

HISTORY

South County isn't an official Rhode Island county. So why does everyone call it that?



[Katie Landeck](#)

Providence Journal

Published 5:23 a.m. ET March 11, 2024 | Updated 5:23 a.m. ET March 11, 2024

It reads like a riddle: I'm in a county in Rhode Island, but you can't find it on a map. Where am I?

The answer: South County.

It's not a very hard riddle if you've spent any time in Rhode Island at all. It may not be one of the state's official five counties, but the idea of South County is everywhere. There's South County Health, South County Tourism Council, South County History Center, etc.

But it is a curious one. And one What and Why reader wrote in asking why we all call southern Rhode Island "South County." Here's what we found out.

Where is South County, RI?

Since it's not actually a geographic designation, the boundary can be a little nebulous. It roughly follows the lines of Washington County, but sometimes a little extra is thrown in.

The South County Tourism Council Creative defines it as Charlestown, Coventry, East Greenwich, Exeter, Hopkinton, Narragansett, North Kingstown, Richmond, South Kingstown, West Greenwich and Westerly, according to creative director Faye Pantazopoulos. They used to include New Shoreham, but now that's thought of as its own separate entity, at least for tourism.

Their definition is a little broad compared with others out there. The South County History Center narrowed it further to Charlestown, Exeter, Hopkinton, Narragansett, New Shoreham, North Kingstown, Richmond, South Kingstown and Westerly.

And then there are those who believe that you just can't draw it on a map. In the book "Simply South County," Betty Cotter wrote that South County is not a place but a state of mind, saying: "South County cannot be measured by metes, bounds or government edict."

Why is it called South County?

The South County History Center has done a deep dive on this and found the earliest usage of the name South County was in 1767, in written testimony of Levi Whipple that read, in part: "He was the man that caused the tax to be taken off from the South County, and put upon Providence County."

The date is important – this is two years after the Stamp Act and the same year the Townshend Acts started to be passed, so rebellion was in the air – as is the bit of historical trivia that Washington County was, at the time, called Kings County.

What and Why RI: What's the history of Warwick's Salter Memorial Grove? Here's what we found out.

"Our hypothesis is that the name 'Kings County,' the original name for today's Washington County, was falling out of favor with Colonists in Rhode Island, which likely only increased with the start of the Revolutionary War," said Erica Luke, the executive director of the South County History Center.

After the war, in 1781, the county was renamed to honor George Washington. But, the fact that we still call it South County is a clear indicator the new name didn't quite stick.

"It seems that the new name never fully caught on, perhaps in part due to Rhode Island's dislike of growing federal power following the war," Luke said, noting that Rhode Island was the last of the original Colonies to ratify the U.S. Constitution. "By the mid-19th century, 'South County' was a commonly used phrase, and in some cases, there are direct references to the name being used in place of Kings County."

In the old archives of The Providence Journal, which go back to 1829, the region is regularly referred to as South County, an indication of the pervasiveness of the name.

As to why so many Rhode Islanders continue to call the area South County, it's likely partly habit and partly that it's a little catchier than Washington County. Take the origin

story of the South County Tourism Council, which was formed in the 1980s, as an example.

What and Why RI: How did Rhode Island get its border? It's a story with hundreds of years of bickering

The feud with Washington long forgotten, when the South County Tourism Council was started, they were covering an area that went beyond Washington County – anything south of Division Street along the East Greenwich-Warwick border – and wanted a name that would unify the southernmost part of the state, Pantazopoulos said. Plus, they needed something clear and easy to remember.

“Our job is to market and promote the region outside of the state, so you can see, the name of the region should describe the area but also be easy to remember,” she said.

And while there's no way to definitely prove this, it's possible the same reasons that made it work for tourism purposes have something to do with why Rhode Islanders never gave the nickname up.

What and Why RI is a weekly feature by The Providence Journal to explore our readers' curiosity. If you have a question about Rhode Island, big or small, email it to klandeck@gannett.com. She loves a good question.