

how the states got their shapes

How the States Got Their Shapes: A Journey Through Borders and History

how the states got their shapes is a fascinating question that takes us deep into the history, geography, politics, and sometimes even the quirks of cartographers and surveyors. Each state in the U.S. has its own unique outline, often shaped by rivers, mountains, historical treaties, and human negotiation. Understanding why states look the way they do offers a window into the complex tapestry of American history and the practical challenges faced by those who originally defined these borders.

The Roots of State Boundaries: Geography and Natural Landmarks

Before modern technology, natural features were the most obvious and practical way to delineate borders. Rivers, mountain ranges, lakes, and coastlines served as natural boundaries that were easy to recognize and hard to dispute.

Rivers as Dividing Lines

Many state lines follow major rivers. For example, the Mississippi River defines large portions of several state borders, including between Arkansas and Mississippi or Missouri and Illinois. Rivers were essential for transportation and trade, so they made sense as boundaries. However, rivers can change course over time, leading to some curious border disputes and irregular shapes.

Mountains and Lakes Defining Borders

Mountain ranges like the Rockies or the Appalachians also influenced state lines. These natural barriers were significant in early settlement patterns and often marked where one territory ended, and another began. Similarly, the Great Lakes form part of the boundary for states like Michigan and Ohio, shaping their contours in ways no human hand could have easily replicated.

Political Negotiations and Historical Treaties

Geography wasn't the only factor in shaping states. Political decisions, treaties, and compromises between competing powers played a huge role in carving out the map of the United States.

Colonial Charters and Early Claims

Many of the original 13 colonies received charters from the British Crown, which sometimes described borders in vague terms like “from river X to river Y” or “extending 100 miles inland.” These ambiguous descriptions led to overlapping claims and border disputes that had to be resolved through negotiation or conflict. For example, the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland was eventually defined by the famous Mason-Dixon Line, a compromise that settled a long-standing dispute.

The Role of Land Purchases and Treaties

As the U.S. expanded westward, land purchases such as the Louisiana Purchase and treaties with Native American tribes or foreign powers influenced state boundaries. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 nearly doubled the size of the country, and the subsequent organization of this vast territory into states required drawing new borders. Some boundaries were drawn along lines of latitude and longitude simply for convenience, rather than natural features.

Surveying Challenges and the Influence of Technology

The actual process of mapping and surveying the land was difficult and prone to errors, which sometimes resulted in oddly shaped states or border anomalies.

Surveying in the 18th and 19th Centuries

Early surveyors relied on rudimentary tools and often worked in harsh, unfamiliar terrain. Mistakes in measurement could cause borders to be placed incorrectly by miles. For instance, the border between Colorado and Utah is a straight north-south line, but due to surveying errors, some towns are technically in the wrong state! These errors have led to minor disputes and even some humorous jurisdictional quirks.

Rectangular States and the Public Land Survey System

Many states, especially in the Midwest and West, have straight-line borders because they were divided using the Public Land Survey System (PLSS). This system divided land into townships and ranges based on latitude and longitude, resulting in the grid-like patterns seen in states such as Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming. This approach was practical for selling and settling land but led to very geometric state shapes, in contrast to the more natural boundaries of the original colonies.

Interesting Cases: Why Some States Have Unique Shapes

While many state borders are straightforward, some stand out for their unusual shapes or fascinating backstories.

Why is Maryland So Weirdly Shaped?

Maryland's shape is famously irregular, with a panhandle reaching westward and a narrow extension toward the east. This odd shape results from colonial charters, wars with neighboring colonies, and agreements like the Mason-Dixon Line. The Chesapeake Bay also plays a crucial role in carving Maryland's coastline, giving it a jagged and distinctive outline.

Why Does Oklahoma Have That 'Panhandle'?

Oklahoma's panhandle exists because of laws in the 19th century that prohibited slavery in certain territories. The area that became the Oklahoma Panhandle was left out of Texas (which allowed slavery) and not included in the territories that prohibited it. This political compromise created the thin strip of land jutting out from the northwest corner of the state.

