

Lots of heart but only one center

By Ethan Gilsdorf
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NEAR THE CENTER OF NEW ENGLAND — “There could be border warfare,” said Brad Hayes, a realtor and cofounder of the Chamber of Commerce in Wakefield, N.H.

Hayes made the joke when he heard that Sanford, Maine, claims to be at the geographic center of New England.

“We are the center,” said Denise Roy-Palmer, Wakefield’s chamber president. “We consider ourselves close to everything. You can live in a small, charming town and drive to the ocean, White Mountains, the city.”

But the true center of the six-state region depends on the method of calculation, who is doing the calculating, and the reasons for the calculation.

About 40 miles north of Portsmouth and just east of Lake Winnepesaukee near the Maine border, Wakefield was once in the limelight. It served as a central railway hub between 1880 and 1930, when ice companies filled some 100 railway cars per day with 25-pound blocks of ice, mostly bound for Boston. Also in the late 19th century, upward of 100,000 tourists per week passed through town on ski trains. These days, second-home owners, many living in converted camps by the area’s 12 lakes, fuel the economy.

Near the stately brick Town Hall, a railroad line still bisects the main street; the hilltop of Wakefield Corner is a cluster of 26 clapboard homes, churches, and inns, all on the National Register of Historic Places. But its claim to centrality put Wakefield, population 4,252, on the map. Hundreds of similar towns that freckle New England’s rural landscape look for a way to stand out and escape the “boonies” label. Asserting a central location is one

way. (One New Hampshire town, Epping, has playfully called itself the “Center of the Universe.”) But how to define that can be confusing.

“We could talk about the geographic center,” said Blake Gumprecht, professor

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SOURCE: ESRI, TeleAtlas

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of geography at the University of New Hampshire, “in terms of miles. Or in more meaningful terms.” Gumprecht and other geographers are “more interested in the center in a more squishy sort of way,” such as Boston being the population center for the region.

With at least two towns, Wakefield and Sanford-Springvale, declaring geographic center status on their websites and brochures, the dispute seems to question if there is an accepted standard for calculating the center of any place.

In fact, the US Coast and Geodetic Survey, which in 1918 declared Lebanon, Kan., the geographic center of the country, has since officially bowed out of calling the contest. In the pre-digital, pre-global positioning days, the center of the United States was determined by cutting a map of the Lower 48 from a chunk of cardboard and balancing it on a point. Ignoring irregularities in elevation and pretending the states are a plane of uniform thickness, this method figures the imagined center of gravity of a land mass, but is accurate only within 20 miles or so (of South Dakota nowadays). An-



other way to calculate would be to find halfway points between the extremes: northern-, southern-, eastern-, and westernmost points.

But no authority has weighed in on New England's center. Even the editors of "The Encyclopedia of New England" (Yale University, 2005) and the director of UNH's Center for New England Culture didn't have a guess.

It turns out Wakefield's reckoning was done more "seat of the pants," said Ron Kinville, an engineer who in 1986 was on the committee charged with coming up with a catchy slogan for the town. "If you put a compass in Wakefield and swing it around," he said, recalling the process (which he admitted ignored northern Maine), "jeez, we're sort of the center of New England."

"Whether it's 100 percent accurate, I couldn't claim," he added. "Some people can challenge it."

A sign once sat at the outskirts of town welcoming visitors to "The Center of New England," but no one seemed to know if it is still there — under piles of snow.

As for Sanford, only a half an hour's drive east, the town of 20,000-plus was hurt when the last mills shut down in the 1950s. Some 3,500 people lost jobs. "We were trying to develop promotional materials," said Paul Chabot, president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1976. "We were trying to get away from the slogan 'The Town That Refused to Die.'"

Sanford, which is bustling compared with Wakefield, was known more for its drag racing and being the place where Babe Ruth played his last baseball game than for anything else. Another casual calculation justified the "center" tagline: Someone drew a circle (that also encompassed Montreal and New York) and declared Sanford, like the pebble dropped into water, the center of a ripple of activity.

As for any "warfare" over bragging rights to be the geographic center of New England, Chabot said, "We were the originator of

that phrase."

But where does the true center lie? Surely in this age of MapQuest and Google Earth someone could come up with an accurate and impartial answer.

That person was Suchi Gopal, professor in Boston University's Department of Geography and Environment, and Center for Remote Sensing. Assisted by her graduate students Hirshikesh Patel and Jared Newell, Gopal used the center of gravity, or "centroid," method. "A mathematical calculation that uses a digital representation of the six New England states is the most accurate because it's based on a math algorithm that the computer uses to calculate the center based on the boundaries," Gopal said. Her calculation, she added, also took into account the irregular coastline of Maine and the islands off the coast of Massachusetts.

And the answer? A place located at 43.117199 degrees latitude and -71.593498 degrees longitude, some 50 miles southwest of Wakefield and Sanford and only a few miles from the intersection of Interstates 93 and 89: Dunbarton, N.H., population 2,600.

Leslie Hammond, longtime Dunbarton selectman and a lifelong resident who can trace his ancestors back to the town's founders, took a visitor for a tour. From his truck, Hammond pointed out the many well-preserved 18th-century homes once owned by prominent Stark and Page families, the churches, the new gazebo, the stone blacksmith's shop, the school, Town Hall, even the house where he grew up.

"Dunbarton's not known for anything," Hammond said, as snowmobilers stopped in for lunch at Page's Country Store and Deli, one of the town's few commercial buildings. "It's really a bedroom community."

With five ponds, and about 2,500 acres of conservation and federal lands, there's plenty of recreation areas for boating, fishing, and trails for off-road vehicles. "It's a nice town to live in. Quiet.

We have our characters," he added. "If you blink, you'll miss it."

Hammond then drove to the place Gopal calculated as New England's exact geographic center, at the intersection of Guinea and Stone roads, the latter so remote it's impassable in winter. Here were woods, a stone wall, and an empty field. Utter tranquility.

Hammond was nonplussed, more interested in talking about how he milked cows at Stone Farm as a boy, and that in 2006, the dairy farm, Dunbarton's last, had to sell its herd.

Two towns wanted to be front-and-center, promoted themselves as such and were not; the one town that was the center didn't know it and at least one town official didn't much care.

Oddly, Dunbarton has another claim to fame. In Stark Cemetery, a few miles from the center, is the final resting spot of Boston-born, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Lowell (1917-77), whose ancestors include a signer of the Constitution, a governor of Massachusetts, and passengers on the Mayflower.

Part of Lowell's poem "Flying From Bangor to Rio 1957" seems written for towns eager for the limelight:

*you can never settle on where
to be,
lashed by your giant memory
to the globe.*

But Dunbarton seems content to be itself, right where it is:

*you'd never found another
place to live,
bound by your giant memory
to one known longitude.*

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PHOTOS BY ETHAN GILSDORF/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Centering New England where Guinea and Stone roads intersect in Dunbarton, N.H., means that Sanford, Maine, at the end of the road (below), and Wakefield, N.H. (bottom), are just a bit off.



