How States Get Their Shapes

What are the most important factors in determining state borders?

Americans are so accustomed to the current shapes of the states that make up the United States. History, however, tells a much different story. Iowa's borders were caught up in the sectional struggle over slavery and became a contentious issue at home and in the U.S. Congress.

Path to Statehood

From the early years of the United States, Congress adopted a plan to admit western states into the Union on a status equal to the original thirteen. The region first became a territory with limited government. Once the population reached 60,000, the legislature could submit to the voters (white males 21 years and older) a proposal to draft a state constitution to send to Congress with an application for statehood. After several false starts, such a proposal was approved in 1844. However, it took two more years before Congress and Iowa voters could agree on the terms of a constitution.

While several issues were subjects of intense debate, Iowa's borders were not at first. Because Missouri had already been admitted as a state, Iowa's southern border was established (or so it seemed at the time). Similarly, the Mississippi River divided Iowa from Illinois and Wisconsin on the east. The northern and western borders had no such fixed lines. Iowa's first territorial governor, Robert Lucas, wanted Iowa to extend up to what is now Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, a large state indeed. The convention adopted the Lucas borders and sent them to Congress for approval.

At this point, Iowa's admission became a subject of geo-political bickering. Because each state gets two Senators, northern interests wanted to carve out western lands into many small states that would never support slavery and cotton production. Many states, many “free” senators. Hence, they wanted to reduce the size of new states on the northern prairies and Great Plains. The South wanted just the opposite. They wanted big states from this region. Big states, fewer senators.

“Small State” vs. “Big State” Interests

When Iowa's constitutional proposal reached Congress, Northern “small state” interests redrew the western border, not as the Missouri river as Lucas had proposed it, but a line some 80-100 miles back to the east. They also moved the northern border south from Lucas' original proposal. Iowans balked at the smaller size. When the proposal came back to Iowa voters for approval, the measure failed. A compromise was reached setting the borders as we know them today.

While the constitution stated that Iowa's southern border is the northern border of Missouri, it was unclear exactly where that line was to be drawn. The survey line ran from the Missouri River to a point “on the rapids of the Des Moines River.” Unfortunately, there were several sets of rapids that answered that description. A heated exchange between the governors of Iowa and Missouri led to hastily assembled militias on both sides, but no shots were fired and the issue was settled by the U. S. Supreme Court.

Even today, issues surrounding the border occasionally arise. The Missouri River occasionally shifts its flow somewhat, and lands on either side might find themselves on the opposite side. Do affected residents now vote in a different state and pay on different tax rates? The courts have been able to settle the cases without resort to armed conflict.

The United States map would look much different in the Midwest if either of the first two Iowa boundary lines had been adopted. We would have had Rochester and Albert Lea, Iowa, and part of Minnesota's capital would have been Hawkeye land. On the other hand, Council Bluffs, Sioux City, Atlantic, and Storm Lake would have been part of Nebraska. The shape of Iowa was the result of political compromise.
Supporting Questions

How did surveyors contribute to border decisions?
- Field Notes of Surveyor John Sullivan, 1816 (Document)
- Map of Surveyed Part of Iowa by J.H. Colton, 1839 (Map)
- Act of Congress to Define Iowa's State Boundaries, August 4, 1845 (Document)
- Surveyor Letter from Messers Hendershott and Minor in Keokuk, Iowa, September 20, 1850 (Document)

What is the process by which a territory becomes a state?
- Land Ordinance of 1785, May 18, 1785 (Document)
- Act of Congress to Admit Iowa and Florida into the Union, March 3, 1845 (Document)
- Final Act of Congress to Admit the State of Iowa into the Union, December 28, 1846 (Document)
- Iowa Boundaries as Defined by the State Constitution, 1857 (Document)

How are/were border disputes between states settled?
- Article Detailing Border Conflict Between Iowa and Missouri, May 17, 1845 (Document)
- "The Contested Boundary" Between Iowa and Missouri, October 30, 1847 (Document)
- U.S. Supreme Court Report by Surveyors about the Iowa, Missouri Border, December 17, 1850 (Document)

