

Upstate and Downstate in New York

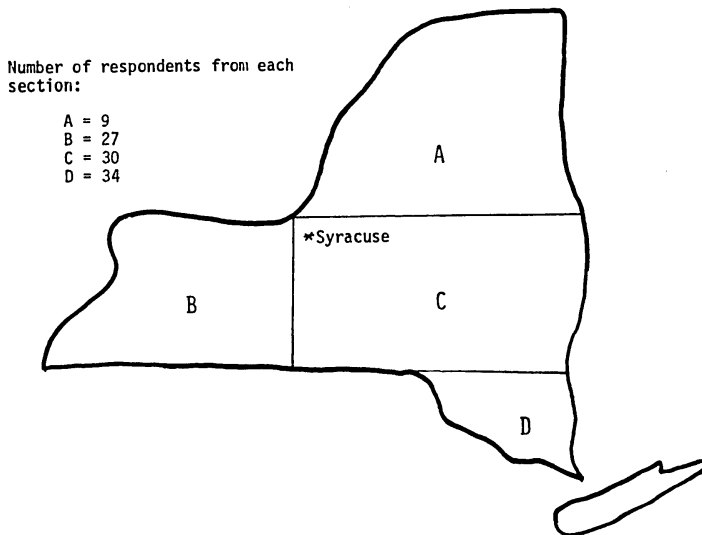
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One of the most puzzling terminologies for persons living outside of New York State (hereafter NYS) is the distinction between Upstate and Downstate New York. Most current dictionaries follow Mathews' *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1966) in defining *upstate* as "a region in a state that is away from, and usu[ally] north of, some large city. Used esp[ecially] in the state of New York." Certainly a natural assumption would be that "some large city" here means New York City, as it seems to in the 1949 quotation from the *Southern Weekly*, "This is the figure with complete returns from Greater New York and 19 up-State districts missing" (Mathews 1966: *upstate*). But Mencken (1963: 299–300) says that "*Upstate* designating New York State north and west of *Albany* is recorded from 1901, but is probably older" (emphasis mine). Mathews does not list *downstate*, but *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1978) defines it vaguely as "that part of a State farther to the south." A survey of 151 college students from all over NYS reveals, however, that many more interpretations of Upstate and Downstate are in current use and that the definition for each depends strongly on the speaker's home locality.

Almost all of the students in this study were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two (two were twenty-three and two were thirty), and each had lived in a single county in NYS since at least his/her eighth birthday. Since the students were all attending college in Syracuse, NY, a large number of them, fifty-one, were from Syracuse's Onondaga County. The rest represented all sections of the state, which for purposes of exposition will be divided as indicated on Map 1. Nine students came from the northernmost section, A; twenty-seven from the westernmost section, B; thirty from the eastern yet middle section C; and thirty-four from the southernmost section, D.

Each student was given a blank map of NYS and asked to draw the dividing line between Upstate and Downstate. If they were not content with letting all of the state be subsumed under one or another of these headings, they were to indicate this also on the map and label the extra area(s).

Map 1: Home Localities of Respondents



As Table 1 shows, of the 151 students, only 108 (72%) were content with dividing New York into only Upstate and Downstate. A total of 30 students (20%) divided it into three sections, and 13 students (9%) divided it into four sections, with Central New York the most common extra section (39 students, or 26% of the 151) and Western New York the next most common section (7 students, or 5% of the 151). The Southern Tier (2 students) and the North Country (1 student) were also mentioned, and two students identified areas for which they had no names, labeling them as “fringe area” and “?”.

Table 1: Number of divisions by home locality

Home locality	Number of divisions			Totals
	2	3	4	
Onandaga Co.	39	10	2	51
A	4	5	0	9
B	17	6	4	27
C	17	8	5	30
D	31	1	2	34
Totals	108 = 72%	30 = 20%	13 = 9%	151

From this table, it can also be seen that New Yorkers from the southern-most section of the state (section D) were the least likely to think in terms of sections other than Upstate and Downstate. Only 9% (or 3 of 34) of this group divided NYS into three or more areas, as compared with 24% of Onondaga's representatives, 56% of section A's, 37% of section B's, and 43% of section C's.

