

Massachusetts / Rhode Island / Connecticut

The Rhode Island / Connecticut / Massachusetts corner is only about twenty minutes from a stretch of I-90 that I travel at least once a week. Usually, though, I am on a tight schedule. A few days ago, I was going to help install a sculpture exhibit in Boston, and learned that I had about two hours to kill, so I decided to try for it.

The corner itself is somewhere to the South-East of Lake Chargoggonmmnmnoaoananoorognonmanoerg, famously the longest place name in the United States. The name comes from the Nipmuc, and I believe the closest actual translation is “Boundary Fishing Water,” but since at least 1916, whites have rendered this to mean “I fish on my side, you fish on your side, nobody fishes in the middle.” (It also seems possible that the lake's strange layout, trisected by two narrow spits of land, has more to do with the “boundary” concept than do any indigenous fishing treaties.) In all events, it is usually abbreviated to Chaubunagungamaug, or, for the outsiders, Lake Webster.

I had been thinking about this lake, or more precisely its name, in another context. I've been working on [a never-ending program](#) that parses sentence structures, which I enjoy mainly for the host of grammatical and philosophical questions it presents me with. One of them is the fluidity of lexical and conceptual units. In any language, the division between one word and the next can become blurry. Is “corner-post” one word or two? One concept or two? What about clitics? What about contractions? Adages?

“Rhode Island” is two words, but it is treated as a one-word metonym for “The State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.” That's 46 letters, considerably longer than the usual rendering of Chargoggonmmnmnoaoananoorognonmanoerg. To someone as unfamiliar with English as I am with Nipmuc, it might be viewed as a single, absurdly long, 13-syllable name. And this is correct, in a sense: names are meant to refer to one concept, usually uniquely so: they are not as fluid as other sorts of words. There is essentially no instance in which we refer to “Rhode” without the “Island.” Like “vim” it has no existence on its own....

Anyhow.

I promptly got lost in the hills around the corner, and finally stopped at the fire station to ask directions. The fireman I spoke to gave me the worst version of Yankee directions I've ever heard. In a classically bad set of directions, you are referred to a place that no longer exists: “where the old tavern was.” But this guy referred me to an *event*: “go down to where the train wreck was.” And, just for added fun, *the train tracks were gone*. So, yeah.

A little beyond the completely unremarkable site of this carnage, I was supposed to look for a sign on the border. It took me several tries, and much existential doubt about where the train tracks might have been, before I realized that the sign did not say “Welcome to Massachusetts,” it said “No Dumping: Police Take Note.” Having arrived, I headed into the sweltering hot woods, which were—as I had guessed—made of sand, brambles, deer ticks, and poison ivy. Also garbage. Lots and lots of garbage: apparently a few people hadn't read the sign.

Beyond the garbage, the woods were full of the spoor of humanity. Stone walls and retaining walls were *everywhere*, and I quickly forded a small creek on a dilapidated stone bridge. There were stone water channels, still working after at least a century of neglect, and then the massive causeway of the fatal railroad, with no tracks. What was conspicuously absent from all this human intervention was the slightest indication of surveying.

At the VT/NY/MA corner, the surveyors had marked so many trees that in some places it looked like a paintgun battle had taken place. Here there was nothing. No ax blazes, no cairns, no ribbons, no paint whatsoever. On the causeway itself, I found a gate marking the entrance to a state forest (on the Massachusetts side). A rock adjacent to this gate had been tagged on both sides, not by a surveyor but by a patriotic citizen from, I believe, Connecticut. On the Massachusetts side, they had written “CONN. + FREEDOM,” and on the Connecticut side “THE REICH,” with several swastikas. (I would



like to point out that this is one of the only instances I've seen of a graffiti swastika having an explicitly pejorative connotation.)



These pictures were taken with my laptop(!) Hence you can't read the stone in the foreground, which is pointing roughly towards Boston and says "EVIL --->". It's like something from a fairy tale: here be dragons.

But I knew that the corner was still about three hundred yards South of this political statement, and I had not brought my compass. I climbed the hill and spent quite awhile wandering around among the trees, looking for any sign that the surveyors had been through. I tried to bear East, in the hopes that the MA/RI border was better marked, and I would intersect it. No luck.

Finally, I found a swallow's nest within, I believe, a few hundred feet of the corner itself. I decided that this was good enough, and headed back to the car....

