

How Arizona got its Shape

East is East and West is West

On February 24, 1863 Abraham Lincoln signed legislation dividing the New Mexico Territory into two approximately equal pieces, creating the Arizona Territory out of the western half. But did you know that for years leading up to Lincoln's action, most proposals to create a separate Arizona Territory wanted to do it out of New Mexico Territory's southern half?

The story begins in 1845 when the United States annexed the Republic of Texas as a state. At the time, Texas claimed lands to the west that included much of present day New Mexico.

At the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, Mexico ceded vast southwestern lands to the United States. In 1850 The U.S. Congress established the New Mexico Territory - including parts of present-day Arizona, Nevada, and Colorado - and settled the eastern boundary of New Mexico at 103 degrees west longitude. Congress also admitted California as a state, with its eastern boundary along the Colorado River, and created a new Utah Territory.

To secure land for a southern transcontinental railroad, the U.S. negotiated with Mexico for the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, adding the southern part of present-day Arizona and the southwestern part of present-day New Mexico (Mesilla Valley) to the New Mexico Territory.

The lower part of the New Mexico Territory was largely dominated by Anglos from Texas, with the upper portion largely under the control of a large Mexican population. (Arizona was very sparsely populated compared to New Mexico.) Settlers in the southern New Mexico Territory felt that they were discriminated against by the northern portion, and complained of a lack of representation in the territorial legislature and no protection from Indian raids.

This situation led to meetings in 1856 in Mesilla and Tucson that produced a petition that the New Mexico Territory be divided into two territories by a boundary running east-west along the 34th parallel. By 1860 ten bills had been introduced into the U.S. Congress proposing a division of New Mexico Territory along an east-west line. None of these bills succeeded because Congress was deeply involved in the North-South sectional controversy that led to the Civil War.

Just before the Civil War started, on February 28, 1861, Congress established a new Colorado Territory, removing the Colorado lands from northeast New Mexico Territory.

During the Civil War, on August 1, 1861, Lieutenant Colonel John R. Baylor of Texas took possession for the Confederacy of the "Territory of Arizona," comprising all of New Mexico and Arizona south of the 34th parallel. President Jefferson Davis formally accepted Arizona into the Confederacy on January 14, 1862. However, by July that year, Union troops had "retaken" the southern part of the New Mexico Territory.

The Confederate actions finally spurred the U.S. to act on a separate Arizona Territory. But, the bill that passed Congress and that Abraham Lincoln signed on February 24, 1863, was for an Arizona Territory

that was separated from New Mexico along a north-south line approximately at the 109th meridian. It was generally thought that southern Arizona and New Mexico favored the Confederacy so a north-south line would break up this potentially hostile bloc.

In 1866 the U.S. Congress passed a bill allowing Nevada, two years after it became a state, to absorb the northwestern part of Arizona Territory, west of the Colorado River, because of perceptions that Nevada would be better able to oversee an anticipated population boom there due to discovery of gold.

The next almost half century was a nightmare for New Mexico and Arizona statehood aspirations. Members of the U.S. Congress considered that there were too few people in the Southwestern desert, that the people were uneducated and poor, and were further bothered by the proportionally large numbers of Mexicans and Native Americans.

Finally things began to move in the early 1900s. After considerable discussion of “jointure,” the idea of admitting New Mexico and Arizona to the Union as a single state, Congress finally passed legislation to admit the territories as separate states – with the now familiar boundaries. President William Howard Taft signed New Mexico into statehood on January 6, 1912, and signed for Arizona on February 14, 1912, exactly 50 years after Arizona was admitted to the Confederacy.

Sources: “The Forgotten Legacy: A Short History of the Confederate Territory of Arizona” (Robert Perkins, Sons of Confederate Veterans, July 16, 2007); Historical Atlas of Arizona (Henry P. Walker and Don Bufkin, 1986); “The Road to Statehood: Southwest Style,” (Johnny D. Boggs, Wild West, February 2012); southernnewmexico.com; The Gadsden Purchase of 1854 – Securing Mesilla Valley; Wikipedia: Arizona Territory, Compromise of 1850, New Mexico Territory, Republic of Texas.

Next time: What would things be like today Arizona had been fashioned out of the southern half of New Mexico?



A 3-cent U.S. stamp issued on Dec. 30, 1953, marked the 100th anniversary of the Gadsden Purchase.