I. CENTRAL NEW YORK

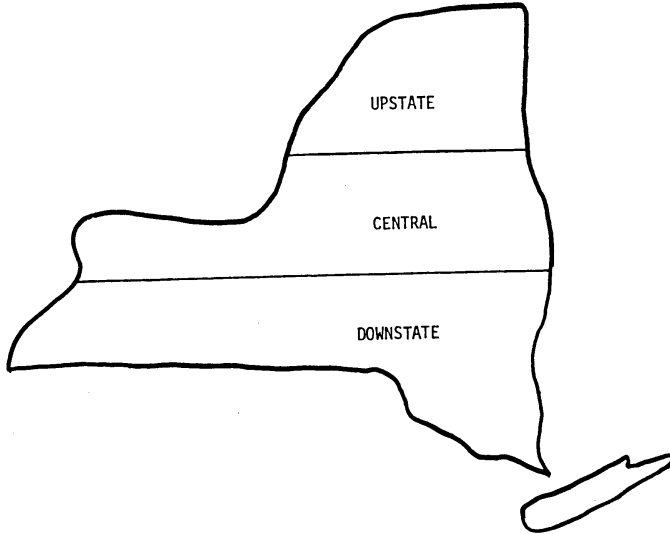
Of the 30 students who divided NYS into three areas, 28 identified Central New York as the only area occupying NYS besides Upstate and Downstate. (Two named Western NY as the third area.) The great majority of these 28 (21 or 75%) saw Central NY as stretching from the western boundary of the state to the eastern boundary, but with varying North/South limits. The northern and southern extremes of this area are shown in Map 2.

Map 2: North/South Extremes of Central New York



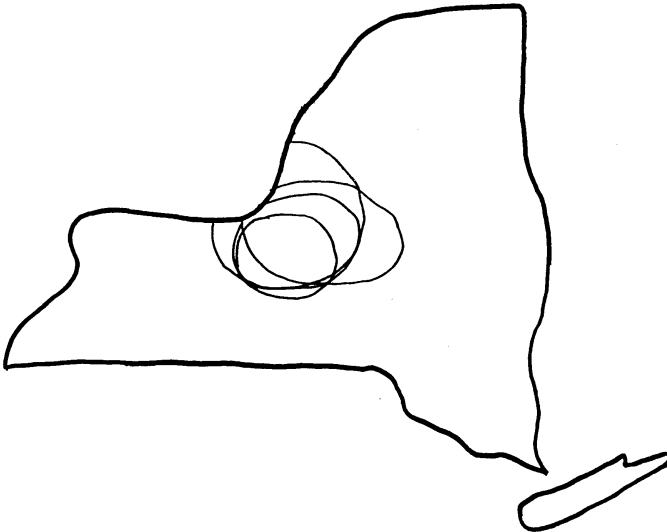
The most common map of this type drawn (9 students — 5 from Onondaga Co., 2 from section A, and 1 each from sections B and C) is Map 3.

Map 3: Most Common Map of Central New York



Another pattern that five of the twenty-eight students gave for Central New York was a circular area encompassing Syracuse. Four of the five students were from this area (Onondaga and Oswego Counties), but one was from St. Lawrence County in Northern New York. Map 4 displays all the variations.