How did the conflict over slavery affect decisions about state borders?
- NW Land Ordinance for Ohio River Territories, July 13, 1787 (Document)
- Mitchell's School Atlas of the United States and Mexico, 1839 (Map)
- "Boundary Between Missouri and Iowa" Article in The Daily Crescent, April 3, 1849 (Document)

*Printable Image and Document Guide

Additional Resources

The Goldfinch: Iowa History for Young People, Spring 1976: This Iowa history magazine for children was published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Iowa from 1975-2000. Each issue focuses on a theme and this particular volume highlighted the development of Iowa's government on its path to statehood.

The Goldfinch: Iowa History for Young People, Volume 4, No. 3, February 1983: This Iowa history magazine for children was published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Iowa from 1975-2000. Each issue focuses on a theme and this particular volume highlighted the creation of Iowa's boundaries.

"To Shed Our Blood for Our Beloved Territory: The Iowa-Missouri Borderland," Derek R. Everett, The Annals of Iowa, Volume 67, No. 4, Fall 2008: This Annals of Iowa essay focuses on the "border war" between Iowa and Missouri as the former approached statehood.

"The Southern Boundary of Iowa," Frank E. Landers, The Annals of Iowa, Volume 1, No. 8, 1895: This Annals of Iowa essay focuses on the conflict and compromise that led to the southern border of Iowa.

"The Border War Between Iowa and Missouri, on the Boundary Question," Alfred Hebard, The Annals of Iowa, Volume 1, No. 8, 1895: This Annals of Iowa essay features a look at the border conflict that developed between Iowa and Missouri as Iowa reached statehood.
Field Notes of Surveyor John Sullivan, 1816

Description
John Sullivan was commissioned to conduct a survey to determine the boundary between American Indian lands and lands belonging to the United States of America. The line created controversy between the State of Iowa and the State of Missouri upon Iowa's admission to the Union in 1846. Subsequent surveys relied on Sullivan's notes as a starting point for their work.

Transcript of Surveyor John Sullivan's Field Notes

Text-Dependent Questions
• Based on your analysis of John Sullivan's notes, how did he fulfill the directives in the Land Ordinance of 1785?
• Using evidence from the text, do you see any problems that might arise from the way Sullivan marked the lines? Why or why not?
Map of Surveyed Part of Iowa by J.H. Colton, 1839

Description
This map was created in 1839 and includes the surveyed parts of Iowa. It shows the division of Iowa into counties, some of which have changed. The map also shows physical features and boundary lines created by treaties with American Indians. Township lines also are drawn on the map.

Text-Dependent Questions
- Consider the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the NW Ordinance of 1787. How does this map reflect the requirements from those documents?
- Compare this 1839 map with a modern map of Iowa and a satellite image of Iowa. What differences do you see?
Act of Congress to Define Iowa’s State Boundaries, August 4, 1845

Description

This law was passed in August 1846 in response to the dispute over the border between the State of Missouri and the State of Iowa. The Act referred the matter to the U.S. Supreme Court as the final arbiter in the conflict.

Full Transcript of an Act of Congress to Define Iowa's State Boundaries

Transcribed Excerpts from an Act of Congress to Define Iowa's State Boundaries

Text-Dependent Questions

- According to this document in Section 1, upon what should the southern border of Iowa be based?
- What authority does Section 2 give to the U.S. Supreme Court in regard to the border between Iowa and Missouri?

Citation Information

Surveyor Letter from Messers, Hendershott and Minor in Keokuk, Iowa, September 30, 1850

Description
This letter was a report from surveyors commissioned by the U.S. Supreme Court to confirm a boundary line between Missouri and Iowa.

