Imagine if you could balance on your finger an imaginary, flat and weightless map of the 50 states and the District of Columbia with each resident placed where they reside and all weighing the same. The balance point would be the mean center of population.

In 1790, the first such center was near Chestertown in Kent County, Md., across the Chesapeake Bay from Baltimore.

Now, 22 censuses later, the center has migrated 873 miles west and a little south to rest near the village of Plato, population 109, in Texas County, Mo.

The center may never make it all the way to the state of Texas, but it has been headed that direction for decades. With each decade, the center shifts west and slightly north or south. The shift from 2000 to 2010 was comparatively short – only 23 miles – but it was the most southerly ever – bearing 238 degrees (270 degrees is due west).

The 2010 center of population was announced on March 24 by Director Bob Groves at the National Press Club in Washington. He explained how the center has moved over the decades.

“The distance between the centers, decade by decade, varies depending on how the population changed,” Groves said. “These reflect the addition of territories … but also, the movement of people.”

The longest shift was 80 miles during the 1850s. The shortest shift was 10 miles during the 1910s.
“It’s a good reminder that the center can also be affected by eastward pulls,” Groves said. “That was the decade that saw large increases of immigrant populations going into the Northeast and the Midwest.”

Census geographer Michael Ratcliffe said the westerly shift was largely due to increased populations in Oregon, Utah, New Mexico, and especially California.

“Migration along the Oregon trail, Mormon migrants to Utah and the California Gold Rush – all of these demographic events began in the 1840s and continued into the 1850s, helping to pull the center of population farther westward than in previous decades,” Ratcliffe said. “The most northerly shift occurred with the aftermath of the Civil War. Cities in the Northeast and Midwest experienced substantial population increases – New York was nearing 1 million residents, and Chicago grew by 166 percent. The Great Lakes states grew in population and settlement was beginning to increase in the Great Plains – Kansas tripled its population between 1860 and 1870.”

Despite six decades of northerly shift from 1830 to 1920, there have been 16 decades of southerly shift, including all nine decades from 1920 to 2010. Air conditioning has certainly made the south more livable. And while the trend is southerly, the distance of shift is getting
shorter. During the first 10 decades, the average shift was more than 50 miles per decade. Since 1890, the distance has shortened to less than 31 miles per decade.

After every decennial, the Census Bureau has calculated the mean center of population and issued the exact coordinates in latitude and longitude. The earliest known survey marker – or mark – to be placed on the earth at or near a U.S. center of population was for the 1910 Census. The mark is on the courthouse lawn in Bloomington, Ind.

Since 1960, the National Geodetic Survey (NGS) has “monumented” the centers with marks. NGS Project Manager Dave Doyle was involved in setting and positioning the 1980, 1990 and 2000 marks. He is leading the effort to mark the 2010 center.

“This will be the first mark to be set in stone, a beautiful block of Missouri red granite,” Doyle said. “We hope everyone will visit these marks. They’re fun to find, and each one tells a unique story about our nation’s history.”