

Georgia and its limits

Boundaries

continued from E1

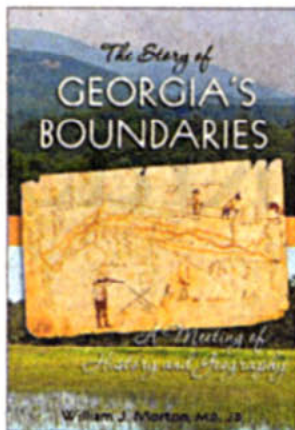
Georgia and North Carolina for control of a 50-mile swath of territory. This battle over the so-called "Nonexistent Land" started because the area was never officially surveyed; it was eventually resolved in North Carolina's favor a quarter-century later. But not before fighting broke out in 1810 between "Non-existent" residents loyal to either state.

Clearly, there's more to Georgia than meets the eye. At least there has been at various times.

"Georgia's borders have changed over a dozen times since 1732," said Morton, 72, who'll appear at the Georgia Center for the Book in Decatur later this month. "They're not just lines on a map. They're where geography and history meet to tell unique stories about the place where we live."

Morton himself arguably is a unique story. He's regularly crossed boundaries in his own life: A retired urologist and attorney (until recently he was a clinical assistant professor of urology at Emory's School of Medicine and he's a part-time magistrate judge in Fulton County), he was born in New York and grew up in West Palm Beach, Fla. A few years ago, while crossing the St. Mary's River on his umpteenth drive from Georgia to Florida, it suddenly struck him that a body of water formed the official demarcation line between the two states.

Intrigued to learn more about this mysterious subject of boundaries



"I knew zero about this topic when I started out. And everything I did know was wrong."

William J. Morton
Author

(“borders” are what separate countries, he gently imparts during an interview in Starbucks), he spent 2½ years immersed in research at state archives, historical societies, even the Smithsonian Institution.

Unable to interest any mainstream publishers in “The Story of Georgia’s Boundaries” – several found it “interesting” but “too nichey,” Morton related with a whadaya gonna do? shrug – the Brookhaven resident created Georgia History Press, hired an editor and indexer and published it himself. The book has attracted speaking invitations from the Athens Regional Library as part of its Georgia Day celebration next month, and the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History in Kennesaw.

It’s all pretty impressive for an author whose only previous book was the even more nichey “Medical Malpractice:

Handling Urology Cases.” “I knew zero about this topic when I started out,” Morton cheerfully admitted. “And everything I did know was wrong.”

He’s exaggerating, of course. Still, it can be surprising to learn from Morton’s book how much Georgia’s beginnings had to do with business considerations and national interests – England’s national interests. Georgia’s boundaries, and what lay between them, became effective bargaining chips in advancing these interests.

Beginning in 1717, it took six separate attempts before England finally established a permanent toehold in what was known as “the debatable lands,” bordered by the Savannah River and St. Augustine. England’s 13th and final colony, Georgia was established in part to serve as a strategic hedge against attempts by Spain (entrenched in what is now Florida) and France (Mississippi) to seize British land along the Atlantic coast and establish valuable trading relationships with Creek and Cherokee tribes.

Colonial Georgia got some novel perks due to its geographic importance: Silk produced here and sent back to England was exempted from import taxes. Meanwhile, Georgia was the only colony granted a financial stipend by the Crown “to assure its success and survival,” Morton writes. It must have been worth it to the Crown, which, under the treaty that ended the French and Indian War, agreed to move Georgia’s western border inward to gain control of all land east of the Mississippi.

Later, the newly independent United States of America was on its own when it came to figuring out where one state’s boundaries ended and another’s began. The coun-

try’s litigious tone was set early on: Morton describes one boudary case involving landowners in Georgia and Alabama dating to 1845. If one criticism of Morton’s book is that it goes into too much detail about this and other court cases, he gets high marks for a section on how Georgia and Tennessee have handled their long-running boundary disagreement. Or not handled it, as the case may be.

In the early 1800s, a flawed land survey mislocated the previously established boundary about a mile south of where Georgia contended it should be. Prior to Georgia legislators’ mostly symbolic attempt to annex part of Chattanooga in 2008, the two states had made about a dozen other attempts to resolve the matter. Yet as Morton drolly illustrates, meetings were agreed to but never held, letters between governors figuratively went nowhere, and bills or resolutions passed by the legislators in one state tended to be ignored by those in the other (sometimes it was the legislators in Georgia or Tennessee who failed to follow up on their own resolutions).

Yet in the end, as Morton points out, it’s not all that funny for metro Atlantans wondering where their water will come from if the area continues to grow at the current pace.

“If the 35th parallel of north latitude had been properly surveyed ... the state would be in the middle of the Tennessee River and Georgia would have plenty of water for its citizens,” he concludes. “Even though it is quite clear that it was surveyed and marked erroneously, Georgia’s northern boundary with Tennessee and North Carolina will probably never be changed.”