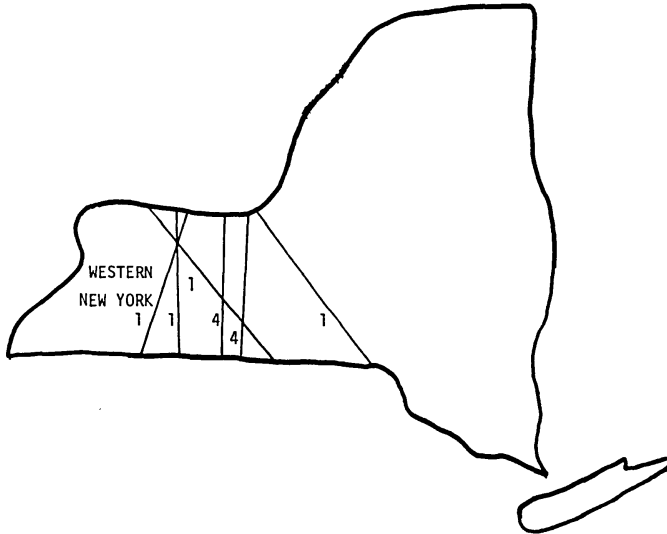
Map 4: Circular Drawings of Central New York



II. WESTERN NEW YORK

Western New York was recognized as a separate area by 12 students, all but one of whom came from sections B (4) and C (6), including Onondaga County (1). There was considerable agreement on the placement of the boundary for Western New York, as Map 5 indicates. The number of respondents represented is given to the left of each line.

Map 5: Western New York



Not surprisingly, the students from sections B (4 of 27, or 15%) and C (6 of 30, or 20%) were more disposed toward identifying a separate Western region than were students from sections A (0) and D (1 of 34, or 3%). What is surprising is that, given the high percentage of students from section C who recognized Western New York, only one student (of 51, or 2%) from Onondaga County did so.

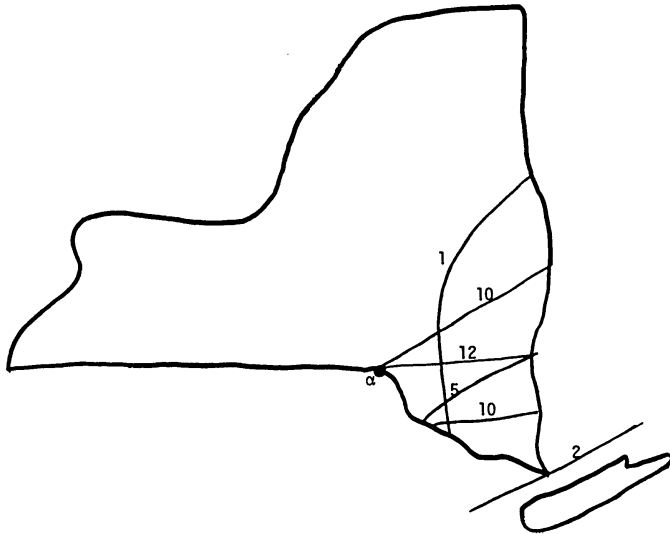
III. UPSTATE/DOWNSTATE

As mentioned above, of the total 151 subjects, 108 (72%) divided the state into only two sections, Upstate and Downstate. From the responses of these 108, 21 distinct mappings were discernable. For that reason, the maps will be divided into more manageable groups based on the western point of the Upstate/Downstate boundary.

The first group includes those mappings which declared the northernmost boundary of Downstate New York to extend from α or below on

