

A Compromised Country: Redefining the U.S.-Mexico Border

Joel Levanetz



San Diego Historical Society

A group of border surveyors operating in San Ysidro Valley, Mexico, no date available. © SDHS# 88_16994

The southwestern United States is undeniably unique. The region's dramatic landscapes have long provoked the human imagination, and its vastness has challenged countless people to make sense of its topography and bring its boundless parameters into understandable and manageable terms. Indians,

Joel Levanetz is an Associate Curator of Collections at the San Diego Historical Society.

Hidalgo made reference to natural landmarks and a 1782 map.¹ Ultimately, the surveyors would find both unreliable.

The map became a problem on the first day of what would be a six-year long survey. According to the treaty, the border would start at “a point on the coast of the Pacific Ocean, distant one marine league due south of the southernmost point of the port of San Diego, according to the plan of said port made in the year 1782 by Don Juan Pantoja, second sailing-master of the Spanish fleet...” Pantoja’s work was useful to eighteenth-century explorers, but his work was less than adequate for nineteenth-century surveying. The Boundary Commission quickly discovered that the point designated by Pantoja as the southernmost point of San Diego Bay was actually 3,500 feet north of where the Bay actually ended. Despite the flaws in the map, the surveyors established an “Initial Point” to divide the new two nations and erected a monument on the site. A different reading of the map might have garnered 31,500 additional acres to the territory of Mexico.²

The other resource on which the surveyors relied, natural landmarks, proved as faulty as the Pantoja map. In Article V of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, rivers were used to demarcate the course of the border:

The boundary line between the two Republics shall commence in the Gulf of Mexico, three leagues from land, opposite the mouth of the Rio Grande... or Opposite the mouth of its deepest branch... from thence up the middle of that river, following the deepest channel... northward, along the western line of New Mexico, until it intersects the first branch of the river Gila... thence down the middle of the said branch and of the said river, until it empties into the Rio Colorado; thence across the Rio Colorado, following the division line between Upper and Lower California, to the Pacific Ocean.

The problem is that rivers slowly move, and sometimes they change course dramatically, especially after floods. Had Texas experienced flooding in 1849, the international boundary could have shifted significantly, which would have affected other survey points. Had the Southwest experienced a drought that year, the path of the Rio Grande might have given the surveyors a very different point of reference.

These dynamics became vividly apparent when the team surveying the Western portion of the border set out from San Diego to establish the boundary at the intersection of the Gila and Colorado Rivers. While Emory and Salazar negotiated where to place the decisive Initial Point, Lieutenant Amiel Weeks Whipple (an American surveyor) and other surveyors left San Diego to find where the Gila River empties into the Rio Colorado. From there, the surveying party could extend the borderline back to the Initial Point on the Pacific Ocean, ultimately establishing a boundary between Alta and Baja California. As in San Diego, the task of marking this point was easier in theory than in practice.³

When Whipple and his men arrived at the junction of the two rivers, they once again had to reinterpret the Treaty. At that particular moment, the Colorado River flowed south, bent sharply to the west where it met the Gila River, then continued southward to the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California). Since the rivers joined at a bend, it was difficult to determine where the Gila ended and the Colorado began.

To further complicate matters, erosion at the rivers' banks surrounding this junction indicated that the course of both bodies was subject to frequent change. Once again, the United States benefited from geographic indeterminacy and expanded its borders below the Colorado River, thereby allotting ten additional miles to the burgeoning nation. A different interpretation of Initial Point and the confluence of the Gila and Colorado would have resulted in a net gain of more than 300 square miles for Mexico.⁴

After completion of the initial survey, seven monuments marked the 2000-mile long border. The border, initially, was more apparent on maps than on the ground. Many on the border lived a bi-national existence without even knowing it. But during the twentieth century, the border became much more of a physical reality. In 1993, nearly one hundred and fifty years after the original survey, San Diego fortified its segment of the international boundary by building a fourteen-mile fence between the United States and Mexico. Despite protests from environmentalists and a divided Kumeyaay Nation, the barrier along the world's busiest border crossing was completed. Today, its three layers of fencing follow the line negotiated in 1849. This contentious wall stands not only as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but the bargaining power of surveyors.

NOTES

1. See Neal Harlow, *Maps of the Pueblo Lands of San Diego, 1602-1874*. Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1987.
2. Curtis M. Brown and Michael J. Pallamary, *History of San Diego County Land Surveying Experiences* (San Diego. Privately printed, 1988), 21.
3. Thomas L. Scharf, "Amiel Weeks Whipple : Boundary and Railroad Surveys in the Southwest, 1849-1854," (master's thesis, University of San Diego, 1973).
4. Michael Dear, "Monuments, Manifest Destiny and Mexico," *The National Archives* 2 (Summer 2005): 2. See also Charles Hughes "'La Mojonera' and the Marking of California's U.S.-Mexico Boundary Line, 1849-1851," *Journal of San Diego History* 53 (Summer 2007):126-147.