

# Borderlands of the Southwest: An Exercise in Geographical History

Stephen J. Thornton

In American history courses and textbooks, the main narrative starts and remains in the vicinity of the English colonies and the political tradition that emanated from them. Of course, this mental geography conforms to the tradition laid down by the first writers of American history textbooks, who were themselves Easterners.<sup>1</sup> They created a mental geography, including place, space, region, and movement, that relied on the East as the touchstone for the location, boundaries, and vantage points in American history. This came to be considered what national history is and it persists to the present day.<sup>2</sup>

But judged by criteria such as length of time and the direction from which one looks—in schoolbooks, national history is understood to move from east to west—it is possible to look at American history in other ways. An alternative mental geography—other places, movements, and developments on the North American continent and its periphery—challenges the standard account of American or United States history. Spanish exploration and settlement in what is now the American Southwest, for instance, present an alternative perspective on “American” history. In this perspective, the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, is no more a starting point of American history than the contemporaneous founding of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Santa Fe, like Jamestown, is part of a continuous tradition within what are now the boundaries of the United States. These traditions do not always, however, play out in the same ways. For example, the Spanish settlement at Santa Fe co-existed with nearby independent indigenous peoples for two centuries or more, while on the New England frontier and during the early years of the republic, Indian “removal” was the norm. Historian Juliana Barr even notes

that the first “Thanksgiving” in what is now the United States may have been at the site of present-day El Paso, Texas.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the standard account. In the standard account, the Spanish, Latinos, and Latin Americans are only treated in any depth in American history during selected periods.<sup>4</sup> In terms of what is now the American Southwest, these periods are: (1) the era of the early explorers and conquerors of the New World, (2) conflict over Texas, New Mexico, and California in the mid-nineteenth century, and, (3) in contemporary society (from the civil rights era to the present). If one takes the current borders of the United States as a proxy for the scope of American history, Hispanic peoples have always formed a significant part of the American experience, yet they play a relatively minor role in school curricula and textbooks.

## **Geography in American History Courses**

The boundaries between the subjects of geography and history were once less clearly demarcated than now. Nineteenth-century geography textbooks, for example, considered social characteristics of regions such as religion,

government, and the history of the land’s inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> But as secondary schools burgeoned toward the nineteenth century’s end, historians and educators called for secondary-school American history to be focused on a narrative of political events.<sup>6</sup> This did not rule out attention to geography in the study of American history, but it was one factor that tacitly devalued its importance.

Geography has continued, of course, to have a definite presence in elementary-school American history in topics such as culture realms of Native American groups, explorers, territorial expansion, and how colonists and pioneers lived. In this approach, methods employing maps, pictures and photographs of physical and human features, climatic data and other physical data readily find use. Significantly, the topics generally taught in elementary programs come from earlier rather than recent American history. This probably reinforces the faulty notion that geography mostly contributes to historical explanations of periods when North America was wilder and less populated. Once frontier days came to an end, so to speak, the significance of geography in American history tends to get discounted. Thus, an emphasis on recent American history, which constitutes much of what adolescents study, tends to omit explicit attention to geography.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the perspective adopted here is that geographical assumptions, constructs, tools, and perspectives pervade the study of American history. These may be ignored, of course,

but their significance is undiminished because geography is always more than a neutral setting for historical events: “it enters,” Dewey noted, “into the very make-up of the social happenings that form history.”<sup>8</sup>

There are at least three senses in which geography is an indispensable complement to history. First, the scope of American history can only be determined by an explicit or assumed set of places, boundaries, and system of spatial relations, all of which have changed over time. So a geographic question—where is America or the United States?—must be answered before an historical question can be posed.

Second, geographic constructs and tools such as maps need to be treated as interpretive. As will be explored below, how we map the world is mentally and culturally constructed, not merely a dispassionate rendering of physical facts. How we make sense of history depends on prior questions to do with mentally- and socially-constructed ideas about place names, regions, sense of place, mental maps, environmental perception, and the like.

Third, geographical forces enter into historical cause-effect relationships. Once in a while, social studies educators draw our attention to this. June Chapin, for example, identifies the following topics as ones in which geography should be considered: “what the Americas were like before 1492, the land features of the various European claims in the New World, land of the thirteen colonies, what the land was like in further exploration and settlement of ‘the West,’ transportation difficulties linked to geographic features, and the growth of cities.”<sup>9</sup> (p. 170).

Chapin’s list is instructive; however, it may perpetuate the notion that generally geography is relevant to American history only when humans are interacting with a largely unharnessed nature. There turn out to be many other topics beyond what Chapin cites, which might include, for instance, the persistent rural-urban voting split, suburbanization, gated communities, urban renewal, and the

interstate highway system. Chapin’s approach is limited in another sense as well: her transportation example seems to imply that geography is more notable for the problems it causes (such as obstacles blocking transportation) than for the opportunities it provides. Attention is also needed to the natural advantages afforded by location, such as San Francisco being at the mouth of an estuary with easy access to California’s central valley.