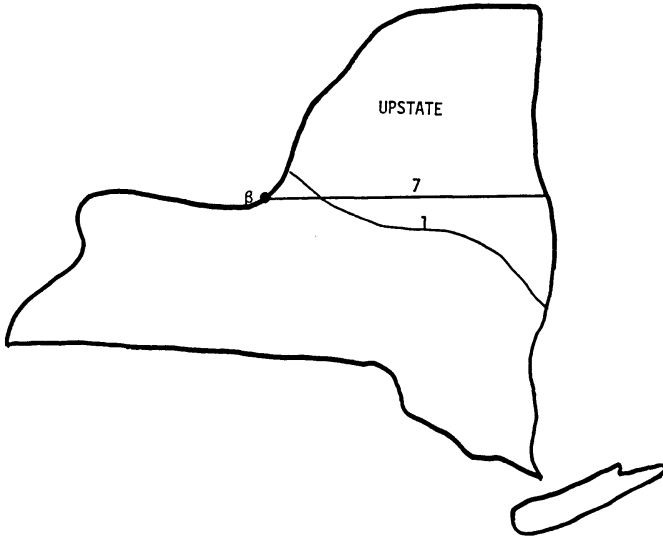
Map 6. The various boundary lines this includes are given, with the number of respondents who drew that line written above each. As a simple tally reveals, 40 (or 37% of 108) chose one of these designations as Downstate. The majority of these 40 (22 or 55%) were from the area in question, that is, from section D. None of them came from the northernmost section, A. It is also noteworthy that of all the respondents from section D, now including those who divided the state into three or more sections, 74% (25 of 34) identified Downstate New York as below one of these lines, as compared with none from section A, 33% from B (9 of 27), 37% from C (11 of 30), and 18% from Onondaga County (9 of 51).

Map 6: Downstate as Below α



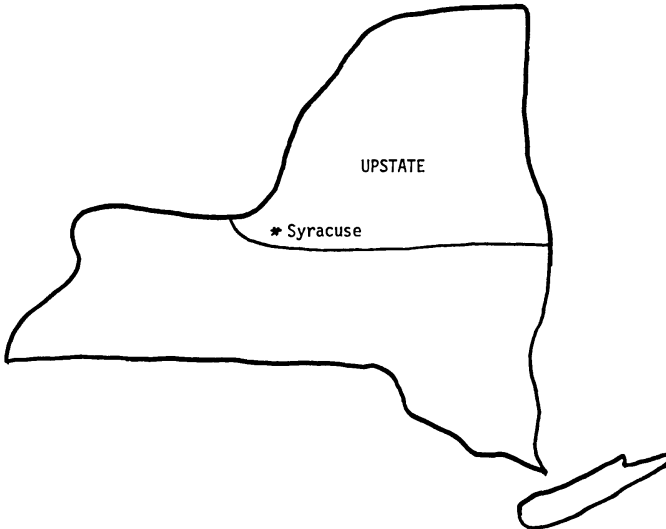
The second group of mappings include those which identified Upstate New York as above a line whose Western point is at β on Map 7. The various boundary lines this includes are also given, with the number of students who drew that line written above each. Of these eight respondents, three were from the section in question, actually a large number considering that they were the least represented section of the state, with only nine respondents altogether. In fact, if we include all the responses from section A students (that is, including as well those who divided the state into three or more sections), we find that 7 of the 9 (or 78%) identified Upstate New York as above this line.

Map 7: Upstate as Above β



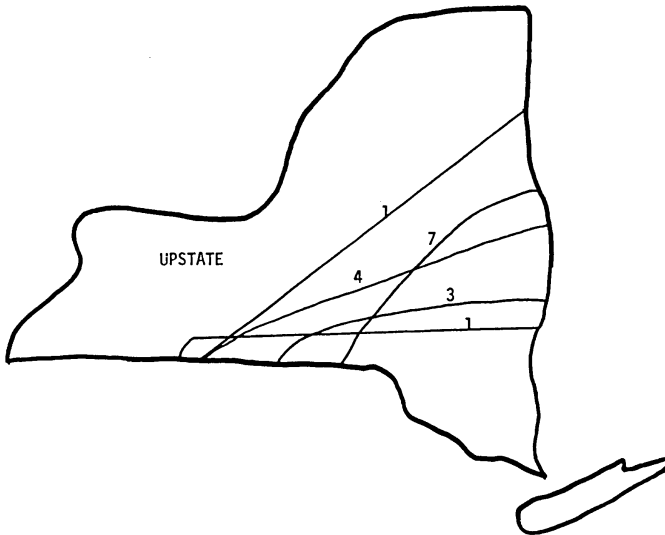
A similar map (Map 8), but with a southern boundary for Upstate New York that is slightly lower so that it encompasses Syracuse, NY, is interesting because it was drawn by 8 students, 7 of whom were from Syracuse's Onondaga County. The eighth student was from section A.

