

Center of Alabama
By Derric Scott

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A very common question is “what is the geographic center of Alabama?”

Immediately, the short answer is “there is no such thing.” That is, there is no generally accepted definition of the “center” of an irregularly shaped state. However, that doesn’t mean that it isn’t fun to consider! So...

There are many different pieces to such a calculation, all of which have merit. Some thoughts:

- First, the earth is curved... think of pulling the peeling off an orange and cutting the shape of Alabama out of it... You cannot then flatten it out and have the shape you started with. It will always be distorted. You have to do a “projection” of it somehow... and there are different methods to do such projections.
- So if a satisfactory projection is made, then what method is used to determine the center? Two methods seem to be written about – center of gravity and center of area.
- Another problem is defining exactly what geographic features should be included in the calculation and also exactly where the boundaries are (example, those for Alabama changed in 1953 with the passage of the U. S. Submerged Lands Acts).

The center of gravity method

Consider a thin cutout of Alabama balanced on a pinpoint. The point where balance is achieved would be the Center of Gravity of the cutout of the state of Alabama.

The center of the area method

Consider dividing Alabama into quarters with two perpendicular lines, each dividing half the area. However, the direction of the lines is arbitrary ... logically, you might say use a north-south line and an east-west line, for example; however this is still an arbitrary choice.

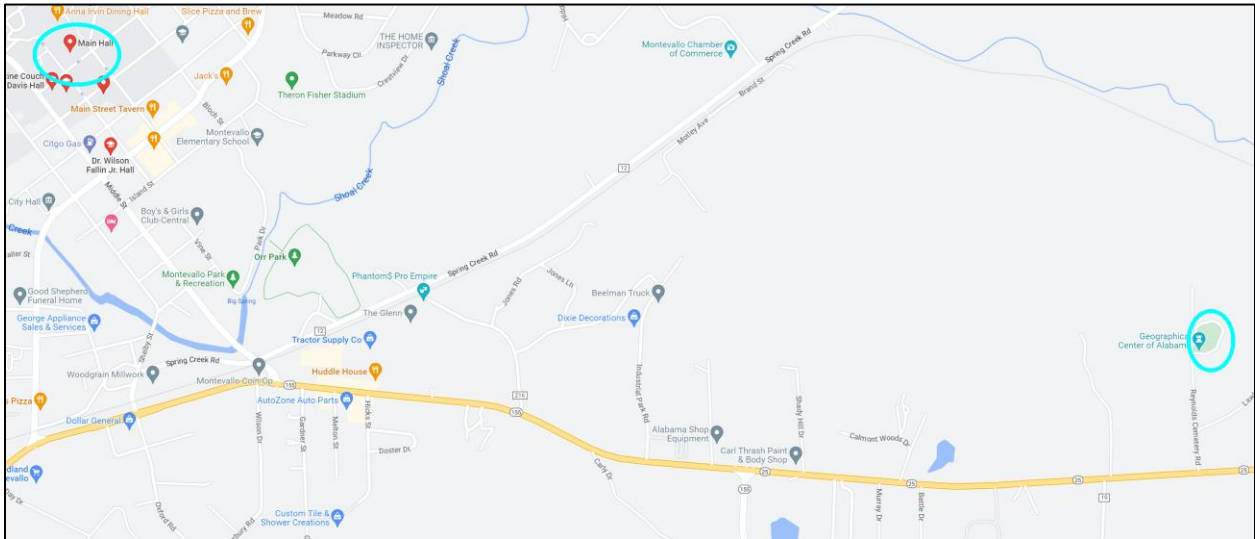
“This is a case in which all may differ but all be right¹.”

¹ Geographical Centers, Oscar S. Adams, The Military Engineer, Vol. XXIV, No. 138.

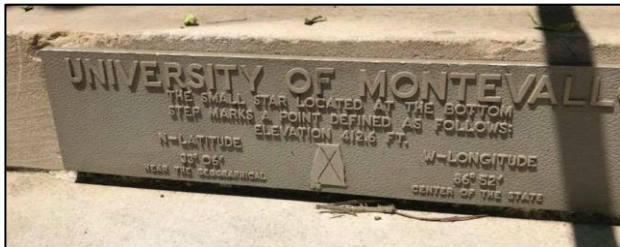
USGS Early Calculations, ca 1923

The U. S. Geological Survey (USGS) first produced a list around 1923. These centers were determined by suspending a cardboard cutout of the state by a string, then drawing a vertical line from the suspension point. The cutout was then rotated 90 degrees and another vertical line was drawn. The intersection point of the two lines was used as the geographic center. This is an approximation of the center of gravity. Again, however, the result is dependent upon the “projection” (from the spherical) used to create the cutout. This 1923 publication listed the center as “12 miles southwest of Clanton.”

From various articles, it seems the center was thought to be in southern Shelby County, in or near Montevallo. There is a marker on the campus of the University of Montevallo and there is also a marker in the Reynolds Cemetery on Hwy 25 between Montevallo and Calera dating before (or around) the 1953 Submerged Lands Act. It is uncertain how these locations were derived.