The Case of Michigan's Upper Peninsula

Michigan's borders, including the Upper Peninsula, were heavily influenced by the outcome of the War of 1812 and subsequent treaties with Great Britain. The Upper Peninsula was originally considered part of Wisconsin's territory but was granted to Michigan as part of a compromise to settle a boundary dispute. This decision has resulted in Michigan having a distinctive two-part shape divided by water.

How Borders Affect Culture and Identity

The shape of a state is not just a cartographic curiosity; it shapes local identity, culture, and even economics. Borders influence where people trade, attend school, and interact socially.

Border Towns and Cross-State Connections

Communities near state lines often have a unique identity influenced by both states. For example, Kansas City straddles the border between Kansas and Missouri, blending cultures and economies. Sometimes, irregular borders mean that residents on one side of a street live in different states with different laws and taxes than their neighbors across the road.

Natural Borders Reinforcing Regional Identity

Regions separated by mountains or rivers often develop distinct cultural traits. The Appalachian Mountains, for instance, have helped shape a unique culture in states like West Virginia and eastern Tennessee, partly because their borders reflect these natural barriers.

Lessons From the Past: What State Shapes Teach Us

Exploring how states got their shapes reveals much about the nation's history of exploration, conflict, and compromise. It also highlights the importance of geography and technology in shaping political boundaries.

Why Understanding Borders Matters Today

Today, state boundaries impact everything from political representation to resource management. Knowing the history behind these lines can foster a deeper appreciation of regional differences and cooperation. For instance, water rights along shared rivers or environmental policies often depend on these long-established borders.

Tips for Exploring State Shapes

If you're curious about the states' shapes, consider:

- Visiting border regions to see how geography influences communities.
- Studying historical maps to see how borders have shifted over time.
- Exploring local histories to uncover stories behind border disputes and agreements.

In the end, the story of how the states got their shapes is a rich blend of natural forces, human decisions, and a bit of serendipity. Each boundary line tells a tale of negotiation, geography, and history, making the American map a living document of the nation's journey.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do some U.S. states have irregular borders compared to others?

Many U.S. states have irregular borders due to historical land claims, natural geographic features like rivers and mountains, and political compromises made during their formation.

How did natural features influence the shapes of U.S. states?

Natural features such as rivers, mountain ranges, and lakes often served as convenient and recognizable boundaries, shaping states like the Mississippi River forming borders for several states and the Appalachian Mountains influencing eastern state lines.

What role did colonial charters play in defining state borders?

Colonial charters granted by the British crown often included vague or overlapping land claims, which later led to disputes and adjustments that influenced the final shapes of states as territories were divided and organized.

How did the Louisiana Purchase affect state shapes?

The Louisiana Purchase added a vast territory to the U.S., which was later divided into multiple states with borders often drawn as straight lines based on latitude and longitude, resulting in many rectangular-shaped states in the Midwest.

Why are many western states shaped with straight lines and right angles?

Western states often have straight-line borders because they were created later using survey lines based on the Public Land Survey System, which divided land into rectangular parcels for easier management and sale.

Did political compromises influence the shapes of states?

Yes, political compromises such as the Missouri Compromise and agreements during state admissions often influenced borders to balance power between free and slave states or to resolve territorial disputes.

How did Native American territories impact the formation of state boundaries?

Native American territories and treaties with indigenous tribes influenced certain boundaries, as lands were acquired, ceded, or reserved, affecting where state lines were eventually drawn.

Additional Resources

How the States Got Their Shapes: An Analytical Exploration of America's Borders

how the states got their shapes is a question that delves into the complex tapestry of American history, geography, politics, and culture. The outlines of the 50 states that make up the United States today are not arbitrary; they are the products of centuries-long negotiations, natural landmarks, political compromises, and historical events. Understanding how the states acquired their distinctive borders provides insight into the country's formation and reflects the dynamic interplay of human decision-making and geographic realities.

