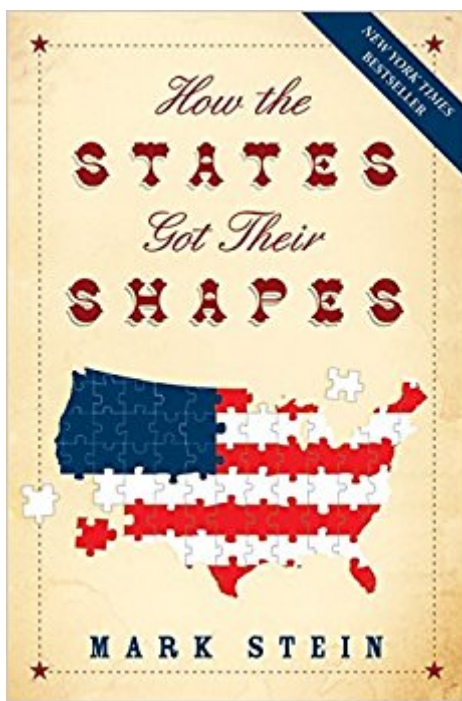


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# How The States Got Their Shapes



## Synopsis

Mark Stein is a playwright and screenwriter. His plays have been performed off-Broadway and at theaters throughout the country. His films include *Housesitter*, with Steve Martin and Goldie Hawn. He has taught at American University and Catholic University.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I was prepared to enjoy this book, but it was a disappointment. Others have commented on the poor organization and lack of compelling personal stories. It is discouraging to find blatant errors in states I know something about, so I wonder about the validity of the rest of the book. For example, he states that the western US-Canadian border was set to insure that the British kept control of the important port of Vancouver, BC. The city of Vancouver was founded about fifty years later after completion of the transcontinental railroad; no Europeans lived there when the border was established. He claims that "Yuma California" (it is in Arizona) was important since the Colorado River was navigable up to the Utah border prior to the construction of Hoover Dam. I'd like to know how many steamships regularly made their way upstream through the Grand Canyon? He makes allusions to the importance of the Southern Pacific Railroad in Arizona and New Mexico long before it was constructed. There are numerous others, but you get the idea. I think he just made stuff up that sounded reasonable to him, without doing the necessary historical research. The absence of footnotes is telling.

I won't try to compete with the detailed review above. I just want to add that I have been wondering

about the odd shapes of the states for years, and wishing for info on this topic. I was thrilled to see that this book was finally available. The book has surpassed my expectations. The details are fabulous. The ample maps fully illustrate the narrative. Each state is explained. For example, why does Rhode Island have "island" in its name? Buy the book and find out. When I lived in Mobile, I puzzled for years over Alabama's "tab" at the south. My guess was that it had something to do with giving the state a gulf shoreline. (Maybe for condos?) I was wrong. It's all Florida's fault. In short, this book is fascinating! Even if you think you're not interested, you will be. The arcane knowledge you learn will make you the star of any party, or a total bore. I love it!

This book is somewhat interesting, but overall it is very disappointing. Light on substance, heavy on repetition, and full of errors. It quickly glosses over major historical events to race through each state's borders. The choice of dealing with the states alphabetically is odd and leads to reiteration of the same facts over and over without deeper explanation. The French and Indian War is mentioned 16 times, but the causes of it are never described. Errors are frequent. In "Arizona," Stein writes about a buffer "...around the town of Yuma, California..." Yuma is in Arizona. He states that Texas joined the United States in 1846. It became a state in 1845. He never describes New Hampshire's northern border, stating that the western border of that state is the Connecticut River but completely ignoring the fact that the northern border departs from the river on its way to Maine. The book seems amateurish and incomplete. I realize the author is a playwright, but that is not an excuse. It left me wanting more.

Our library just got this book in, and it bothers me that the promotion of this book includes the falsehood that this is the first book to tackle how the states got their shapes... Just nine years ago, there was the book *The Shape of the Nation-Why the States are Shaped Like That* by Jim Feldman, which is arguably a better book and with better resources/references/footnotes. You might like to poke around a bit to see what else is out there (such as Mr. Feldman's book) before you invest the money and reading-time in this book.

There is a lot of useful information in this slim volume, but the omissions I know about without so much as cracking open a book indicate to me that the author didn't really do enough research to justify his grandiose title. I enjoyed learning such things as how a small valley was transferred from Massachusetts to New York hundreds of years after their borders were presumably set. Indeed, I wondered why Arizona didn't seek to cede the isolated and ungovernable Colorado City, home of

alleged polygamists, to Utah on the same basis. It was also interesting to learn about how some lines were mis-surveyed, though Stein could have gone into further depth as to why in some cases courts would allow this to continue. Given that nearly every school child knows about the Mason-Dixon line, it would have seemed natural for Stein to cover their work in far more detail than he did. But what really bugged me is that he totally missed a number of interesting issues relating to borders. For example, there was an arbitration between the U.S. and Canada over the border between Alaska and British Columbia in the panhandle region. This makes for interesting history, the idea that our border was subject to a vote of six people, three from each country. Stein doesn't mention it at all. There was a war called the Pig War, commemorated by a National Historic Site, over British and American claims to the San Juan and Gulf Islands off Washington. And why does the border, which follows the 49th parallel even to include a tiny, noncontiguous area called Point Roberts, suddenly head southward so that Vancouver Island isn't split between the U.S. and Canada? Not a word from Stein. Finally, Isle Royale, the largest island in Lake Superior, is (a) in the United States, not Canada; and (b) in Michigan, not Minnesota, to which it is far closer. Why? Not a word from Stein. If these things, all of at least as much interest as the questions Stein does ask in his book, are not covered, what others of which I am unaware are not covered as well?

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