In the case of the American Southwest, geographical history is an important counterweight to confounding an “Eastern” perspective with the entire national experience. The region’s relative location near Mexico, for instance, gives its historical development a character different from the rest of the United States because of events such as armed incursions across the national boundary in the early twentieth century as well as persistent issues such as migration. Continental expansion also took a distinctive form in the Southwest. Except for the relatively small area of the Gadsden Purchase, the American Southwest was acquired through wars—one fought by Texans and one by the United States—with Mexico. With the obvious exception of Native Americans, other regions in North America which the United States added to its national territory—Louisiana, Florida, Oregon, and Alaska—were secured from the European powers of France, Spain, Great Britain, and Russia, respectively, by means short of war. The aridity of the Southwest also makes its settlement and population distribution distinct from the United States east of the 98th meridian. For example, in the Southwest, river transportation was lacking, irrigation was usually required for agriculture, and the development of large urban areas such as Los Angeles was dependent upon shipping in water from distal areas.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Scope of American History**

Depending on where one draws boundaries and when one looks, American history takes on different shapes. Since this

question is already answered, generally with scant if any justification, by the scope of any American history course, it would be worth beginning an American history course by having students debate its scope. Commonly, American history is defined in national terms which, as noted, begins in the East and moves westward with territorial expansion. But is American history confined to the boundaries of the United States? Is American history even restricted to the North American continent (and how is that continent defined)? Or does it extend into the islands of the Caribbean? What of influences from further afield? How does the American experience appear different depending on which of these perspectives is adopted?

In recent decades, historians have devoted considerable attention to, for example, an “Atlantic” perspective. In this view, influences and people from the Old World continents of Europe and Africa and trans-Atlantic connections need to be considered in a proper scope of American history. Others, such as Karin Wulf, propound a “continental” perspective located in the heart of North America—not its Atlantic periphery—claiming it brings a more representative and coherent meaning to “the first half of the American history survey,” and trace through the ramifications of what counts as history in that scheme, versus a national or Atlantic perspective.<sup>11</sup> A continental perspective features various groups converging from different directions in what is now the center of the United States.

### **Mental Geographies**

Geography, as noted, is more than a neutral description of the Earth. How geography is thought about is part of its meaning. For example, the idea of a “western hemisphere” has served political purposes for the United States. Defining the western hemisphere as an entity distinct from the rest of the planet was invoked by presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy to justify American interventions south of its

# TEACHING IDEAS

## Borderlands of the Southwest

### Small group activity

As a way of tracing some of the Spanish legacy in the American Southwest, assign students to small groups and provide each group with an atlas. Create four groups. Each group will search for Spanish names of a particular type of geographic feature: (1) rivers, (2) landforms such as mountain ranges, (3) towns and cities in Texas and New Mexico, (4) towns and cities in California. Explain to students that the distribution of many urban centers today still conforms to patterns laid out by the Spanish, such as the line of missions running north from San Diego.

### Map analysis

Ask students to examine the map of the United States in 1821 (it can be downloaded from <http://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/2300/2324/2324.pdf>). According to the map, which European powers claimed land that is now part of the United States? Draw particular attention to Spanish possessions in the southwest in 1821 that later became part of the United States. Tell students that Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. Point in particular to the Rio Grande as one boundary for land that is now American. Provide students with a copy of the map and ask them to pencil in the states that are formed wholly or partly from land that was once Spanish or Mexican.



United States in 1821  
Albert Bushnell Hart, LL.D., *The American Nation* Vol 14 (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1906)  
Downloaded from Maps ETC, on the web at <http://etc.usf.edu/maps> [map #02324]

Courtesy of Dr. Roy Winkelman, Florida Center for Instructional Technology, University of South Florida

### Historical photograph

The objective of this activity is to get students to hypothesize. The details of the answers are less important than building understanding that developments in the Southwest rested on contributions from both Native Americans and the Spanish and there is visual

evidence of this. Project or distribute copies of an image of the church at Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico. It can be viewed or downloaded from the National Archives Picture Branch: [www.archives.gov/research/ansel-adams/](http://www.archives.gov/research/ansel-adams/)



photographer Ansel Adams (courtesy of the National Archives)

Initially at least, do not reveal that the photograph was taken as late as 1941. Ask students: When do you think this building was constructed? What type of building is it? Reveal that the building is in the United States. Ask, in what region of the United States do you think it is located? Why? What materials is the building made of? What features do you think may have been created by indigenous peoples and which by the Spanish?

