



Borders defined, 50 times

—review by Bill Kauffman of “How the States Got Their Shapes” by Mark Stein, Collins, 332 pp.

“Was Delaware really necessary?” Mark Stein asks this existential question in “How the States Got Their Shapes,” a cartographic tour of America, and many other questions as well. For instance: Why does West Virginia “have that . . . weird thing coming up underneath Maryland?”

Mr. Stein’s bottom line is: “Why put the line there?” The beautifully misshapen boundaries of the original 13 states were formed by colonial charters, sinuous rivers, surveying mistakes, and fraternal quarrels over who gets Pawtucket. Maryland, Mr. Stein notes, lost “every border dispute in which it engaged,” but its reward was the striking contour of a squirt-gun—a snub-nosed model, thanks to the Potomac River.

The early states varied in size and shape, befitting a nation born of rebellion, but as the republic expanded, Mr. Stein explains, “Congress would locate the nation’s internal borders with the goal that all states should be created equal.”

Texas and California were the obvious exceptions to the general practice of avoiding overly large or small states. “California violated the policy of equality among states because it could,” writes Mr. Stein. “The United States needed California more than California needed the United States.”

He quotes a 1786 letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison: “Considering the American character in general, a state of such extent as one hundred and sixty thousand square miles [roughly the size of California] would soon crumble into little ones.”

California did not crumble, despite persistent efforts in the 1850s by the

Spanish-speaking agrarian south to detach itself from the gold-rush-fevered north. Earthquakes notwithstanding, California hasn’t split yet, so either Jefferson was wrong or the American character isn’t what it used to be.

As for Texas, it came into the Union with a provision permitting its division into as many as five separate states, but Texans never went for fission. Apparently, the prospect of 10 senators can’t compete with the bragging rights belonging to the biggest (pre-Alaska) state.



The map’s white area shows Maryland’s colonial shape, before years of border disputes whittled it down.

Mr. Stein’s book has instructive maps, but he doesn’t spend enough time sketching in the schemers and idealists and land-grabbers and patriots who drew the boundaries.

Still, he does ask the right questions:

- “How come Michigan has that whole separate section that’s actually attached to Wisconsin?” Congress gave Michigan the Upper Peninsula as compensation for losing Toledo and Gary. In fact, Ohio and Michigan hurled insults but drew no blood in the Toledo War of 1835.
- Why is northern Idaho so narrow, Mr. Stein asks; “isn’t Montana big enough as it is?” The answer is both

natural—the Continental Divide separates the states—and political. In 1864, Congress pushed Idaho’s northeastern border back to the Bitterroot Mountains after an eastern Idaho Territory politico named Sidney Edgerton “went to Washington with \$2,000 in gold packed away.” The \$2,000 was expended, border adjustments were made, and Sidney Edgerton wound up territorial governor of newly created Montana.

- “Why in the world does Oklahoma have that skinny panhandle? Why didn’t Texas just fill up that space?” Texas ceded the land to the U.S. in order to keep beneath the Missouri Compromise line of 36 degrees 30 minutes north latitude. Otherwise Texas would have had to free its slaves.
- “Why does Colorado have such boring borders?” Disappointingly, many of the Western states fell victim to carto-conformity when Congress clipped and hacked aborning states to a rough equality of size. By design, North and South Dakota, Washington, Wyoming, Colorado and Oregon are all seven degrees of longitude in width; Colorado, Wyoming and Montana are each four degrees of latitude in height, while Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas are three degrees high. Politics, however, had a way of thwarting geometric mandates. Oregon is taller than Washington because, writes Mr. Stein, a clean bisection “would have placed the vitally important Columbia River”—and thus Seattle and Portland—“entirely in Washington.”
- “Why isn’t Utah a rectangle?” Partly, Mr. Stein explains, so that Wyoming could swell to the uniform seven-degree width and perhaps also so that Congress could minimize

States, p. 40, 3rd col.