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Worcester Is Reviving, but People Still Can't Spell It (Forget the Pronunciation)

People have been mangling the name of the Massachusetts city since at least 1896 when the Boston Globe added an 'h'



Downtown Worcester, Mass. Not Worchester. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

By

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WORCESTER, Mass.—This city is shaking off decades of post-industrial rust with help from downtown revival efforts, a restaurant scene and, coming soon, a minor-league baseball team.

There's one thing Worcester can't shake: the letter H.

From government to newspapers to visitors, people won't stop calling New England's second-largest city "Worchester."



Jessica Walsh sells Worcester-branded items at her downtown shop. “I’ve had people come into my store and ask me, ‘Isn’t there an ‘H’ in there?’” she said. “I say, ‘Nope, do you think I misspelled everything?’”

For the record, the name is correctly pronounced with just two syllables, not three. It sounds like “Wuster,” and locals will also accept “Wusta” or “Wista.” There is no correct version with a “ch” sound in there.

Welcome to Worcester, Now Get the H Out

People have had plenty of time to get this right: The central Massachusetts city has been around for about 300 years. It is the largest among several U.S. Worcesters named after the much older English city.

But even the federal government keeps adding an H, including on a September press release describing charges against a “Worchester Man” due to a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives error. The typo is also sprinkled around in the state of Massachusetts’ government website.

Newspapers mess it up routinely, including The Wall Street Journal in [a 2016 article](#) about a guilty plea for a multilevel-marketing firm’s founder.



Worcester Wares owner Jessica Walsh, left, here with manager Danielle Montgomery, sells city-branded merchandise. “Isn’t there an “H” in that name?” some customers ask. PHOTO: JON KAMP/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

When Worcester announced in August it had lured the Red Sox triple-A farm team from Pawtucket, R.I., the Boston Globe wrote online: “It’s Official: PawSox are Moving to Worchester.” It later fixed the error.

The errant “H” stretches way back. “Wanted in Worcester for Taking Ex Mayor Pratt’s Fine Mares,” the Globe wrote in 1896, covering a notorious horse thief.

Despite having the state’s and region’s second-largest population, about 185,000, Worcester can feel overlooked, locals say. It isn’t a state capital like nearby Providence, Hartford or Boston, and has battled an image as another faded industrial city with a lifeless downtown. Messing up the city’s name can spoil its rare moments in the sun.

“It’s like you’re all dressed in your best gown, but you have toilet paper on your foot,” said Ms. Walsh.

Massage therapist Jennifer Wood has run out of patience. “If a telemarketer calls and mispronounces it, I hang up on them immediately,” she said.

And if they get it right?

“I’d just hang up on them a little later.”

Recent city improvements have softened frustrations for some. Former mayor Jordan Levy lives in new apartment building downtown [that replaced a failed mid-century shopping mall](#). Developers have been turning old office buildings into housing, colleges have expanded downtown, and the minor-league baseball team will get a new stadium nearby in 2021.

“Now it’s kind of funny” to see people misspell Worcester, said Mr. Levy, 75 years old. “It wasn’t funny when we were struggling.”



Skyline of Worcester, which is nearly 300 years old but has a name that still stumps some people. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Other locals try to keep a sense of humor about the constant barrage of mistakes. Bill Wallace, director at the Worcester Historical Museum, jokes, “The line around here is just get the H out of Worcester.”

Even residents of the original Worcester in England see their name gotten wrong. A German grocery chain used “Worchester” in an ad campaign a couple of years ago. “It’s a nice store but get the name right, for crying out loud,” one resident told the Worcester News.

The Massachusetts Worcester is among many New England locales that owe their tricky spelling to namesakes across the pond, where befuddling names such as Beaulieu (“Bew-lee”) and Woolfardisworthy (“Woolzery”) have been confusing visitors for centuries.

There is no clear method to the mayhem, said Jenny Lewin-Jones, a lecturer in English and sociology at the U.K.’s University of Worcester. Modern pronunciations can reflect older spelling variants, or efforts to make names easier to say, she said. The English language is also famously idiosyncratic, with plenty of exceptions to the rules.

The suffix “cester” seems to have the same origin as “chester,” referring to former walled Roman encampments. The history of pronouncing “cester” as just “ster” has a more obscure history, according to the [Oxford English Dictionary](#). Ms. Lewin-Jones said just saying “ster” may be a way of getting around repeated “S” sounds. For the “cesters,” places like Manchester, Dorchester and Winchester seem to be fueling the barrage of “H” mistakes.



This includes Worcester Township, Pa., which uses a more phonetic “Wor-ses-ter” pronunciation, yet gets pronounced as “Worchester” all the time, according to Township Manager Tommy Ryan. Officials in the small Worcesters in Vermont and New York, pronounced just like the Massachusetts city, say they are also bombarded by errors.

Yanick Turcotte, a French-Canadian player on the Worcester Railers hockey team, at first thought the city name was “Rochester.” PHOTO: JON KAMP/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The name of Alcester, S.D., is botched even by people who don't live very far away, according to Wanda Halverson, the small town's assistant finance officer. "It's just massacred," she said. Alcester is properly pronounced "Al-ses-ter," she said.

Back in Massachusetts, the Worcester name is a constant challenge for outsiders. At Worcester Polytechnic Institute, "last year I reviewed an application and a student spelled Worcester two different ways," said Andrew Palumbo, dean of admissions and financial aid. "Both of them were wrong. I think they were just trying to cover their bases."

The applicant didn't get in, but the school doesn't hold misspellings against prospective students. After all, even its elite auditor, PricewaterhouseCoopers, used the wrong spelling "Worchester" in a report a couple of times last year.

Worcester can be a tongue twister for the thousands of college students flooding into local schools each year. The College of the Holy Cross tries to explain the tricky name on its website. Laurie Britt-Smith, who directs the school's center for writing, recalled waiting for a recent flight home from Philadelphia when the gate agent called out something like "Wuh-chester."

Passengers, laughing, "all yelled about the same time, 'it's Wusta!' in a very Worcester accent," she said.

Quebec City native Yanick Turcotte, a member of the Worcester Railers minor-league hockey team, said his French-Canadian parents are still struggling with his new city's name. When he first heard it, he thought he was heading to "Rochester."

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