### Primary Source Activity

Tell students that President Woodrow Wilson had kept the United States out of World War I. By 1917, Germany thought it could win the war by sinking ships sailing to Great Britain. The German government was concerned that this might bring the United States into the war against Germany. Obtain a copy of the Zimmermann Telegram from *100 Milestone Documents* at the National Archives site ([www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=60](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=60)). The telegram contains a proposal by Germany of an alliance with Mexico that would enable Mexico to reconquer lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Review the text with students. It may be necessary to explain to students what a telegram is. Ask students: Why might Germany want Mexico to recover territory once lost to the United States? Ask them how the revelation of the telegram's content might have affected how Americans felt about staying out of the war with Germany.<sup>1</sup>

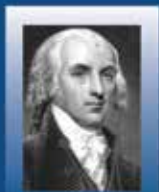
### Note

1. For additional teaching ideas on this document, see Mary Alexander and Marilyn Childress, "Document of the Month: The Zimmermann Telegram," *Social Education* 45, no. 4 (April 1981): 266–269.

## Crafting Freedom Workshop

**“Crafting Freedom: Black Artisans, Entrepreneurs and Abolitionists of the Antebellum Upper South”** or simply the **“Crafting Freedom Workshop”** is a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshop offered to K-12 educators in two sessions: **June 20–25, 2013** and **June 27–July 2, 2013**. The workshop provides a stipend for travel and living expenses and the opportunity to study the lives and works of individuals such as Thomas Day (1801–ca. 1861) a highly successful furniture maker and business man, and Elizabeth Keckly (1818–1907) a famous dress designer, author and social activist of the Civil War era. They, like other featured “freedom crafters,” created opportunities and achieved greater freedom for themselves and others through their actions and ingenuity, through their works of art and craft, and through their spoken and written words. Visits to off-the-beaten-track black history landmarks enhance this one-of-a-kind learning experience in the North Carolina Piedmont. Application deadline is **March 4, 2013**. For more information, see: <http://thomasday.net/crafting-freedom-workshop>

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borders. The term “western hemisphere” has also proven sufficiently flexible to justify actions on the eastern side of the Atlantic such as when, before Pearl Harbor, Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Navy to patrol the hemisphere as far as the Azores.<sup>12</sup>

### Geographical Forces

Geographical forces sometimes bear fairly direct relation to historical cause and effect. For example, the Dust Bowl on the southern Great Plains during the 1930s resulted in thousands of migrants heading to California. Likewise, when Mexican independence opened up Santa Fe, New Mexico, for trade with the United States, shorter distances and easier terrain from the American trading centers explains much about why Santa Fe’s economy became more tied to American traders than Mexican ones.

Other geographical forces may be less obvious. Much of the growth of Los Angeles in the late nineteenth century and thereafter can be attributed to shrewd marketing that capitalized on the mild and pleasant climate of the area. Further, students can be shown on a map how the gap in the mountains to the east of Los Angeles made it a desirable terminus for a railroad linking directly to eastern markets rather than through the circuitous route via Sacramento, terminus of the first transcontinental railroad. Its role as a transportation hub was an important reason why Los Angeles by 1920 had overtaken San Francisco as the largest city in California.

In the accompanying textbox, there are teaching ideas that illustrate the principles I have been laying out. Except perhaps for the primary-source exercise, the activities should be easily adapted to different grade levels.

### Conclusion

Conscious that the American history curriculum is already crowded, I have tried to introduce ideas that will fit easily with, or are quick additions to, what is already taught. In the case of the American Southwest, explicit attention to

the geographic context of history seems especially significant to understanding historical developments. At minimum, the region’s geography and history gives the region a character in many ways distinct from the rest of the nation. ●

### Notes

1. Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979).
2. Juliana Barr, “Beyond the ‘Atlantic World’: Early American History as Viewed from the West,” *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 1 (January 2011): 13-18; Patricia Nelson Limerick, “The Case of the Premature Departure: The Trans-Mississippi West and American History Textbooks,” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1380-1394.
3. Barr, 15.
4. Bárbara C. Cruz, “Don Juan and Rebels under Palm Trees: Depictions of Latin Americans in U.S. History Textbooks,” *Critique of Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (September 2002): 323-342.
5. Susan Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 94.
6. Stephen J. Thornton, “Legitimacy in the Social Studies Curriculum,” in *Education across a Century: The Centennial Volume*, ed. Lyn Corno (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 2001), 185-204.
7. Thornton, “Geography in American History Courses,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 7 (March 2007): 535-538.
8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 211.
9. June R. Chapin, *A Practical Guide to Middle and Secondary Social Studies* (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003), 170.
10. Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).
11. Karin Wulf, “No Boundaries?: New Terrain in Colonial American History,” *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 1 (January 2011): 9.
12. Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR, the War President, 1940-1943* (New York: Random House, 2000), 229

**STEPHEN J. THORNTON** is a professor and chair of the Department of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida, Tampa. He is author of *Teaching Social Studies That Matters*.