

From Halifax to Athens to Baltimore—All in One Day and One State



Sandy Levesque celebrates at reaching the 251st town: Baltimore. (Photo by Stephen Morris)

By Stephen Morris

This is a story that deserves background music.

As we turned off Vermont Route 10 onto the dirt road heading towards Baltimore, Vermont, our excitement was palpable. Despite the sizable snowbanks lining the highway, there was a bright sun offering promise of spring. Rivulets of snowmelt were on either side of the roadway. The winter had been long, hard, and cold but now there was a hopeful glimmer of spring.

A half mile up the hill towards the town, however, and we were back in the purgatory of Mud Season, that curious time between winter and spring when the entire state turns to goo. A half mile further still, and we were now firmly back in winter's grasp. We came to a crossroads and a sign "Baltimore Rd." We stopped to take a picture.

"I think we're there," I said.

You can't always be sure of these things. Just a day earlier, while en route from Halifax (Vermont) to Athens (Vermont, pronounced "Ay-thens," by the way) our GPS told us we had reached our destination of Dummerston Center, although the only verification could be provided from some nearby cows, none of whom were offering any help.

Then, we turned the corner and

Harbor, and no Orioles.

"Doesn't seem big enough to host a Town Meeting," commented my wife and traveling companion, Sandy. She's a city girl, accustomed to big metropolises like Bethel, Vermont, where we live. According to the 2010 census, the total population of Baltimore is only 244 people.

There was nothing in the surrounding countryside to reflect our exultant mood. No brass bands, no mayor to present us with the keys, just snow, trees, and hills, in a word, Vermont. We could easily have leaned on our horn without disturbing anybody. The lack of fanfare, however, did nothing to dampen our sense of triumph. Maybe this wasn't Dr. Livingston discovering the headwaters of the Nile, but heck Livingston never made it to all of Vermont's 251 towns.

Names Explained

Little known fact ... the name "Baltimore" comes from Irish: Baile an Tí Mhóir, meaning "town of the big house." That's the kind of factoid that comes from Esther Munroe Swift's "Vermont Place Names: Footprints of History" (1977), our other traveling companion for this final leg of the journey.

It is not required reading. In fact there are no requirements of the 251 Club. You get to make your own rules. We just found that Ms. Swift always had something of relevance for each of the places we visited.

Rather than being named for its Gaelic translation, however, the name "Baltimore" more likely came from Cecil Calvert, the second Baron of Baltimore, the namesake of the town in Maryland that has the good crabcakes. We'd had a similar experience the previous day when we were tracking down Halifax, named after Lord Halifax, a tiny town down by the Massachusetts border. It's not far from Green River, if that helps.

You CAN Get There

In Halifax we could find no signage to direct us to the town center, but we finally happened upon a gaggle of road crew workers. Relieved at such good fortune we asked which direction to take to Halifax. "Either" came the answer, then he clarified, "Both ways take you to Halifax." Responding to our involuntary double-take, the road worker added, speaking slowly and more loudly, as if addressing a child or someone unfamiliar with the English language, "It depends where in Halifax you want to go."

There's more than one place to go in Halifax? As we drove off, scratching our heads at the apparent incongruity of road heading in opposite directions leading to the same place, we realized that we had been given the polar opposite response of the classic punchline of Vermont humor, "You can't get there from here." This time we couldn't get anywhere else but Halifax from here.

Our 251 quest had languished for a while, until last fall when, on an epic weekend trip to the Northeast Kingdom, we knocked off a whopping 36 towns from our list. This included the crown jewel of the 251 Club, the uninhabited, unorganized town of Lewis. The place is reachable via a series of dirt roads, marginally maintained, that lead through miles of nothingness, until you reach a little more nothingness. That's how you know you're in Lewis. There's a pond, a small dock, and little else, certainly not signs for town meetings. Baltimore, by comparison to Lewis, is Paris, London, and Manhattan rolled into one.

Final Push

This reduced our unvisited towns to a Baker's Dozen. The end was

nigh. A ratiage trip netted us Belvidere, population 294 in Lamoille County. The remaining towns were in the southern part of the state. We decided to hit them all on a single trip over Washington's Birthday. Windham, Jamaica, Dover, Townshend ... each one fell to our relentless pursuit. Even the uninhabited town of Somerset was checked off the list. Then there were three, then Halifax fell, and Athens, then only Baltimore.

