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A Not-too-distant Mirror: The Talcott Commission (1840-43) and the Meaning of the Border

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Bridgewater State students who study North American history and politics in our post-9/11 classrooms today do so in an environment that has changed so dramatically that few of them might appreciate the difference. Nine-eleven did that, as scholars are beginning to discover. It changed Americans’ sense of place in the world and has prompted a new search for identity (something in which Americans periodically engage). “Who we are” has always been defined in part by “who we’re not,” and who we’re not is often symbolized by our borders. America’s edges, its international borders, have become a critical focus of identity politics and border security—keeping out Mexican migrants, Canadian drug smugglers and other fiends—grist for the Sunday morning news show mills. However, today’s Fortress America is hardly new; students who examine America’s mid-nineteenth-century rush to solidify its national borders would find that their ancestors made a similar equation. The ways they defined their borders reflected the ways they defined themselves.

In the sixty years following the Revolution, Americans and British North Americans struggled to define their own national selves and finding respective places on the map was one important method of self-assertion. Controversy over the British western posts in the 1790s, neutrality of the seas, the War of 1812, the McLeod Affair, and the rivalry between lumbermen and settlers in Maine’s Aroostook region contributed to heightened tensions between Americans and British North Americans and revealed the need to draw a definite and permanent border. Where do we begin and they end? That question underlay the Northeast (or Maine) Boundary Dispute of the early 1840s.

By the late 1830s, British and American statesmen had concluded that the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1783) that described the boundary between their respective claims in the northeast were too vague. Several bilateral and arbitrators’ attempts to settle the boundary before 1840 had founndered on the rocks of domestic political maneuvering and national chauvinism. Our textbooks tell us that only diplomacy at the highest level saved the day. After several months of close negotiation colored by personal friendship, the U.S. Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, and British envoy, Alexander Baring (Lord Ashburton), resolved the issue by drafting the Treaty of Washington (the Webster-Ashburton Treaty) in August 1842.

There is, of course, much more to the story. The Maine boundary dispute involved staking claims in unsettled regions and provided opportunities for discovery of many kinds: scientific, ethnological and cultural. Surveying and mapping the boundary involved imagining the border, too, and investing it with meaning.

In the 1830s and 40s, territorial expansion was at the top of the national political agenda in the U.S., but most Americans saw their course of empire growing westward in places like Texas (1845), California (1848) and Oregon (1846). In the Northeast, five separate attempts at settling the boundary issue since 1783 had succeeded only in confirming and marking the western- and easternmost sections of the boundary, along the forty-fifth parallel from the St Lawrence River to the source of the Connecticut River in the west, and from the source of the St Croix to the Atlantic Ocean, less than half of the unresolved boundary territory. By the late 1830s, disputes between American frontier settlers and New Brunswick lumbermen along the Aroostook River drew the attention of the U.S. government. Equally disconcerting was a British boundary commission of 1839 (led by geologist G.W. Featherstonaugh and military surveyor Richard Mudge) that threatened to declare unilaterally a boundary in the Northeast that excised the...
“crown” of present-day northern Maine (the land north of the forty-sixth parallel), making it British territory. The United States could not allow these challenges to stand. In 1840, Congress commissioned its own survey of the disputed territory, naming Captain Andrew Talcott its head. An officer retired from the United States Army Corps of Engineers, Talcott had established a wide reputation as a reliable and efficient surveyor, engineer and cartographer. Also appointed were two co-commissioners, James Renwick, a professor of physics at Columbia College and Major James D. Graham of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers. Before the commission could complete its exploration, Webster and Ashburton had concluded a compromise solution.

Even so, the commission’s work is telling. The maps, diaries, field notes and reports, correspondence, and watercolor paintings—all available in the Virginia Historical Society collections and the National Archives—produced in the course of these excursions are reflective. In mapping the boundary they were, in a sense, mapping themselves. They perceived borderlands as the places where cultural and physiographic differences between Americans and British North Americans were visible and palpable enough to sustain an international boundary.

The Commission was divided into three parties, each assigned a section of the contested boundary region: Graham’s party the easternmost section; Renwick’s the middle section of the highlands; the western part of the contested boundary fell to Talcott. The work took three successive seasons to complete, September–October 1840, June–September 1841 and summer 1842. The commissioners and their crews endured many physical, topographical, climatic and technical challenges. They were befuddled by faulty maps and impeded by windfalls, marshes, rapids and a perennial shortage of provisions. And bugs: “the immense swarms of black flies & mosquitoes, harassing us...& from whose venomous sting there was no protection.” Each commissioner conducted his division independently, though they expected to write a joint final report to submit to the Government when their work was done.

The ultimate report complete with maps and appendices was submitted to Webster on 27 January 1843. The Commission surveyed and mapped thousands of miles of borderland, making thousands of astronomical and barometrical measurements. The final report, complete with ten volumes of tables, two appendices, and a comprehensive map (see Fig. 1) composed a significant body of new scientific knowledge about the northeastern landscape. Science was an article of faith for Talcott, Renwick, and Graham. Such an abrupt and overtly diplomatic conclusion to what should have been a scientific determination was to them troubling, even galling. Even so, as much as Talcott and his co-commissioners claimed their work was guided singly by scientific principles, complete objectivity was elusive. Drawing boundaries in the era of “manifest destiny” could not help but reflect this sense of national mission. Strewed through the scientific observations in their diaries, reports, and correspondence was a running commentary on American and British colonial cultures that justified an official border between two different countries.

