

How ^{the} States got Their Shapes



Most Americans are familiar with the map of the United States, but why do our states have the boundaries they do? Every shape on the map tells a great story about our past. Why is California bent and why does Oklahoma have a panhandle? Viewers will learn about the many reasons borders were determined, from political dynamics such as the shifting boundaries of slavery, to the importance of access to ports and waterways, to unexpected events such as earthquakes. This is an excellent program blending geography and history, showing how state borders have been affected by both human interaction and the natural world. With commentary from historians and compelling visuals, *How the States Got Their Shapes* gives teachers and students an informative and unique window into the American past.

Pre-viewing activity

Before watching this program, ask students to create a drawing of their state or another state of their choice. Compare these drawings with an actual map after they are completed. Students can then discuss the notable features of the U.S. map before watching the documentary.



Host Brian Unger

Curriculum links

How the States Got Their Shapes would be useful for classes on U.S. history, American culture, social studies and geography. It is appropriate for 5th grade and above. This documentary fulfills several National Standards guidelines as outlined by the National Council for History Education including: 1) Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas and Institutions, and 2) Patterns of Social and Political Interaction.

Vocabulary

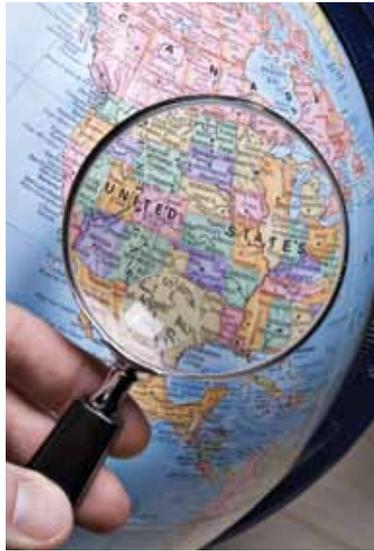
Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

arbitrary	microcosm	rhombus
entity	militia	speculator
flashpoint	ore	surveyor
latitude		

Discussion questions

1. Why did Ohio and Michigan have such conflict over their state boundaries? Which state do you think ended up benefitting the most when the boundaries were finally drawn in 1835?

2. How did the construction of the Erie Canal change the United States?



3. Why does Pennsylvania have a “notch” near its border with New York?

4. What was unique about Thomas Jefferson’s plan for how U.S. states should be divided? Why do you think this plan was never adopted?

5. What were some of the factors involved with establishing the border between the U.S. and Canada? How has the security around the border changed over time?

6. What is a “surveyor”? Why do you think the role of the surveyor was so important in the 18th and 19th centuries?

7. What happened to the state of “Franklin”? What was the significance of this attempt to form a new state, and how did Congress respond?

8. What role did Haiti play in the Louisiana Purchase? How did the acquisition of these new lands change the U.S.?

9. Where is the “Mason Dixon line” and when was it established?

10. How did the Missouri Compromise of 1820 affect state borders? What conflicts arose over this boundary?

11. Why did Texas seek statehood after it achieved independence from Mexico?

12. What role did gold play in the boundaries of California?

13. What is the Continental Divide?

14. Based on what you learned in this program, what are some of the major factors that influenced the way state boundaries have been determined?

Extended activities

1. Locate a large photocopy of the U.S. map with the state boundaries included. White out or erase the state names and cut the map up into individual states. Then, have students work in small groups to identify each state by writing the names on the cut-outs. You can also play this game with a timer, challenging each group to name the states in the shortest amount of time.

2. This documentary explores the boundaries of many states. Working in small groups, ask students to research the history of their own state boundaries. Students can create visual presentations of their state boundaries on posterboard, on PowerPoint, or using any other format, and should include a written essay about their state boundaries. These presentations can be shared with the larger class or group.

3. As this program describes, state boundaries are often a matter of great debate. Ask students to choose a state they think should have different boundaries. Then, ask them to write a letter to the editor or opinion piece about why the state has the boundaries it does, and when they were established.

4. *How the States Got Their Shapes* highlights several interesting state stories. Ask students to write an essay of 1-2 pages about the state they find most interesting, with details about the state’s history. Students can also include information about the state’s motto, key dates, and geographic features.

Websites

Learn more about the U.S. on History.com:

www.history.com/topics/states

Play the “Place the State” game on History.com:

www.history.com/topics/states/interactives/place-the-state-game

View maps online at the Library of Congress website:

<http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gmdhome.html>

More U.S. history maps:

www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/histus.html



Books

Hayes, Derek. *Historical Atlas of the United States* (University of California, 2006).

Linklater, Andro. *How the United States Was Shaped by the Greatest Land Sale in History* (Plume, 2003).

Nash, Gary and Carter Smith. *Atlas of American History* (Facts on File, 2006).

