

Circles on the map, Circle Towns or Round Towns

<http://blog.ncmaps.org/circle-towns/>

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Circle Towns: One of my childhood map memories is the distinctively circular shape of Shelby, NC, on the state's official highway map:



Shelby on 1970 NC Highway map, courtesy of North Carolina State Archives

Shelby was not an anomaly; there were quite a few North Carolina towns whose limits were originally prescribed by a perfect circle. Shelby just happened to be the only one large enough to be depicted as such and that still retained its circular shape at that time (at least on the state highway map). An excellent source for locating North Carolina “circle towns” is the series of highway maintenance maps of individual counties, such as the 1962 series [available](#)

[here](#). Below is a close-up from the Cleveland County map of 1968; it reveals that Shelby had already developed a “growth” on its southwest limits. Nearby are the perfect circles of Lattimore (top left) and Boiling Springs (bottom left).



Circle towns in Cleveland County, NC, on 1968 county highway maintenance map; courtesy of North Carolina State Archives

The original boundaries of towns are described in various volumes of the proceedings of the state’s General Assembly. For circle towns, the description provides a central point and a radius of a given distance from that point. The central point could be a courthouse, a train depot, the local high school, a railroad bridge, or “a certain white oak on the east side of the public road, near a well at the stores of Rogers Brothers and Cowing Brothers.”¹ In 1889, founders of the town of Clyde made a knot in the door of the train depot the center point for their circular town.² Clyde is still a [mostly circular](#) town.

Did you know that circle towns are just as Southern as grits? In his 1963 article, *Round Towns*, Howard Schretter identified 620 circularly incorporated towns in the United States. Their distribution was as follows:

Distribution of Circular Places By States, 1957

<i>State</i>	<i>Circular Incorporations</i>
Maryland	1
Virginia	5
North Carolina	62
South Carolina	124
Georgia	379
Alabama	37
Mississippi	2
Kentucky	6
Texas	4

Distribution of circular towns, from “Round Towns” by Howard A. Schretter, in Southeastern Geographer, Volume 3, 1963, pp. 46–52

From a query of some of these circle towns, Schretter identified three reasons a circle was chosen: *complete directional impartiality, explicit verbal clarity, and extreme ease in establishment*. As far as ease of establishment, that obviously referred only to writing a description of the town limits. Schretter noted, *a community anticipating field survey of its boundaries probably would not propose circular limits. It takes little engineering know-how to realize that the ever changing direction of a circular limit defies effective field location, since even the establishment of periodic monuments would not fix the location of the boundary at all points.*³ That reminds me of the Louise Goffin song lyrics, “Sometimes a circle feels like a direction.”

Circle towns have caught the attention of other bloggers; so I’ll stop trying to re-invent the circle that rotates on an axle. Instead, check out these excellent sources of information:

[Enigma, Georgia: Mystery of the South’s Circular Towns](#), by Frank Jacobs.

[Circle Cities](#), by Sarah Michael Levine.

REFERENCES

1. “Round Towns”, by David A. Norris, in the *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*, edited by William Powell, available at this URL: <http://www.ncpedia.org/round-towns>
2. <http://visitncsmokies.com/2017/03/move-norman-rockwell-meet-n-c-smokies>
3. Howard Schretter’s article is available on line at this URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/563106/pdf>