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FROM FRONTIER TO BORDERLANDS

During the relatively brief span from Mexican independence in 1821 to the end of the war between the United States and Mexico in 1848, Spain's far-northern frontier territories became borderlands—the relatively undefined and frequently contested terrains between Mexico and the United States. Many patterns and processes that first appeared during this twenty-seven-year period would shape border society for the following century. Mexico sought to integrate the area into the national mainstream by building political and economic ties. But attempts to make the region part of the nation fell short of success. The era culminated in the acquisition of a great portion of the Mexican North by the United States.

Following independence, the two key frontier institutions—the presidio and the mission—fell into irreversible decline. The presidio lost its imperial purpose, and resident soldiers focused their energies on non-defensive activities. The missions came under sharp attack from Mexican liberals, who denounced them for oppressing the native population, accumulating nonproductive wealth and property, and interfering in affairs of State. Local pressure to secularize the missions, which would turn them into parish churches and pueblos, fundamentally resulted from non-religious settlers' desire for land, however. By the mid-1830s, secularization was a fact in Texas, Arizona, California, and New Mexico.

Mexico's inability to integrate its northern frontier into the country's core reflected, above all, the difficulties of establishing political stability after independence. A complete collapse of effective administration in the North doomed the borderlands to remain on the periphery economically and politically. Although Mexicans understood the challenges of incorporating the region into national life, efforts to do so were overshadowed by the exigencies of nation building. Fewer than fifteen thousand Mexicans lived in the area, and frontier and central regions did not identify with one another. Independence encouraged a return to local autonomy rather than a strengthening of ties between the North and the center.

Several additional factors pulled central Mexico and the borderlands apart. In

1814 the first national constitution created a federal republic of states and territories in which states achieved considerable autonomy in decision making but territories came under the direct control of the Mexican Congress. Under the 1814 constitution, California and New Mexico were territories, but Congress never enacted regulations for their internal governance. Texans reacted bitterly to the loss of their voice when the Mexican constitution joined them to the more powerful and populous Coahuila as the state of Coahuila y Texas. In 1836, President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna introduced a new centralist constitution that converted the states into military departments, a status they would retain until 1847. The result of these actions in the North was a growing sense of separation from central authority. Relations between periphery and center became increasingly strained.

Another force that tended to move the North out of the central Mexican sphere of influence was commerce. Illegal trade with French, English, and U.S. citizens had existed under Spain, but commerce with foreigners increased dramatically after the young nation officially authorized such trade in 1821. The bulk of business was with the United States and Europe rather than with central Mexico. American farm products and British manufactured goods were exchanged for a variety of Mexican frontier products; hides from California; mules from New Mexico; and wheat, salt, silver, tallow, and other items from throughout the borderlands area. North American and European merchants established themselves in ports and cities, providing both capital and trade goods to the local population. These commercial links strengthened the economic independence of the North and tied it ever more closely to the United States.

Border society underwent several important changes during the early national period. The most notable was the decline in sedentary, native population and the increase in the numbers of Europeans and mestizos. Under Mexican rule after 1823, the natives of the borderlands became citizens, gaining an equal legal footing with European Americans. In practice, however, they were subject to the whims of local government, they were compelled to pay special taxes, and their movements were sometimes restricted. They were steadily forced off the land into towns and onto ranches as laborers. In addition to typhus, smallpox, and measles, which were prevalent in the colonial period, malaria and cholera took heavy tolls. The exodus from traditional villages also caused fewer persons to be considered Native Americans, as ethnic mixing and acculturation blended identities

and categories.

The impact of immigration and colonization from the U.S. Midwest, Southeast, and eastern seaboard became clear by the 1830s. U.S. citizens sought new wealth in the mining zones of Sonora and Chihuahua and in livestock raising and commercial agriculture in Coahuila y Texas, New Mexico, and Alta California. The United States established wagon roads and subsidized stagecoach lines. The U.S. government rapidly turned Public lands over to private holders throughout the West. Mexico actively encouraged U.S. migration to the frontier after 1811, hoping that an increased population would serve as a buffer between Mexico and the territorial interests of the United States, Mexican policymakers generally considered the immigration of national and foreign colonists to the sparsely populated North to be the best way to defend settled lands against the Apache and Comanche and to hold the North within the boundaries of Mexico's territory. They offered colonists land on much more generous terms than those of the U.S. government. Mexico allocated large, inexpensive tracts to settlers from other countries, including the United States, on the condition that they become Mexican citizens.

