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The unlikely origins of

By Joshua J

Donald Trump became president promising to build a “big and beautiful wall” between the United States and Mexico. Now it seems his plans have been forestalled: members of his own party view the wall as a colossal waste of money (the most recent estimate is \$21 billion over three years), and people living near the border are refusing to give up their land for a project they see as harmful and inane. About a third of the two-thousand-mile frontier between San Diego and Brownsville, Texas, already has some sort of constructed boundary—often cement, corrugated metal, or steel mesh—and the desert terrain acts as a deterrent along the rest. But Trump’s proposal was always more rhetorical than real. Those who would “Make America Great Again” by walling off Mexico want to believe that the border is a natural and meaningful divide rather than the recent product of human accident and endeavor.

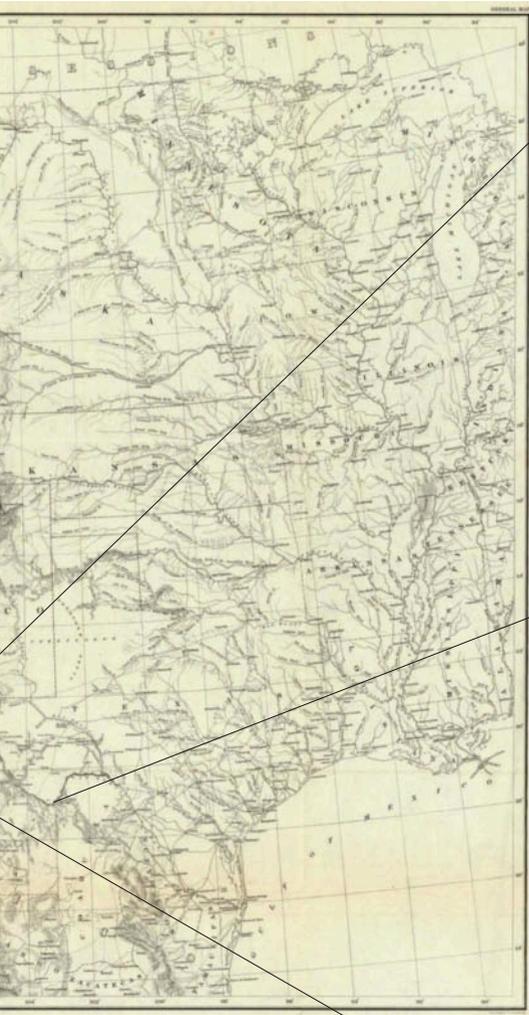
The story of the border begins in 1846, when the United States was in the grip of an expansionist fervor. President James K. Polk, having just annexed Texas, launched a war against the Republic of Mexico whose ostensible purpose was securing the new state but whose true aim was making manifest America’s destiny “to overspread the continent.” Mexico, which had won independence from Spain only two decades earlier, was quickly outmatched. In February 1848, envoys of the two nations convened in Guadalupe Hidalgo, a village near Mexico City, to sign the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits, and Settlement. With US troops occupying the capital, Mexico agreed to relinquish half its territory—what is now California, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Wyoming—in exchange for \$15 million. As part of the treaty, the envoys traced a new border across the continent’s arid waist by connecting San Diego to El Paso through the junction of the Colorado and Gila Rivers, in present-day Arizona. Each country also appointed a boundary commission; the two were jointly directed to map the border’s path through territory so barren that the envoys agreed it could “never ... be cultivated by either party.”

For much of the 1850s, the most prominent figure on the US Boundary Commission was Major William H. Emory, a mustachioed graduate of West Point. Emory was versed in the surveying techniques of his day—he used zenith telescopes to determine location by the position of the stars—and he relished the idea of expanding the United States. His Mexican counterpart was José Salazar Ilarregui, who was appointed to the commission just a few years after graduating from Mexico’s College of Mining. Whereas Emory looked to the heavens, Salazar had mastered the surveyor’s craft of triangulation—measuring distance by drawing triangles from fixed points across the land. Lending those skills to an endeavor that would cost Mexico half its soil must have troubled him, but he was also a nationalist who wanted to ensure that his country’s borders were clearly marked and defensible. Emory and Salazar were responsible for turning the language of the treaty into a real dividing line, marked every so often with a marble obelisk or a simple pile of stones.



THE LINE

the US-Mexico border
Jelly-Schapiro



The American and Mexican boundary commissions were supposed to conduct independent surveys, but the two teams frequently found it advantageous to share the work. Determining the azimuth—a straight line over the curving earth—was one thing on paper; it was quite another to track its course across peaks and deserts. Working from faulty old maps, the teams were often forced to compromise about the border's route. For example, they discovered that “the town called Paso” (now Ciudad Juárez) was dozens of miles from where the treaty said it should be—a discrepancy so great it required a second treaty to resolve. Then there was the challenge of the Rio Grande, whose snaking course made up one section of the route. The surveyors, balancing precariously in rowboats, had to lower weighted strings into the rushing current to find the river's deepest channel, where the border was meant to run. In 1851, several members of the American team caught yellow fever in what is now Big Bend National Park—then a terra incognita of canyons and thorns. Another man drowned in the river. In the end, the Rio Grande's tendency to change its course, especially after heavy rains, guaranteed that legal conflicts over the “true” border would continue for a century.

The expedition proceeded intermittently for six years. Emory's men continued to receive steady funding for gear and food from President Millard Fillmore, who, like Zachary Taylor and Polk before him, was well disposed toward the mission. Mexico's team wasn't so lucky. In 1853, with the treasury empty and the government in chaos, the old war hero Antonio López de Santa Anna was elected president and soon declared himself dictator; Salazar was briefly tossed in a Chihuahua jail for criticizing Santa Anna's lack of support for the border commission. Once released, Salazar was so determined to continue the survey that he borrowed money on his own credit. Emory helped by sending funds from the United States. Jingoist or no, “Bold Emory” had come to admire the young Mexican. When the teams completed their work in the field, in 1855, they bid each other fond farewells born, as one of the Mexican team members put it, of “continued good will and mutual suffering in the desert.”

When Emory presented his findings to Congress in 1857, it was the first time Americans saw the line that would become fixed in their minds as “the southern border.” But in the 1890s, a new binational survey team was tasked with replacing the old rock piles with more lasting markers, and what they found was telling. The presence of the border had already begun to transform this “barren” land into a busy corridor. Outside the Arizona town of Nogales, an enterprising saloon owner had turned a stone marker into part of his wall; his front door opened on Mexico and his rear door faced the United States. The legacy of the border, from its collaborative beginning, is as much one of contact as of separation. Many twinned towns—from Calexico/Mexicali to Brownsville/Matamoros—sprang from the desert because the border gave them a reason for being. They are, like the vanished rock piles, defiant monuments to interaction and exchange. ■

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, “All Over the Map,” appeared in the September 2012 issue.