The Historical Foundations of State Boundaries

The earliest American colonies were established by European powers with little regard for geographic or cultural coherence. British, Spanish, French, and Dutch colonial ambitions shaped initial territories, often relying on vague charters and ill-defined claims. As these colonies evolved into states, their borders began to take more concrete form, influenced by natural features such as rivers, mountain ranges, and lakes, as well as political treaties and land purchases.

One of the key factors in shaping states was the colonial charters granted by the Crown, which often described boundaries in terms of latitude and longitude or natural landmarks that were poorly understood at the time. This ambiguity led to frequent disputes between colonies—and later states—over overlapping claims. For example, the border disputes between Virginia and Maryland were eventually settled by the Mason-Dixon Line, a famous demarcation that still influences state borders today.

Natural Features as Boundary Markers

Geography played a crucial role in how the states got their shapes. Rivers such as the Mississippi, Ohio, and Colorado acted as natural dividers, offering clear and defensible boundaries. Mountain ranges like the Appalachians and the Rockies also helped delineate borders by creating natural barriers that were difficult to cross.

The use of natural features provided practical advantages:

- **Clarity:** Natural landmarks were easy to identify and less prone to dispute.
- **Defense:** Mountains and rivers provided protection against invasions or encroachments.
- **Economic considerations:** Rivers often served as transportation routes, influencing settlement patterns.

However, reliance on natural features sometimes led to oddly shaped borders, such as the panhandle of Oklahoma or the jagged edges of West Virginia, which reflect the terrain's complexity and historical compromises.

Political Negotiations and Compromises

Beyond geography, the political landscape was instrumental in defining state boundaries. The process of statehood, especially during westward expansion, involved a series of negotiations between federal and territorial governments, influenced by economic interests, population density, and the balance of power.

The Role of the Northwest Ordinance and Land Ordinances

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established a system for admitting new states from territories north of the Ohio River. This legislation introduced a grid system for surveying and dividing land, resulting in the characteristic rectangular shapes of many Midwestern states such as Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

This approach had several implications:

- **Standardization:** The rectangular townships and range lines created orderly borders that facilitated land sales and governance.
- **Efficiency:** Clear boundaries simplified administration and reduced disputes.
- **Influence:** The grid system set a precedent for future territorial divisions.

While this method yielded neat state shapes, it sometimes ignored cultural or natural boundaries, leading to friction with indigenous populations and between neighboring states.

Compromises Over Slavery and Political Balance

Another significant influence on state boundaries was the political necessity to maintain a balance between free and slave states in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 are examples where

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how the states got their shapes: *How the States Got Their Shapes* Mark Stein, 2008-05-27

Why does Oklahoma have that panhandle? Did someone make a mistake? We are so familiar with the map of the United States that our state borders seem as much a part of nature as mountains and rivers. Even the oddities—the entire state of Maryland(!)—have become so engrained that our map might as well be a giant jigsaw puzzle designed by Divine Providence. But that's where the real mystery begins. Every edge of the familiar wooden jigsaw pieces of our childhood represents a revealing moment of history and of, well, humans drawing lines in the sand. *How the States Got Their Shapes* is the first book to tackle why our state lines are where they are. Here are the stories behind the stories, right down to the tiny northward jog at the eastern end of Tennessee and the teeny-tiny (and little known) parts of Delaware that are not attached to Delaware but to New Jersey. *How the States Got Their Shapes* examines: Why West Virginia has a finger creeping up the side of Pennsylvania Why Michigan has an upper peninsula that isn't attached to Michigan Why some Hawaiian islands are not Hawaii Why Texas and California are so outsized, especially when so many Midwestern states are nearly identical in size Packed with fun oddities and trivia, this entertaining guide also reveals the major fault lines of American history, from ideological intrigues and religious intolerance to major territorial acquisitions. Adding the fresh lens of local geographic disputes, military skirmishes, and land grabs, Mark Stein shows how the seemingly haphazard puzzle pieces of our nation fit together perfectly.

