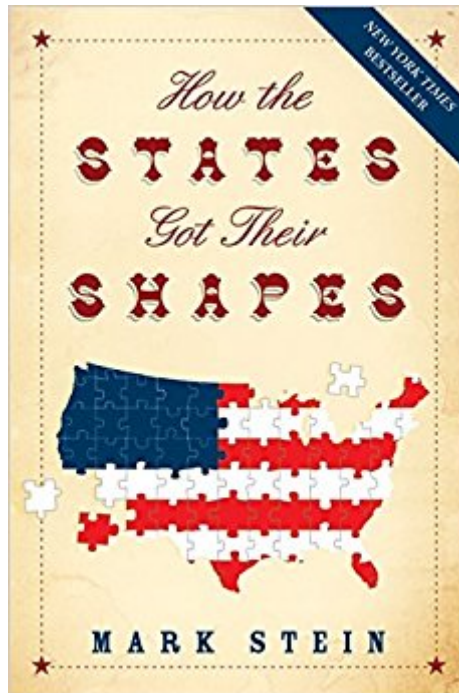




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How The States Got Their Shapes



Synopsis

Mark Stein is a playwright and screenwriter. His plays have been performed off-Broadway and at theaters throughout the country. His films include *Housesitter*, with Steve Martin and Goldie Hawn. He has taught at American University and Catholic University.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

America's first century was defined by expansion and the negotiation of territories among areas colonized by the French and Spanish, or occupied by natives. The exact location of borders became paramount; playwright and screenwriter Stein amasses the story of each state's border, channeling them into a cohesive whole. Proceeding through the states alphabetically, Stein takes the innovative step of addressing each border-north, south, east, west-separately. Border stories shine a spotlight on many aspects of American history: the 49th parallel was chosen for the northern borders of Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana because they ensured England's access to the Great Lakes, vital to their fur trade; in 1846, Washington D.C. residents south of the Potomac successfully petitioned to rejoin Virginia (called both "retrocession" and "a crime") in order to keep out free African-Americans. Aside from tales of violent conquest and political glad-handing, there's early, breathtaking tales of American politicians' favorite sport, gerrymandering (in 1864, Idaho judge Sidney Edgerton single-handedly "derailed" Idaho's proposed boundary, to Montana's benefit, with \$2,000 in gold). American history enthusiasts should be captivated by this fun, informative text. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

“Give me the splendid irregularities any day. God bless the panhandles and notches, the West Virginias and Oklahomas.” • (Wall Street Journal) “For anyone who’s been confounded by the largest of all jigsaw puzzles, the one that carved out those fifty weirdly formed states, here is the solution. It’s history, it’s geography, it’s comedy, it’s indispensable.” • (ANDRO LINKLATER, author of *The Fabric of America: How Our Borders and Boundaries Shaped the Country and Forged Our National Identity*) “If you ever wondered why Delaware owns a small portion of the southwest New Jersey coast, the answer is here!” • (Library Journal) “A fascinating and wonderfully entertaining account of an often-overlooked oddity of America’s history: how the jigsaw-puzzle layout of the United States emerged. I never thought a book on geography could be funny, but Mark Stein has pulled it off.” • (Vogue)

I love the idea of this book, and I did learn a lot of interesting trivia about how the states’ borders were formed. The problem is with the book structure... it’s alphabetical by state, which means you’ll be reading the same trivia twice for each border, for example, the border between Connecticut and Massachusetts is discussed in both states’ chapters. This gets old after a while. And also, the reason for some borders (e.g. the 36° 30’ latitude that came out of the Missouri Compromise (slavery allowed below, not above) affects several states, so you read about it over and over again. I can see why organizing the book was challenging, but I wonder if there was a better / less tedious way. If you love geography and US history, you’ll still get a lot out of this book.

This is a good reference work. It tells how each of the states became formed and what geographic and political factors were involved. For example, Utah lost the northeast corner of the state to Wyoming which became a complete rectangle as a result: two factors were involved: Geographically there is an imposing mountain range cutting across the northeast corner of what could have been Utah that would have made transportation, administration and logistic support of the trans-mountain section of the potential Utah difficult. Politically, many senior congressmen and senators were prejudiced against the Mormon leaders of Utah and happily jumped at the chance to take territory away from Utah. While the book is episodic, telling as it does 50 stories about the states of the country, Mr. Stein tells the stories interestingly and with obvious academic research. It is a good addition to any library of American history.

When you look at all the state lines on the map, you rarely stop and think "Why does ____ start/stop

where it does?" You can see that the eastern states are small (on average) and the western states are big, how western states line up in columns, that Maryland and Virginia have cut-off (or nearly cut-off) parts and have no clue how/why it is that way. This book digs into the stories of each state and tells how and when the different borders came to be. Very entertaining and informative book.

A few years back the History Channel aired a series based on this book. Like the series this book tells you how state boundaries were created. Some were for political reasons and others for practical reasons.

I like it and I was annoyed by it. I really like topic-- I was a magazine writer for 30 years and actually proposed doing an article on this topic for National Geographic many years ago (never heard back). So was delighted to see that there was a whole book on the topic. Alas, the chapters become confusing after a while. I think the writer was so familiar with the material that he failed to realize that most of us don't exactly recall where latitude 30 runs, or where some river intersects another, even though he mentioned it in a chapter 50 pages previous. The book needs even more maps than it has. But the author has done his homework, and this is well researched and interesting if you can visualize all the bizarre permutations in the state borders that he describes.

"How the States Got Their Shapes" relates various reasons for state boundaries. The book is chock full of maps illustrating boundaries and how some changed over time. Each state has a separate entry, which makes it nice if the reader is interested in a certain state. On the other hand, it's a bit artificial, as any given boundary is shared by two or more states. The book thus ends up being repetitious if you read it from beginning to end, as I did. I'm an amateur geography fan, so I enjoyed this book quite a bit. It's written for all audiences, and the author avoids using too much jargon. Instead, it focuses more on the historical reasons that states came to be certain shapes. I learned quite a few fascinating tidbits, although as other reviewers have pointed out, the entries are fairly surface level. A list of sources for each state, though, provides the reader with possible follow-up materials to read. Note: This review is for the Kindle version, which I would rate just 2 stars. One of the beautiful things about using a Kindle is that a book can include links, which would have greatly benefited this book. So when the author discusses the boundaries for West Virginia, he notes "See Virginia," but he doesn't include a link! Navigating to Virginia from another entry is awkward. This book ABSOLUTELY needs links in the Kindle version.

This has got some really interesting information, and I learned quite a few new tidbits. My biggest issue is with the formatting of the book. On one level, it makes sense to just go alphabetically, state by state. The only problem with that, is that the stories of so many states are interwoven with each other, so breaking them up that way seemed to me to be interfering with the flow. For instance, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. You read the same border story three times, in different "chapters" of the book. Maybe it would have made things easier going regionally. I have mine on the Kindle Paperwhite, so maybe it is different in others, but if you wanted to refer back to another state for some reason (like for a map), there is no direct link. It will say "See Figure XXX, in STATE", but you'll have to manually go back and find it. With a book like this, maps are a huge help. Unfortunately, the screen on the Paperwhite does the maps no justice. If you zoom in, things get a bit hazy. All in all, I'm not hugely disappointed - like I said, there are some really interesting facts which really give you insight as to the seemingly arbitrary lines, curves, and notches on the map.

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