new streets. These examples “overlap” in that they are related and may even occupy the same physical location. There are also informal place references which do not correspond with any single official place, and yet may still be encountered in a census return. An example might be The Potteries in the UK.

4. Illustration

The following STEMMA example shows an English town that has moved between two counties over time.

```
<Place Key='pStapenhill'>
        <Title> Stapenhill </Title>
        <Type>Town</Type>
        <PlaceName> Stapenhill </PlaceName>
        <ParentPlaceRef Key='pDerbys' Before='1889'/>
        <ParentPlaceRef Key='pStaffs' From='1889'/>
        <Narrative>
                <Text>
                In 1889 the part of the parish of Stapenhill in the
                borough of Burton upon Trent became part of
                Staffordshire, and in 1894 the remaining Derbyshire
                parts of the parish became part of the parishes of
                Bretby and Drakelow, so that thereafter Stapenhill was
                wholly in Staffordshire
                </Text>
        </Narrative>
</Place>

<Place Key='pDerbys'>
        <Title>Derbyshire</Title>
        <Type>County</Type>
        <PlaceName> Derbyshire </PlaceName>
</Place>

<Place Key='pStaffs'>
        <Title>Staffordshire</Title>
        <Type>County</Type>
        <PlaceName> Staffordshire </PlaceName>
</Place>
```

5. Use Cases

Places are very important for family history and may have their own historical narrative and properties. Breaking down a place reference to its component place entities allows both narrative and properties to be assigned at each level, right down to the street and building in the STEMMA case.

Handling place references as true hierarchies of place entities (as opposed to mere text strings) affords better support for correlating people's locations and movements.

Having a controlled vocabulary of place types will help in the creation of a single resource for identifying places globally.

6. Recommendation

The list of place entity types should be used to design a federated Place Authority that will help resolve references and provide historical details of them. By federated, I mean that a single point of contact, with a well-defined interface, can delegate requests to the appropriate authority with local knowledge of the place. All cooperating sites would have to honour that standard interface.

7. References

STEMMA discussion of place hierarchies. http://www.familyhistorydata.parallaxview.co/research-notes/persons-places (section 3.1, *Hierarchies*).

STEMMA discussion of Place Authorities. http://www.familyhistorydata.parallaxview.co/research-notes/persons-places (section 5.1, *Place Authority*).