

Setting an International Boundary

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(Sep 5, 2022) One of our household's favorite things to do on a weekend day is to take a little drive and see the wonders of East Texas. Sometimes we venture out to discover some of the charming small towns that dot the region, other times we make a trek to a "big city" such as Tyler to get a taste of urban life, but more than anything else—given my profession—we love to get a look at historic sites. This past Labor Day weekend Sunday we took the short drive—just a bit over fifty miles—up Highway 7 to Logansport, Louisiana and then a jog back on LA state hwy. 764 and 765 to see a unique piece of history that is just back across the Texas state line in Panola County: The Republic of Texas Boundary Marker and Texas Historical Commission Historical Marker that gives some details of this obscure (it can be difficult to get to) but fascinating little bit of Texas history. It is intriguing because it is the last remaining obelisk marker placed by a special boundary initiative by the United States and the Republic of Texas to survey and mark the border between the two countries, which makes it the only "international" boundary marker completely within the borders of the present-day United States.

The border between what would eventually be Texas and the United States had for more than a century been one of those fuzzy, ambiguous lines that cause international intrigue when the U.S. and the Republic of Texas decided to clearly demarcate such a line shortly after the Republic was formed. France and Spain had debated over who controlled Texas; both nations claimed Texas as their province, although France never really pressed their claim and was generally content with



developing Louisiana. Because both nations declared Texas as their own, neither nation got around to negotiating an actual border between the two empires until 1736 when the two military commanders for each nation in the area met in Nacogdoches and agreed that the boundary was the Arroyo Hondo, a tributary of the Red River that lay between Natchitoches—the French post—and the Sabine River. When Spain received Louisiana from France after the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, Spanish authorities continued to assert that the border stretched to the Arroyo Hondo.

The first complication came when the United States bought Louisiana from the French—who had retaken it from the Spanish in 1799—in 1803. The French suggested to James Monroe, the man who negotiated the Louisiana Purchase, that the United States may be able to claim Texas as part of the Purchase. So, President Thomas Jefferson informed the Spanish Ambassador in Washington D.C. that the border between the U.S. and New Spain (Mexico) now reached to the Rio Grande (which would spark another border controversy more than forty years later). Spain resisted such a suggestion and to prove their claim they sent two men, Franciscan priest Melchor Talamantes and later José Antonio Pichardo, to detail the historic limits of Louisiana and Texas. The Spanish also moved troops from Nacogdoches over the Sabine River to repel a proposed attack by a force raised by disgraced former Vice-President Aaron Burr. The move made the United States counter with moving troops over the Arroyo Hondo. War could have resulted, but once again military men found a solution that had failed diplomats. Spanish commander Simón de Herrera and U.S. General James Wilkinson settled on the infamous “Neutral Ground” agreement in which Spanish troops agreed to remain on the west side of the Sabine (in reality they did not venture outside of Nacogdoches), and the American troops acceded to stay east of the Arroyo Hondo. That agreement remained in place until the United States and Spain signed the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1819 that set the border between the two nations at the Sabine River until the 32nd parallel, which would then run north until it intersected with the Red River.

Such was the border when Texas obtained independence from Mexico in 1836. However, Mexico had disputed the confines of the Adams-Onís Treaty throughout the 1820s, which meant that the border had gone unsurveyed. That also meant that there had been no official markers placed along the line north from the 32nd parallel. Such a task would be left to an agreement between the United States and Texas. Both nations appointed a boundary commission in 1837. John Forsyth represented the United States and Ambassador Memucan Hunt was the Texas representative. The two men hired survey crews to begin the difficult task of setting the boundary in May 1840. It was a laborious and time-consuming project, but the crews placed granite markers to denote the border between the two nations. They did not finish their work

until late June 1841. The marker on the side of the tiny road in Panola County is the only one of those left, a reminder that there once was an international border between Texas and the United States. If you have some time on your hands make the drive to see this unique bit of history. Don't worry—Google Maps can get you there and back!

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