In Texas, Mexican colonization policy proved to be a mistake. The earlier U.S. purchase of Louisiana and continued expansionist sentiment and claims caused Spain to become concerned about the fact that, even prior to Mexican independence, colonists from the United States had begun moving into the region. Local Spanish military commandants, however, welcomed the newcomers as a defense against raiding indigenous groups, U.S. citizens, many of whom came with slaves, spread into the river valleys around Nacogdoches, Brazos, and Bejar. Following the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, which established a boundary between Spain and the United States, colonization by the United States became more purposeful. In the early 1810s, Moses Austin received permission from Spanish military authorities in Coahuila to settle colonists in Texas. His contract allowed him to bring three hundred families to settle on land near the Brazos River, Passage of Mexico's colonization law of 1814 and complementary legislation by the state of Coahuila y Texas in 1825 permitted Stephen Austin to take over his father's colony. The younger Austin brought twelve hundred families to homestead land along the Brazos River. Many more settlers from the East followed both legally and illegally. European colonists, African-American slaves and freemen, and eastern North American natives swelled the population of Texas. From 1811 to 1836 the number of Mexican settlers

increased by about one-third, but that of other colonists grew much faster. By 1830, U.S. immigrants outnumbered Mexican settlers.

In contrast to the situation in Texas, U.S. citizens who migrated to New Mexico, Sonora, Sinaloa, and the Californias went initially as trappers and traders rather than as farmers and permanent settlers. The few who stayed frequently entered into commerce, milling, lumbering, crafts, and manufacturing; later they turned to farming and ranching. And the western borderlands, again unlike Texas, presented incoming U.S. citizens with an established civilian population of Spanish-speaking landholders, merchants, and craftsmen, as well as mission and Pueblo indigenous peoples who maintained the traditional practices of Mexico's colonial economy. Many newcomer merchants married into local families, thereby giving them access to local networks and economies.

During the brief borderlands interlude, there were three important changes in landholding patterns. First, there was a transition from the informal holding and use of land to formal, legal, written rights. Second, the period witnessed a shift from small family-run plots to large concentrations of land. Third, there was a virtual end to indigenous village possession of cropland, pasturage, and water, as title shifted to nonnative owners.

In Nuevo Mexico, Governor Manuel Armijo granted large tracts of public land to private entrepreneurs in an effort to extend settlement to the upper Pecos, Canadian, and Arkansas rivers. Long-time residents of New Mexico towns and the pueblo people contested these grants, defending the rights of communal ownership and protesting the sale of land to foreigners. In California, secularization of the missions released prime agricultural land and created a pool of cheap labor, both attractive resources for ambitious settlers. Between 1834 and 1846 the Mexican governors of California awarded seven hundred private land grants, over 90 percent of all grants issued during the combined Spanish and Mexican periods. Through marriage and business arrangements, U.S. entrepreneurs allied themselves with the local merchant and landholding elite and began to purchase land for investment and speculation.

In the Mexican North, too, the period saw the emergence of vast landholdings. In the northeastern states, extended families came to control huge estates. The combined property of the Sanchez Navarro family in Coahuila constituted the largest landed estate of the borderlands period. After independence, the Sanchez

Navarros doubled their colonial inheritance, mainly through foreclosure on loans to other owners of large estates. In 1840 the family acquired the Marquisate of Aguayo, making it the greatest landowner of Mexico, with holdings of over fifteen million acres.

CONFLICT BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO

By the early 1830s the experience in Texas had convinced Mexican policymakers that allowing U.S. settlers to grow to a majority in its northern frontier posed a grave danger to the new nation. By this time, immigrants from the United States outnumbered all others in Texas and Alta California. In an attempt to control immigration and bring the northern frontier firmly into its sphere of influence, the Mexican government abolished slavery and imposed high taxes. And in a move that irritated the local settlers, the government began to use convicts to settle the region.