Central to this notional delineation was the landscape of the border region. Water, rocks, vegetation and soils were texts to be read by the scientific interpreters. The terrain itself would reveal the boundary line. For Talcott and his men, the northeastern borderlands were a threshold or buffer between British America and the United States. To these scientists, the border had to be drawn to envelope the lands and peoples who shared the principal characteristic of antebellum America: progress. A cultural yardstick would determine the extent of the northeastern American marches.

Largely unknown, the landscape was monotonous and difficult to read. The corridor that encompassed the highlands did not subscribe to the commissioners’ expectations for a single, identifiable “axis of maximum elevation” separating St. Lawrence from Atlantic waters as the 1783 Treaty of Paris had indicated. In the Famine River highlands, Talcott’s nephew and aide, Sebastian Visscher Talcott noted, “[i]t is not possible to discern any ‘dividing ridge’ as there is no elevation sufficiently great above the level of the surrounding country to be dignified with that name.” The borderlands corridor had a uniformity of character. “The country is so monotonous[sic] that in describing one mile you describe the whole.” These borderlands were an uncultivated and stagnant zone, a northeastern badlands. Agriculturally, the highlands were “a little less than worthless.” Marshes, swamps, and the unexpected flow of rivers also made the area seem less than promising economically. Even timber, so attractive in the lower St. John River valley by this era, was in the highlands difficult to get to, small, and generally “unfit for useful purposes.” In many ways, the highlands comprised a very appropriate threshold between Canadian and American civilizations. “The country...is,” S.V. Talcott wrote, “as I have said above, swampy and covered with a heavy growth of white cedar, spruce and Balsam with no pine of consequence: the soil is thin and poor, resting upon a bed of loose stone not a foot below the surface, and altogether fit only for a Boundary between two distinct nations.”

To draw the separation between cultures, the commissioners and their men labeled things—trees, rivers, mountains and people—literally and notionally. Repeatedly, the Talcott division’s journals note the marking of trees “U.S.C. 1840” (or 1841) [United States
Commission] at strategic points on what they perceived would be, ultimately, the American side of the border. Ostensibly, this marking was designed only to aid the surveyors who would formally mark the boundary when the Treaty was drawn up. To the commission, however, these markings had deeper meaning as territorial claims. In the St John River valley, Graham’s men cleared away trees on the properties of private landholders in New Brunswick without notifying them first, and then marked some remaining trees simply “U.S.,” a claim that became the cause of no small concern to British American settlers in the territory, many of Loyalist backgrounds. Talcott’s men repeatedly referred to rivers flowing northwest from the highlands as “Canadas.” Even mountains on either side of the expected border were seen to reflect national postures. “[T]he prominent mountains viewed from across the Lake [Mégantic],” Talcott aide R.D. Cutts entered into his 1840 report, “were raised like a profile before us, as if in the act of comparing their relative heights [sic].”

Boundary surveyors labeled the people of the borderlands too. The commissioners found a small body of frontier families worthy of American citizenship and possessing the appropriate character—independence, self-reliance and rugged individualism, celebrated “American” traits in the age of Manifest Destiny—for situation on the frontier of a new nation. Their reports vaguely asserted who belonged on what side. A judicious boundary, if possible, would allow the United States to reclaim some American-born settlers, like those identified by Renwick living “on the right bank of the St. John’s[sic], from the mouth of the Meduanekeag upwards to the Grand Falls,” but exclude others, such as the areas around Richmond and Woodstock, “held by the descendants of the refugees of the Revolution and others who united with them in invertebrate hostility to the American name.” To be embraced were expatriates who had gone far afield in search of arable land and victims of British oppression (like the French-speaking Madawaska Acadians) who would be liberated, it was felt, as American citizens. To be rejected were those unassimilable to American values: British soldiers, Canadien peasants and most certainly, Loyalists.

On the heels of all this claiming, imagining and measuring, the international boundary between the United States and British North America was ultimately drawn and blazed in spring and summer 1843 by an official Joint Commission. Working as Chief Topographer was Graham, the only one of the three 1840 Survey Commissioners appointed to the 1843 body. Of all the work completed by the 1840 Survey, the Joint Commission relied most heavily on Talcott’s reports on the western highlands. The completion of boundary marking by the 1843 Joint Commission was both an ending and a beginning. It simultaneously brought to a close a colorful chapter in the history of American manifest destiny and commenced, symbolically at least, a period of North American infeudation; the “filling in” of Canadian and American frontiers. Today, it is no longer unknown territory, but the northeast borderlands remain thinly settled and of limited economic use outside of tourism, still a buffer of sorts between two distinct nations.

And what of the Talcott Commission? We cannot dismiss it as merely dull prelude to a sparkling diplomatic achievement. There was more to it than that. Engineers and surveyors who labored in difficult circumstances only to have their scientific arguments compromised in a conventional treaty? To some degree, yes. But equally importantly, Talcott and his fellow expeditionists were cultural explorers who interpreted the northeastern border even as they sought to draw it. Their border, like ours today, was as much an idea as it was a real place and a mirror reflecting what mid-nineteenth-century Americans thought they were, and were not. Borders did that, and still do.

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