

PBN-20-26 April 1998

Rhode Island, the Rosetta stone of comparisons

Unique among the states because of being smallest of the fifty, Rhode Island thus often serves as the measure of size when talking about other places. Most recently it was Lake Champlain.

When Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, in the form of an amendment, had the seven words "the term Great Lakes includes Lake Champlain" added to some legislation in order to qualify for special federal funding provided states with coastal or Great Lakes location, he stirred up a hornet's nest among those senators from the Midwest whose states border the five Great Lakes of this country.

Subsequent legislation had that phrase eliminated, but Senator Leahy was still successful in getting necessary support so that Vermont now qualifies for federal dollars, based upon its location on this lake.

Lake Champlain is nearly one-half the size of Rhode Island, according to news accounts, and the sixth largest lake in this country, after the five Great Lakes.

A lake is defined simply as a water-filled hollow which may sometimes be called a sea because of its size, such as the Caspian, the largest lake in the world with an area two and one-half times that of New England and 93 times the size of our state. The Caspian also borders on five countries, among them Russia.

Our own Lake Superior, second largest in the world, largest of the Great Lakes and largest in this country, is nearly one-half the size of New England and 21 times that of Rhode Island. The other four Great Lakes place them among the 14 largest

in the world. And Lake Ontario, smallest of the five at 7,540 square miles, is still five times larger than Rhode Island.

Lakes may be composed of salt or fresh water. The Caspian, Great Salt Lake and Dead Sea, for example, are salt because of interior drainage. When rivers flow they dissolve mineral salts in the land that accumulate in standing bodies of water.

Most rivers that flow into lakes also drain them, so that the dissolved mineral salts flow to the ocean, which originally was fresh water. The Great Lakes, as well as Lake Champlain, are thus fresh water because they drain into the St. Lawrence River which flows into the ocean.

For our state the vital 120 square-mile Narragansett Bay makes up nearly one-quarter of the total water area of the state. Of course, the Bay is salt because of its connection to the ocean.

Using the size of Rhode Island as a comparative measure of places and features can be tricky. For example, should you use the combined land and water or just the land as this measure of size?

The 1990 U.S. Census check of our boundaries came up with a land area for Rhode Island of 1,049 square miles and a water area of 496 square miles, for a total of 1,545 square miles. So the state is 47 percent larger if the water area is used, but the use of the approximately 1,000 square miles of land makes it a simple mental calculation to determine the size of another place, so this is the figure often used.

Another example of this is with the state of Michigan. At 97,000 square miles it is approximately 50 percent larger than all of New England, but since it has frontage and ownership on four of the Great Lakes, this 40,000 square miles of water amounts to 40 percent of the area. So Michigan's land area of 57,000 square miles means that it is smaller than New England.

Within our own state there are three communities with more water than land in their total areas - Bristol, Jamestown and Portsmouth. The water area of Bristol is the same as the land area; in Jamestown the water area is more than twice that of the land; and Portsmouth, the community with

the greatest amount of claimed water area in the state at 36 square miles, when combined with its 23 miles of land area, would be the third largest community in the state rather than 21st in size if only land area were used.

The massive state of Alaska is one-sixth the total area of the United States. If you wanted to impress someone even more, say that you could put 398 Rhode Islands in the state (using land and water areas) but if you really wanted to emphasize its size, say that 543 Rhode Islands would fit into Alaska (using only land areas).

Whether compared with our sixth largest lake, our largest state or some other feature or place, Little Rhody, too often ignored, misplaced or mistaken for Long Island, is still recognized and used as the standard for measuring size in this country. And that's no small measure.

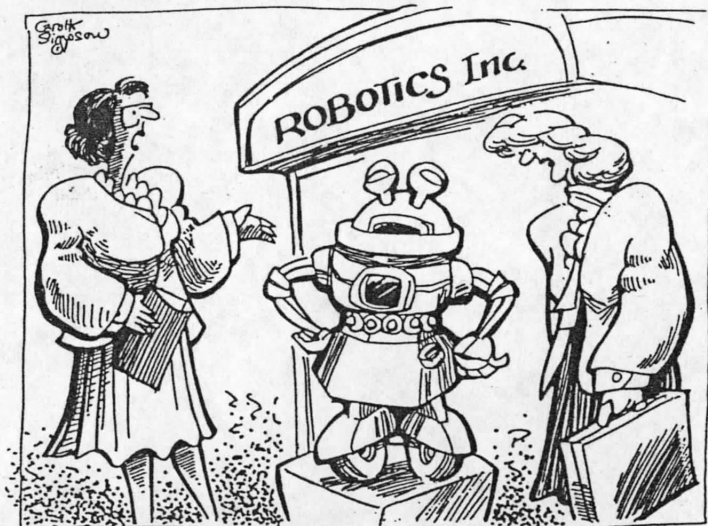
Chester E. Smolski
Professor Emeritus of Geography
Rhode Island College

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