At the same time, the sentiment of Manifest Destiny was sweeping the United States. There was a widespread belief among U.S. citizens—from frontier people to New England poets, northern abolitionists, and southern slaveholders—that it would be beneficial to both countries to absorb Mexico into the United States. Expansion was a pervasive idea in the U.S. culture of the time, widely promoted in newspapers and political speeches. The United States repeatedly offered to buy Texas; Mexico steadily refused to sell territory clearly belonging to that nation under the 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty. Finally, Mexico sent an army to Texas in an attempt to bring the region back into the national fold. When Texas and Mexico went to war, the United States refused to intervene; despite its official neutrality, however, it looked with favor on the volunteers and weapons that poured into Texas to aid the independence movement. Even without overt U.S. support, Texas won its independence in April 1836. Britain, France, and the United States recognized Texas independence the following year.

For the next nine years, Texas defended its sovereignty against constant saber rattling in Mexico. For its part the United States placed the Texas issue on a back burner until the early 1840s, when increasing European interest in the new republic fueled U.S. concerns about European expansion into the region, California, with its access to the Pacific Ocean for whaling and trade, began to attract the attention of U.S. policy-makers. U.S. interest in the West Coast sharpened when France and Great Britain expressed interest in the property. The United States offered to buy California for the price of outstanding U.S. claims against Mexico, but the Mexican government, still outraged over the loss of Texas, declined.

Diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States deteriorated during the early 1840s. Mexico refused to discuss its debt with U.S. creditors or to reopen negotiations on the boundary established in the 1819 treaty. U.S. policymakers were alarmed by the perceived threat of the potential sale of California by Mexico to Great Britain. Tensions increased when the United States annexed Texas in 1845, an act that Mexico perceived as a declaration of war. Strong factions within Mexico that welcomed a war with the United States influenced other leaders to reject offers of peace; there was a great deal of confidence in the Mexican military's ability to resist the United States. Annexation of Texas became the final act severing the tenuous connection between the two countries. After a skirmish on land that clearly belonged to Mexico, armies from both sides hurriedly moved to the Texas-Mexico border, each preparing for the hostilities that broke out in April 1846.

Between 1846 and 1848, the U.S.-Mexican war was fought to a stalemate. Winfield Scott, commander of the U.S. forces in Mexico, occupied Mexico City and forced Lopez de Santa Anna to terms of agreement. Both sides could make further gains only by bargaining. The occupation of its capital was a great humiliation to Mexico, but the war also cost many U.S. soldiers' lives. Although an All Mexico movement in the United States advocated taking the entire country, some observers worried about the expansion of slavery and the incorporation of a large, mixed-ethnicity population into the United States. The conflict was formally ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and the forced sale of one-third of Mexico to the United States. In 1853 the Gadsden Purchase completed the parcelization of Mexican territory. All told, about one-half of Mexico, including Texas, was lost to the United States by midcentury. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established a new international boundary that had immediate consequences for people residing in the now lost territories. As many as 300,000 people, many of them Mexican nationals, lived in the ceded territories and in Texas.

EARLY BORDER PHENOMENA

Changes followed immediately upon the establishment of the new border. Many towns located on or near the boundary were transformed by the new reality. Laredo was divided into two, with Nuevo Laredo established on the south bank of the Rio Grande. Tijuana, although it remained a modest village of little consequence until the mid-twentieth century, emerged in 1848, as small ranchers and merchants capitalized on the new back door

to California. After the boundary was drawn, many Mexicans migrated south into Mexico, where they founded settlements along the border. This movement was abetted by the insecurity of land tenure and continued rapid U.S. settlement on the U.S. side of the border and by the existence of family land held by returnees on the Mexican side.

One of the most significant stimuli to the growth of border towns was Mexico's campaign to repatriate its citizens to the south side of the border. The Mexican government was eager to populate its border states in an effort to avoid further U.S. incursions into its territory. Beginning in 1848, Mexico began repatriating southwestern families of Mexican descent by providing them with free land. Commissioners traveled to California, New Mexico, and Texas to recruit interested families. Established towns such as Guerrero, Mier, Camargo, Reynosa, and Matamoros grew in population as new towns such as Nuevo Laredo and Nogales were founded. Families repatriating from New Mexico founded several towns in Chihuahua, including Refugio, Guadalupe, La Mesilla, and Santo Tomás. At the turn of the century, perhaps one-quarter of the Mexican-origin population in the northern cities consisted of *repatriados* (repatriates).

