



How the States Got Their Shapes Too: The People Behind the Borderlines

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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 Too: The People Behind the Borderlines Details

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Borderlines Mark Stein

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Doreen Petersen says

Was a mistake to read this book. Was too dry and lacked that special something to draw you in. I think the tv series about this subject is far better. I wouldn't bother with this one.

Y. says

Human geography knowledge booster. Pleasant reading about the protagonists behind the shapes and borders. I was looking for an explanation of the Texas panhandle. Not to avail. WRT to the Florida panhandle the question that springs to me is: "Why not having given this swath of coastal land to Alabama after the West Florida purchase?"

David says

Now I'm not even sure of the name of this book. I had thought it was *The People Behind the Borderlines*, but now it appears that this may just be the subtitle, with the actual title being *How the States Got Their Shapes Too*. Anyway, this is a sequel or companion book to Stein's *How the States Got Their Shapes*. It goes along those same lines, but in 44 chapters, it mostly focuses on the individuals and personalities that were influential in determining specific borders within the United States.

The book starts with Roger Williams and the establishment of Rhode Island. As you'd expect, most of the chapters are set in prior centuries. However, it does make its way to the present, with the final chapter on Eleanor Holmes Norton and her effort for increased Congressional representation for residents of the District of Columbia.

Maybe I missed something, but I felt that the chapter on Clarina Nichols and her efforts to extend voting rights to women seemed contrived in a book that was otherwise about state and international boundaries.

I enjoyed it, but eventually it seems to drag on for too long.

Holly says

I really liked the History Channel show based on the previous book (which I didn't read), but I thought this sounded really interesting, to look at the people rather than just the geography. But this was drier than I was anticipating. There were times I started skimming sections.

Not that the information isn't interesting. I learned a lot about US history and geography from this, but its presentation wasn't exactly exciting.

Stewart says

While looking at a map of the United States, we may have asked ourselves how the 50 states got their often odd shapes. There is not a single state that doesn't have a little strangeness to its shape. Why does Missouri have that notch in its southeast, the Boot Heel, that really should be in Arkansas? Why does Oklahoma have a panhandle or Michigan an Upper Peninsula? Why does northwest Pennsylvania have that small piece of land touching Lake Erie, what might have been part of New York? And what's the deal with California's unsymmetric form?

Two books answer these questions in different ways.

"How the States Got Their Shapes Too: The People Behind the Border-Lines," published in 2011, is a followup to Mark Stein's "How the States Got Their Shapes" of 2008. The latter book examines in 51 chapters the genesis of the borders of all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

The 44 chapters of the more recent book are devoted to the famous and obscure people who helped determine the final shapes of the U.S. states. The names range from the famous (Thomas Jefferson, Sam Houston, and Brigham Young) to the obscure (Benjamin Banneker, Francisco Perea, and Clarina Nichols). Both books not only give the history of why states have the shapes they do but point out that most of the 50 states could have been shaped much differently if not for the actions of settlers, business people, and social leaders and decisions by state legislators, members of Congress, and presidents.

Stephen A. Douglas – best known as the other person in the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 – had an immense impact on U.S. borders as a member of Congress. Stein writes, "Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas established more present day state lines than any other individual."

In second place would be Thomas Jefferson, who not only made the Louisiana Purchase that resulted in 13 states being added to the union, but had a great influence on the shapes of those states from the Louisiana Purchase and the five states carved from the Northwest Territory.

Both books are fun reads, presenting an American history that hits home and isn't usually taught in high school and college.

Martin says

What a fantastic education this book is, most of which you'll never get in school, but all of which really should be taught.

It is crazily stuffed with gobs of dense information, but Stein never makes the reader feel like he's belaboring anything. Just the facts, and so much of it indeed.

I have an idea for a sequel. I'm going to ask him for permission to write it.

Jeff says

Very similar to the first book by Stein, *How the States Got Their Shapes*. Same ironic writing style, same view of geographic history being the history of individuals and how important decisions are sometimes made by the loudest voice and not necessarily the most reasoned voice. As with the first book, read the chapters

that sound interesting and skip the others, although there is even more overlapping here of the characters than in the first book. Recommended for people who want to know more about the history of the United States, and Americans.

Mark Kloha says

If you enjoy American History, if you enjoy Geography, if you are ever looking at a map and are curious about all the lines on the map, then I highly recommend this book.