We hadn't discovered the Northwest passage or climbed Mount Everest, but we sure felt as if we had accomplished something. You hardly need an excuse to explore the backroads of Vermont, but if you are looking for one—or maybe 251—here it is.

(Full disclosure. My wife, Sandy Levesque, is also the executive director of the 251 Club of Vermont. For information on membership visit VT251.com.)

Test Your Vermont Place Names IQ

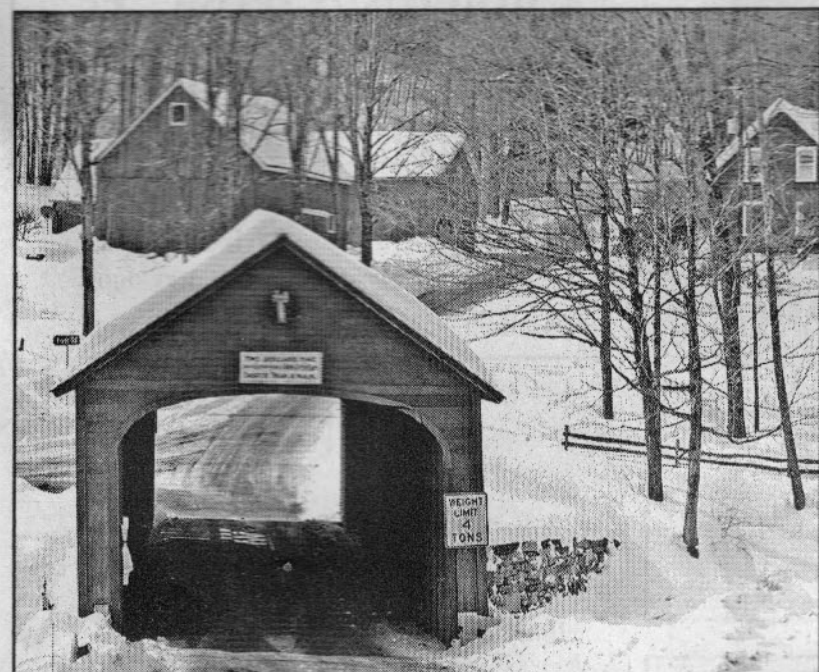
Contributed by David Palmer

1. What six Vermont towns take their names from the Old Testament?
 2. What seven Vermont towns have the same name as a state capital?
 3. What eight Vermont towns/villages have names similar to a U.S. President?
 4. No towns in Vermont are named for Ethan Allen. What two towns are named for his brother?
 5. What three towns in Vermont have the same name as a Vermont county, but are not located in that county?
 6. In the Green Mountain State, what are the only four towns that have a derivation of "mountain" in their name?
 7. What two Vermont towns have the same name as cigarettes?
 8. What three Vermont towns/villages have the same name as a foreign capital?
 9. What three towns have the same name as a foreign country?
- (Find the answers at bottom)

saw it, a simple, white, clapboarded structure with a community bulletin board and an announcement of the upcoming Town Meeting.

"Baltimore Town Hall." We cheered. It may have been the first time anyone ever cheered upon reaching this isolated building. For us, however, it marked the completion of a quest several years in the making. We had now visited all 251 towns in the state of Vermont.

While the final leg was an uneventful 10-minute drive on a dirt road, our full journey was a cornucopia of the Vermont experiences, encompassing an entire spectrum of seasons, road conditions, personalities, local food experiences, and memories. The Baltimore we visited offered no crabcakes or steamed crabs, no Camden Yards, no Inner



A covered bridge in the village of Green River admonishes to cross no "faster than a walk." (Photo by Sandy Levesque)

Quiz Answers: 1. Goshen, Sharon, Bethel, Jericho, Eden, Canaan 2. Dover, Wilmington, Albany, Concord, Hartford, Richmond, Lincoln 3. Johnson, Lyndon, Garfield, Washington, Lincoln, Jacksonville, Taftsville, Jeffersonville 4. Ira, Irasburg 5. Washington, Chittenden, Essex 6. Mount Tabor, Mount Holly, Montpelier, East Montpelier 7. Marlboro, Newport 8. Athens, Berlin, Moscow 9. Jamaica, Peru, Holland