Full Transcript of Surveyor Letter from Messers, Hendershott and Minor

Transcribed Excerpts from Surveyor Letter from Messers, Hendershott and Minor

Text-Dependent Questions
• Using evidence from the text, give two examples of ways that surveyors' lines in the 1800s could be lost.
• According to the text, how did the surveyors in 1850 try to prevent confusion over their line in the future.
• According to the surveyors, what was wrong with John Sullivan's line?
Land Ordinance of 1785, May 18, 1785

Description
The Land Ordinance of 1785 was passed by the U.S. Congress under the Articles of Confederation. It laid out the process by which lands west of the Appalachian Mountains were to be surveyed and sold. The method of creating townships and sections within townships was used for all U.S. land after 1785.

Full Transcript of the Land Ordinance of 1785

Transcribed Excerpts from the Land Ordinance of 1785

Text-Dependent Questions
• According to the text, what were the key tasks surveyors needed to do to fulfill the land ordinance?
• What suggestions does the text give to surveyors in marking lines?
• How were the surveyors and geographers to make certain they marked straight lines?

Citation Information
United States Continental Congress, King, Rufus & William Samuel Johnson, “An ordinance for ascertaining the mode of disposing of lands in the Western Territory: Be it ordained by the United States in Congress assembled, that the territory ceded by individual states to the United States, which has been purchased of the Indian inhabitants, shall be disposed of in the following manner,” 18 May 1785. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Act of Congress to Admit Iowa and Florida into the Union, March 3, 1845

Description
This is a document from the U.S. Congressional Record. These pages show the congressional acts that brought Iowa and Florida into the Union. Iowa was admitted as a free state and Florida was admitted as a slave state, according to their respective state constitutions. The concurrent admission of the two states allowed the U.S. Senate to remain balanced in regard to the number of senators from free and slave states.

Full Transcript of an Act of Congress to Admit Iowa and Florida into the Union

Transcribed Excerpts from an Act of Congress to Admit Iowa and Florida into the Union

Text-Dependent Questions
• According to the document, what steps have both Iowa and Florida taken to be admitted into the Union?
• According to the document, where is the southern border of Iowa? What conflict might arise by the wording?
• In the antebellum period in U.S. history, states were generally allowed to join the Union in pairs. Why were Iowa and Florida admitted at the same time? Why does the legislation not make reference to it?

Citation Information
Final Act of Congress to Admit the State of Iowa into the Union, December 28, 1846

Description
This Act of Congress is the final step in Iowa's admission into the Union. The Act references the conflict over the boundaries defined in an 1845 Act of Congress. This law also states that Iowa followed the NW Ordinance by forming a republican constitution for their state.

Full Transcript of Congress' Final Act to Admit Iowa to the Union

Transcribed Excerpt from Congress' Final Act to Admit Iowa to the Union

Text-Dependent Questions
• According to the document, what steps did the people of Iowa take in order to form a government? Why would these steps be important?
• What type of government was formed by the people of Iowa?
• What questions does this document leave you in regard to the boundaries of Iowa? What sources could you use to find the answers?

Citation Information
“An Act for the Admission of the State of Iowa into the Union,” U.S. Congress, 28 December 1846. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Iowa Boundaries as Defined by the State Constitution, 1857

Description
This document is the official first constitution of the State of Iowa. Iowans participated in three constitutional conventions in 1844, 1846 and 1857 - the first constitution was rejected by voters. This version, from 1857, was approved by voters.

Transcribed Excerpt from the Constitution of the State of Iowa

Text-Dependent Question
- According to Iowa's constitution, what document established the northern border of Missouri?
- What differences do you see in how Iowa's constitution defines its southern border compared to how it defines its northern border? How might these different definitions lead to conflict?

Citation Information
“Constitution of the State of Iowa,” 1857. Courtesy of Iowa Secretary of State
Article Detailing Border Conflict Between Iowa and Missouri, May 17, 1845

Description
This document is a newspaper article that appeared in the "Weekly National Intelligencer," a Washington D.C.-based newspaper. The article appeared on May 17, 1845, and describes conflict between the state of Missouri and the territory of Iowa.