Chris Batchelor says

When I first bought this book a few years ago, I thought that no book would be as bad as the first book. However, I was wrong! This book was very hard to understand and try to keep up. Although the author's use of people in this sequel tended to fair well at first, after reading the first few chapters, made it very hard to understand. I mean, there were some statesmen who I recognized the names, but the information they presented made it really hard to understand how the states border was really constructed - the real purpose of the title of this book. Although for some it presents what the statesman did to create the state, for some it talks more about the statesmen's life and little to no info about the creation of the borderline of the state making this book difficult to understand when reading.

Dominic says

I was looking forward to the second book in the series of books on the borders of states in the United States. I found that this book was tougher to get through than the first book. The first book, *How the States Got Their Shapes*, I could not put down. The majority of *The People Behind the Borderlines* is the same information as the first book but told in chronological order and focused on the legislation and the individuals involved in creating the borders. The first book had it the borders in alphabetical order by state. The subject of the book is different (people vs the states themselves) but the information is more or less the same. I gave the book four stars because there are interesting points and if you read this book before or instead of *How the States Got Their Shapes* it may be more interesting.

Tom Darrow says

I really enjoyed the first book, but this one didn't quite live up to those expectations.

Negatives... There is a lot of repetition between the first and second books.

Some of the topics don't even relate to actual boundaries of states, like the story about women's rights in Kansas.

His coverage of historical events is somewhat inconsistent, in that sometimes he gives a lot of background information about a particular border and other times he doesn't.

There isn't an introduction or conclusion. He slaps a paragraph at the end of the last chapter to try to sum

things up, but it didn't really do the job.

Positives...

He has fleshed out some of the stories from his first book and added some others.

The maps are very helpful at illustrating issues.

It has several stories that fall into the "what if" category, like the United States taking over most of the northern part of modern Mexico.

Clare says

5 stars for the concept of showing us interesting stories about why our states are shaped the way they are. That was highly engaging and eye-opening. Yet I'd give only 3 stars for the writing style. Many chapters were pretty dry and I found myself skimming some sections.

I read this while on the plane for vacation. It does make for interesting conversations with your travel mates.

The best way to read this book is to check the table of contents and choose the states that you think are most interesting to you personally.

Enjoy!

Aaron says

This book is the sequel to the popular *How the States Got Their Shapes*, which went state by state in order to define how their various borders came about. I thought that was really interesting and was excited to learn that the writer had opted to do a sequel. This volume is done in much the same style with each chapter focusing on various people who had a major influence on the shapes of the states. These include the famous Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon to the lesser well-known Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island and Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, who attempted tirelessly to win statehood for the District of Columbia.

One of the things I enjoyed so much about both books was the strong use of maps and a great narrative writing style that was relaxed while also being informative. The personalities involved are brought to life with Stein's words. In a way, it is hard to put the book down since each chapter runs between 3 and 6 pages.

If you liked the first book or just like American history, this is a must read.

Anne Dunham says

This is a book about people. But there is also a fair dose of history, geography and, yes, politics. With fifty states, all with unique histories, only a brief chapter can be devoted to each. I kept wanting to know more. The fascinating characters who shaped the country are as diverse and provocative as our current countrymen.

The stories continue to this day. Will this country always have fifty states? (It only had 48 in my youth.) Are there still citizens that have taxation without representation? Can state boundaries change? Is the political climate today different from what it has been in the past? This is an ongoing tale. History really does come alive in these brief bedtime stories.

JQAdams says

This is at least more of a readable book than its predecessor was, in that it is a collection of biographical sketches. Theoretically these are about people that have to do with the placement of borderlines, but sometimes that connection gets pretty abstract and metaphorical -- Clarina Nichols gets a chapter for her efforts to get women's rights enshrined in Kansas's state constitutions, John Sutter gets a chapter for being important to California becoming a state, and Eleanor Holmes Norton gets a chapter because she carries "a torch that illuminates the lines *inside* us." Conversely, there's a fair amount of "here's someone who didn't determine where the borders were," as when John Quitman is out there trying to conquer Cuba for the United States. Stein still spends a fair amount of time making unsupported assertions about how lines were drawn specifically so that states could be made of equal north-south height -- e.g., he avers that the Oklahoma Panhandle exists so that there would be a border at 37° (rather than the Missouri Compromise line of $36^\circ 30'$) so that four states of equal height could divide the area between 37° and the Canadian border at 49° . But he never provides any evidence that anyone thought about that at the time -- or explain why, if they thought in those terms, they couldn't equally divide 12.5 degrees into four (or five!), or why if they thought it was so important they also pushed North Dakota's border south to the end of the Coteau des Prairies to make it easier to survey.

But as light reading, it was fine.