Map 8: Upstate as Including Syracuse



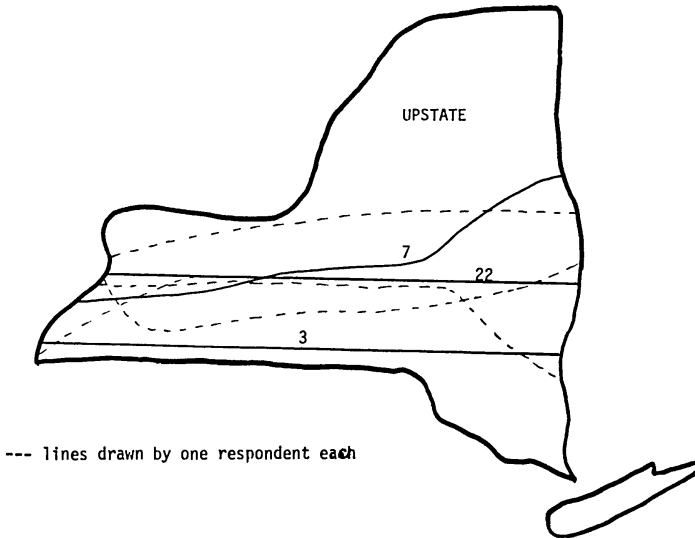
The remaining maps fell into two groups: those whose western border touched on the southern boundary of the state and those whose western border touched on the western boundary of the state. Those maps included in the former group are traced below on Map 9. The majority of these (63%, or 10 of 16) were drawn by students from Onondaga County. None came from section A, only one each from sections B and C, and four from section D (or 13% of the 31 section-D respondents who distinguished only between Upstate and Downstate).

Map 9: Upstate as Above Southern Boundary



The maps whose westernmost boundary also touched the western boundary of the state are traced below in Map 10. By far the most popular of these divisions (22 of 36) was a straight east-west line dividing the state in half. This map alone was given by 28% (11 of 39) of the students from Onondaga County, 29% (5 of 17) of those from section B, and 24% (4 of 17) of those from section C — proving its wide appeal in those areas as compared to section A (0%) and section D (6%).

Map 10: Upstate as Above Western Boundary



IV. CONCLUSION

The main finding of this study has been that the terms *Upstate* and *Downstate* in New York have not yet stabilized to denote any particular sections of New York, beyond *Upstate* including at the least the very northernmost section of the state and *Downstate* including at the least the very southernmost section. Residents of NYS still use the terms in a primarily descriptive way; that is, people from the most southerly section consider themselves as *Downstate* while everything “up” from them is *Upstate*, and those from the most northerly section consider themselves *Upstate* and everything “down” from them is *Downstate*. Residents of the middle section of the state predictably tend to divide the state approximately in half.

This pattern of usage tells us something about the nature of such names. As Stewart (1954: 1) suggests, “all naming of places stems from one basic motive, that is, the desire to identify a place and thus distinguish it from others.” Most place naming involves a place with clearly delineated natural or political boundaries; then a name becomes attached to that place. In the case of *Upstate* (which is apparently an earlier term than

Downstate), the coiner of the term no doubt had a specific land mass in mind. But current learners of the language first hear the terms Upstate and Downstate and then try to assign some geographical location to them. The descriptive nature of the terms forms the basis for these speakers' formulation of their own definitions.

One suspects that eventually one definition will win out over the others, just as, for instance, Englishmen have accepted the name North Sea for a body of water that in actuality lies to Great Britain's east. Meanwhile, however, New Yorkers disagree considerably over the denotation of Upstate and Downstate, with the result being that some New Yorkers must no doubt get the occasional impression that their neighbors do not know up from down.

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