how the states got their shapes: *How the States Got Their Shapes* ,

how the states got their shapes: *How the States Got Their Shapes Too* Mark Stein, 2012-05-29 Was Roger Williams too pure for the Puritans, and what does that have to do with Rhode Island? Why did Augustine Herman take ten years to complete the map that established Delaware? How did Rocky Mountain rogues help create the state of Colorado? All this and more is explained in Mark Stein's new book. *How the States Got Their Shapes Too* follows *How the States Got Their Shapes* looks at American history through the lens of its borders, but, while *How the States Got Their Shapes* told us why, this book tells us who. This personal element in the boundary stories reveals how we today are like those who came before us, and how we differ, and most significantly: how their collective stories reveal not only an historical arc but, as importantly, the often overlooked human dimension in that arc that leads to the nation we are today. The people featured in *How the States Got Their Shapes Too* lived from the colonial era right up to the present. They include African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, women, and of course, white men. Some are famous, such as Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Daniel Webster. Some are not, such as Bernard Berry, Clarina Nichols, and Robert Steele. And some are names many of us know but don't really know exactly what they did, such as Ethan Allen (who never made furniture, though he burned a good deal of it). In addition, *How the States Got Their Shapes Too* tells of individuals involved in the Almost States of America, places we sought to include but ultimately did not: Canada, the rest of Mexico (we did get half), Cuba, and, still an issue, Puerto Rico. Each chapter is largely driven by voices from the time, in the form of excerpts from congressional debates, newspapers, magazines, personal letters, and diaries. Told in Mark Stein's humorous voice, *How the States Got Their Shapes Too* is a historical journey unlike any other you've taken. The strangers you meet here had more on their minds than simple state lines, and this book makes for a great new way of seeing and understanding the United States.

how the states got their shapes: *How the States Got Their Shapes Too* Mark Stein, 2011 The author of the New York Times bestseller *How the States Got Their Shapes* returns to tell the story of the people behind the boundary lines.

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technology and architectural formulation, the authors create an evolving intellectual reflection on digital architecture and computer science.

how the states got their shapes: Creating the American West Derek R. Everett, 2014-05-27
Boundaries—lines imposed on the landscape—shape our lives, dictating everything from which candidates we vote for to what schools our children attend to the communities with which we identify. In *Creating the American West*, historian Derek R. Everett examines the function of these internal lines in American history generally and in the West in particular. Drawing lines to create states in the trans-Mississippi West, he points out, imposed a specific form of political organization that made the West truly American. Everett examines how settlers lobbied for boundaries and how politicians imposed them. He examines the origins of boundary-making in the United States from the colonial era through the Louisiana Purchase. Case studies then explore the ethnic, sectional, political, and economic angles of boundaries. Everett first examines the boundaries between Arkansas and its neighboring Native cultures, and the pseudo war between Missouri and Iowa. He then traces the lines splitting the Oregon Country and the states of California and Nevada, and considers the ethnic and political consequences of the boundary between New Mexico and Colorado. He explains the evolution of the line splitting the Dakotas, and concludes with a discussion of ways in which state boundaries can contribute toward new interpretations of borderlands history. A major theme in the history of state boundaries is the question of whether to use geometric or geographic lines—in other words, lines corresponding to parallels and meridians or those fashioned by natural features. With the distribution of western land, Everett shows, geography gave way to geometry and transformed the West. The end of boundary-making in the late nineteenth century is not the end of the story, however. These lines continue to complicate a host of issues including water rights, taxes, political representation, and immigration. *Creating the American West* shows how the past continues to shape the present.