Transcript of the Article Detailing Border Conflict Between Iowa and Missouri

Printable Excerpt of the Article Detailing Border Conflict Between Iowa and Missouri

Text-Dependent Questions
• According to the article, what was the cause of conflict between Iowa and Missouri?
• Was this conflict resolved? Justify your answer.

Citation Information
“The Contested Boundary” Between Iowa and Missouri, October 30, 1847

Description
This newspaper article from 1847, after Iowa’s admission to the Union, tells how both Iowa and Missouri have hired lawyers to present their cases regarding their shared border to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Transcript of “The Contested Boundary” Article

Printable Excerpt of “The Contested Boundary” Article

Text-Dependent Questions
- Using evidence from the text, describe how the author believes the U.S. Supreme Court decision will be received by the states involved.
- The author of this article seems to think the resolution of the border conflict will “be in favor of Iowa.” How credible do you believe the author is? What factors helped you decide the authors credibility?

Citation Information
U.S. Supreme Court Report by Surveyors about the Iowa, Missouri Border, December 17, 1850

Description
This report to the U.S. Supreme Court was submitted by surveyors who had been commissioned to re-survey the southern border of Iowa after Missouri and Iowa sued each other. The surveyors particularly point out the difficulty of confirming the line surveyed in 1816 by John Sullivan.

Full Transcript of U.S. Supreme Court Report by Surveyors about the Iowa, Missouri Border

Transcribed Excerpts from the U.S. Supreme Court Report by Surveyors about the Iowa, Missouri Border

Text-Dependent Questions
- According to this report, what caused problems for the surveyors when they tried to determine a previous surveyor's line?
- How did the surveyors try to prevent future confusion with the line they were marking?
NW Land Ordinance for Ohio River Territories, July 13, 1787

Description
This ordinance was passed July 13, 1787, and it specified the steps necessary for the territories north and west of the Ohio River to become states on the same footing as the original 13. It also outlined a Bill of Rights to be guaranteed in the territories. The plan put forth in this document has been the guiding document for states to enter the Union since it was approved.

Full Transcript of NW Land Ordinance for Ohio River Territories

Transcribed Excerpts from NW Land Ordinance for Ohio River Territories

Text-Dependent Questions
• Based on the excerpts above, outline the steps a territory needs to take in order to become a state.
• What do you think are the three most important rights guaranteed to inhabitants of the NW territory?
• Using your knowledge of U.S. history in the late 1700s, why do you think Article Six is significant?

Citation Information
Mitchell’s School Atlas of the United States and Mexico, 1839

Description
This map appeared in Mitchell’s School Atlas in 1839. It shows the territories formed from the Louisiana Territory Purchase as well as several states that had already been carved from Louisiana Territory. The Iowa territory is shown in pink.

Text-Dependent Questions
- Compare and contrast this 1839 map with a current U.S. map. What is the same? What is different? What observations can you make about the border of Iowa territory compared to the border of the modern state?
- Refer back to the Act of Congress to Admit Iowa and Florida into the Union, March 3, 1845. Why would a conflict about Iowa’s southern border relate to the issue of slavery?

Citation Information
“Boundary Between Missouri and Iowa” Article in The Daily Crescent, April 3, 1849

Description
This newspaper article appeared in the New Orleans newspaper, The Daily Crescent. The article announced that the conflict over the border dispute between the states of Iowa and Missouri was settled. Iowa had been admitted as a state in December 1846, with the border in question. The ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court settled the issue.

Transcript of “Boundary Between Missouri and Iowa” Article

Printable Excerpt of “Boundary Between Missouri and Iowa” Article

Text-Dependent Questions
• According to text, what is Iowa's southern boundary based on?
• Based on evidence from the text, what state “won” the case? How could the “very small slave population ... unexpectedly attached to Iowa by the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States...” impact both Iowans and Missourians?

Citation Information