Southern Shelby Co, circles indicate markers at U of M Main Hall and Reynolds Cemetery.



U of M Main Hall steps (left),



Reynolds Cemetery marker (right).

However, this view was not unanimous. The editor of Clanton's Union-Banner in the 1930s was convinced that the center of Alabama was around Lomax. He writes that this came from his almanac and said "2 miles northwest of Clanton."

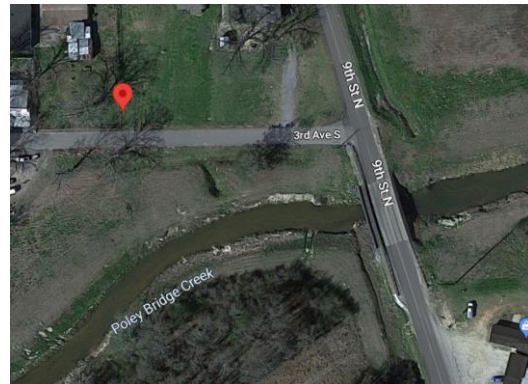
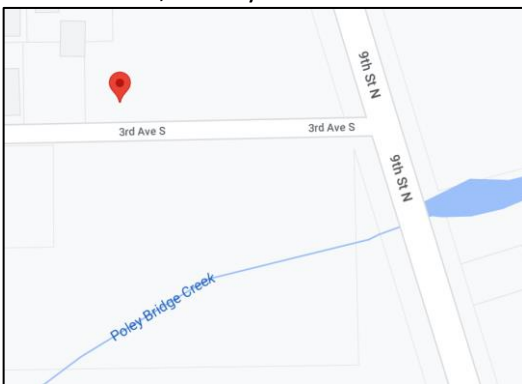
Submerged Lands Act, 1953

In 1953 the U. S. Congress passed the Submerged Lands Act. This Act transferred ownership of 3 miles of offshore area along the coast to the respective states. When these additional miles of property were added to the state of Alabama it skewed the center towards the south.

List with GPS?

At some point it seems the USGS published GPS coordinates of their list of centers. This listed the center of Alabama as in Chilton County, in Clanton.

GPS Coordinates: 32° 50' 5" North by 86° 38' 0" West: Latitude 32.83489, Longitude 86.633376. This is in Clanton, a few yards to the west of Enterprise road on the north side of 3rd Avenue South.

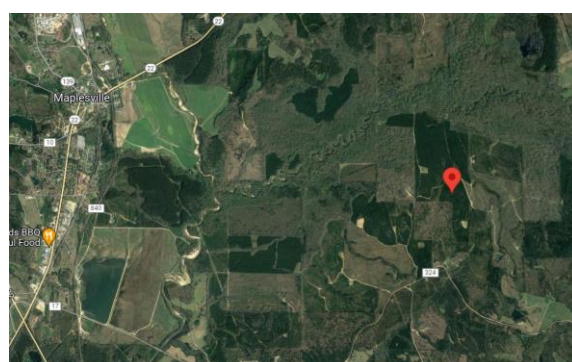
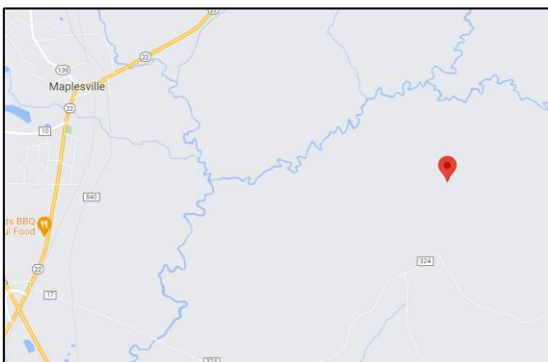


Geographic center of Alabama from original 1920 publications, in southwest Clanton.

Other Calculations

Using a more modern method calculating the "center of gravity," a newer list has been made. In that list the center of Alabama is also in Chilton County, but, like the 1923 original list, it is listed as "12 miles southwest of Clanton," specifically at

GPS Coordinates: 32° 46' 45.8" North, 86° 49' 43.3" West: Latitude 32.7794, -86.8287. This is literally in the middle of timberlands.



Geographic center of Alabama using more modern "center of gravity" calculations, near Maplesville.

As a result of all of these issues and the number of questions the USGS was getting on them, they removed the coordinate information from their publication sometime before the year 2007.

City of Clanton – Center of Alabama Monument

On July 6, 2023 the City of Clanton placed a marker in Corner Park across from the Courthouse noting that Clanton was near the geographic center of the State. They engraved the later GP location above on the marker: 32.7794, -86.8287.



City of Clanton “Center of Alabama” monument, placed July 6, 2023.

References

Boundaries, areas, geographic centers and altitudes of the United States and the several States with a brief record of important changes in their territory
Bulletin 689, USGS
By Edward M. Douglas