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Discover a Lifetime of Deeper Sleep and Dreams Naturopathic doctor Laura Harris Smith offers practical guidance to help you increase in prayer, bolster faith and sleep better. She explains the harmful effects--spiritual, emotional and physical--of what keeps you awake. Then she leads you to a place of peace where you will learn to hear God speak to you as you rest, and discover how to speak back through various avenues of prayer. The entire book takes place in your bedroom, with chapters like · The Treasures in Your Bedroom (rest, dreams) · The Monsters in Your Closet (familiar spirits) · The Weapons under Your Pillow (prayer, sleep) · The Junk under Your Bed (fear, unforgiveness) · The Morning After (interpreting your dreams) Where there is no sleep, there are no dreams; where there is fear, there is no faith; and where there is stress, there is no peace. It's time for you to Give It to God and Go to Bed! Contains Laura's 10 Days to Deeper Sleep and Dreams program with links to 10 good-night videos where you'll receive nightly prayer and impartation. Laura Harris Smith absolutely hits the nail on the head to render powerless the killers of anxiety, worry and lack of peace.--DR MARK SHERWOOD, co-CEO, Functional Medical Institute

how the states got their shapes: How to Select an American President James A. George, 2017-01-24
Presidential campaigns often seem like popularity contests and that needs to change. While some savvy American voters are becoming more reflective about the need to carefully pick presidents, that hasn't stopped the system from being eroded by special interests that endanger our liberty and freedom. The authors propose a disciplined approach for evaluating a candidate's resume. In developing such a process, they share the resumes of the former U.S. presidents as well as a scoring method that can be used to compare them and prospective candidates. By examining the credentials and performance of past presidents and using techniques employed by Fortune 500 companies to create a knowledge, skill, experience, and proficiency profile, we can make significant headway in selecting the best candidates. Anyone can aspire to become president, but that doesn't mean we should elect our neighbor. Find out how to evaluate who is most qualified for the job in *How to Select an American President*.

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The

Creative Classroom presents an original, compelling vision of schools where teaching and learning are centered on creativity. Drawing on the latest research as well as his studies of jazz and improvised theater, Sawyer describes curricula and classroom practices that will help educators get started with a new style of teaching, guided improvisation, where students are given freedom to explore within structures provided by the teacher. Readers will learn how to improve learning outcomes in all subjects—from science and math to history and language arts—by helping students master content-area standards at the same time as they increase their creative potential. This book shows how teachers and school leaders can work together to overcome all-too-common barriers to creative teaching—leadership, structure, and culture—and collaborate to transform schools into creative organizations. Book Features: Presents a research-based approach to teaching and learning for creativity. Identifies which learning outcomes support creativity and offers practical advice for how to teach for these outcomes. Shows how students learn content-area knowledge while also learning to be creative with that knowledge. Describes principles and techniques that teachers can use in all subjects. Demonstrates that a combination of school structures, cultures, incentives, and leadership are needed to support creative teaching and learning.

how the states got their shapes: *Blue Metros, Red States* David F. Damore, Robert E. Lang, Karen A. Danielsen, 2020-10-06 Assessing where the red/blue political line lies in swing states and how it is shifting Democratic-leaning urban areas in states that otherwise lean Republican is an increasingly important phenomenon in American politics, one that will help shape elections and policy for decades to come. *Blue Metros, Red States* explores this phenomenon by analyzing demographic trends, voting patterns, economic data, and social characteristics of twenty-seven major metropolitan areas in thirteen swing states that will ultimately decide who is elected president and the party that controls each chamber of Congress. The book's key finding is a sharp split between different types of suburbs in swing states. Close-in suburbs that support denser mixed use projects and transit such as light rail mostly vote for Democrats. More distant suburbs that feature mainly large-lot, single-family detached houses and lack mass transit often vote for Republicans. The book locates the red/blue dividing line and assesses the electoral state of play in every swing state. This red/blue political line is rapidly shifting, however, as suburbs urbanize and grow more demographically diverse. *Blue Metros, Red States* is especially timely as the 2020 elections draw near.

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