New border settlements also sprang up on the U.S. side of the border, across the boundary from repatriate communities, to take advantage of trading and smuggling opportunities. In Texas, Brownsville, Rio Grande City, Eagle Pass, McAllen, El Paso, Del Rio and other small communities emerged and thrived. In Arizona, Douglas and Nogales grew as commercial centers. U.S. military outposts constructed along the new border also served to encourage the establishment of towns on the Mexican side, as was the case with Fort Duncan and Piedras Negras.

The most difficult border-region conflicts of the period involved land. Most of the Mexican citizens occupying land grants in the ceded territories held titles that were valid under Mexican law but were considered vague and inadequate by U.S. legal traditions. Such circumstances as frequent changes in administration and the slow motion of the Mexican bureaucracy made it difficult for estate holders to obtain clear titles. Within months of the beginning of the gold rush in California, the call was raised to "liberate" property held by Mexicans. Texas proved particularly problematic, since one of the conditions of its 1845 admittance to the United States had been complete control over its own lands. As a result the U.S. Congress approved the Gwin Land Act in 1851. The Board of Land Commissioners was established to analyze the validity of Spanish and Mexican land grants. Grantees had two years

to present evidence supporting their titles to occupied territories; if they were unable to document their grants, the land became part of the public domain.

In California the law touched off an orgy of speculation and squatter intrusions, as settlers moved to claim “unused” rancho lands. Mexican estate holders eventually lost the bulk of their property to lawyers, banks, and speculators. In New Mexico, where most of the lands were grants held in common by residents of former pueblos, Congress authorized the surveyor general’s office to determine the extent of pueblo holdings. By 1863 only 15 grants had been confirmed; by 1880 only 150 of 1000 claims had been acted upon by the federal government. Two-thirds of all claims were rejected; eventually, only six percent of claims were settled in favor of Mexican-era estate owners. In the meantime, as a result of the bribery of corrupt officials and the activities of speculators, thousands of acres of village and township lands passed to the federal government and were then purchased by individuals or corporations. In 1856 a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court held that, because the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo applied only to territories held prior to its signing, the treaty did not apply to Texas. In the following years, most Mexican-origin *tejanos* (Texans) lost some part of their property through “a combination of methods including litigation, chicanery, robbery, fraud, and threat.”

In most conflicts between Mexican and U.S. landholders over titles, U.S. courts ruled against petitioners of Mexican descent. The Mexican government protested, demanding compensation for damages. Responses to such complaints were ad hoc and limited in scope. The biggest winners in the land grab were U.S.-owned corporations and the federal government. Private estate owners who built up great fortunes would later invest their capital in border mining, commerce, and industry. The government would use its vast public landholdings to spur development in the West.

Midcentury witnessed the first major economic boom on the border. In January, 1848, not two weeks before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, gold was discovered in California. Large numbers of people began moving north and west to take part in the prosperity of the region. Between 1840 and 1860, 300,000 people migrated west on overland trails. The non-indigenous population of California increased from about 14,000 in 1848 to about 115,000 in 1851. This increase fueled rapid growth and development of western agriculture, trade, and industry. In the process, many border towns flourished as well, as they became swept up in the boomtime economy. The rush reshaped large areas of

the border, as migrants passed through them. Many never made it all the way to California, settling in the border region permanently. This early boom would be followed by one after another with similar patterns and rates of growth.

During the mid nineteenth century, the border region was officially recognized by the Mexican government as a special area with distinct and unique needs. Free zones, where goods could be moved back and forth across the border without paying any duty, were established in Tamaulipas and Chihuahua in 1858. Shortly thereafter, the border areas of Nuevo Leon became free zones as well. These sectors led to an economic expansion on the Mexican side, as trade and consumption of U.S. manufactures increased. Untaxed trade was eventually expanded to the entire border region in 1885. Although the existence of the free zone in these states brought significant benefits to *fronterizos* (border dwellers), it provoked opposition, particularly from merchants, in both Mexico and the United States. Many Mexicans from the interior argued, with justification, that the free zone stimulated smuggling into the rest of Mexico, that it brought unfair competition for national manufactured goods, and that it prevented the government from collecting import taxes. U.S. border merchants complained of unfair competition and large-scale smuggling into the United States as well.