BORDERS, MONUMENTS, AND PRESERVATION: THE UNITED STATES SECTION, INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY AND WATER COMMISSION (USIBWC) AND THE HISTORY OF THE PRESERVATION OF THE BORDER MONUMENTS

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The International Boundary and Water Commission has a line of permanent metal, masonry, and marble obelisk monuments from El Paso, Texas to the Pacific Ocean at San Diego along the Mexican border. These monuments were established after the Mexican-American War of 1848 and maintained by both nations. The total number of boundary monuments is 276, with monuments 206 to 258 in California. An examination of the monuments, the condition they are in, and the archaeology of recent refurbishing of the monuments are analyzed. We aim to examine the history of initial and later boundary monument placement, methods of maintenance, and how these archeological sites define the US/Mexico boundary.

IBWC HISTORY

The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) has a long history and lineage in the formation of the United States and westward expansion after 1848. The USIBWC is the United States section, and the Mexican section is the Comisión Internacional de Limítes y Aguas (CILA). This history is partially stated on the USIBWC website:

The IBWC traces its roots to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Gadsden Treaty of 1853, which established temporary joint commissions to survey, map, and demarcate with ground landmarks the new United States (U.S.)-Mexico boundary. The Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty of February 2, 1848 established the international boundary between the United States and Mexico. The Treaty of December 30, 1853 (Gadsden Purchase) reestablished the southern boundary of New Mexico and Arizona to enable the United States to construct a railroad to the west coast along a southern route and to resolve a question arising from the 1848 Treaty as to the location of the southern boundary of New Mexico. The Convention of 1882 established another temporary joint commission to resurvey the western land boundary between the Rio Grande and the Pacific Ocean, rebuild the old monuments, and install additional monuments where necessary. U.S. Commissioner John Whitney Barlow and Mexican Commissioner Jacobo Blanco resurveyed the borderline and increased the number of boundary monuments from 52 to 258. This survey started at the El Paso, Texas – Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua border in 1891, and concluded at the San Diego, California – Tijuana, Baja California border in 1894. Later as border populations increased during the 1900’s the Commission installed 18 additional boundary monuments for a total of 276 [International Boundary and Water Commission 2014].

This history of the monuments from the temporary joint commissions of 1848, 1853, 1882, and 1891-1896 was a work of compromise on both sides of the border with American and Mexican surveyors (Barlow et al. 1897; Rebert 2001:14).

The mapping of the border after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo situated the new United States-Mexico border based on the Mapa de los Estados Unidos de México that was drawn by John Disturnell (Rebert 2001:3). The treaty established a border running from east to west, from the Gulf of Mexico up to the “southern boundary of New Mexico” (Werne 2007:9-13). At this point, it ran northward to the “first branch of the Gila River and west till it emptied into the Rio Colorado; thence, across the Rio Colorado,
following the division line between Upper and Lower California, to the Pacific Ocean” (Rebert 2001:5). The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, being based on Disturnell’s map, gave only a certain expanse of land to the United States that was not completely defined. The loss of an enormous amount of land by the treaty only wounded Mexico’s patriotic pride, and any further loss of land would not be permitted (Werne 2007:xiii). Mexico’s pride and honor were irrevocably stained. The concept of losing more land to the United States was not to be allowed at all cost. Since the treaty gave a general concept, this could be later reinterpreted on the ground by the Mexican surveyors (Werne 2007:xiii). The boundary was to be clearly based on this map, but errors did exist. These errors greatly influenced what was on the ground compared to the maps (Rebert 2001:7). Even though the maps were not correct in the locations as depicted, both commissions knew this and adjusted for it when they arrived in El Paso in December 1850 (Rebert 2001:7). This was realized when the commissions were establishing the initial point on the Rio Grande above El Paso (Timm 1941:23) (Figure 1).

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848, the next phase was to establish and mark the international border (Werne 2007:12). After both commissions established the first border line and additionally with the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, a more defined and manageable border was established, and the original surveying was done.

The original appointee as American Commissioner was Colonel John B. Weller; first Surveyor was A. B. Gray, and Major W. H. Emory was Chief Astronomer. The Mexican Commissioner and
surveyor were General Pedro García Condé and José Salazar y Larregui (Timm 1941:23). The military of both countries were heavily involved on both sides of the survey. In the field, the initial American Commissioner was replaced by John R. Bartlett in 1849 (Weber 2010:52). The Surveyor was replaced when Gray refused to sign the map of the initial point of demarcation; he was succeeded by Major Emory (Timm 1941:24). The American commission assigned two topographical engineers, Lieutenant Whipple and Captain Hardcastle, as Emory’s assistants (Werne 2007:22). Other members were assigned as well, some military, some not. In all, this mix only caused frequent problems between the military and civilian commission members, with delays and setbacks during 1849 (Werne 2007:22).

The Emory monuments of the 1850s were markers with one aim: to demark the new border of the United States and Mexico. From the mid-1850s to the early 1900s, the commission was a work in progress, in 1889 changing to a formal commission instead of temporary entities (International Boundary and Water Commission 2014). The treaties of 1848, 1853, and 1882 were “special commissions to survey and [mark] all or parts of the land and water boundary between the United States and Mexico” (Timm 1941:13). The 1891-1896 surveys were “pursuant to the convention on July 29, 1882, to relocate the existing frontier line between the two countries west of the Rio Grande.” The 1850s commission took two years just to survey the area between the Colorado River and San Diego Bay (Weber 2010:52). All the problems leading up to the Gadsden Purchase were a result of a frontier largely not anticipated in scope and depth by the commission from the start. In the supposition of the original surveyors, “the disorganization of the United States commission, caused in part by the hysteria of the gold rush (1849), but in much greater part by the failure of the government to provide adequate money and credit, is largely to blame for the delay” to finish the survey (Weber 2010:121). The establishment of American forts along the Rio Grande and Colorado River and areas along the border were aimed to control the Indian population under Article XI of the treaty, but also to control the border during the mid to late 1800s (Griffen 1998:248). The increased military presence up to today has led to a militarization of the border that can be seen today in both physical structures and human presence (St. John 2011:202).

THE 1891-1896 BARLOW-BLANCO RESURVEY

Monuments along the border from Texas to California were originally rock, but later replaced with obelisks for permanent stature and demarcation (Figure 2). According to the report of Emory, knowing the long time that must elapse before the monuments arrive, I have, in conjunction with [the Mexican Commissioner] Mr. Salazar, to secure this [California] line beyond all cavil, and for the convenience of property holders on either side, caused monuments of a pyramidal shape, twelve feet at the base, and twelve feet high, composed of stones and earth, to be erected at the points established [Martin and Ybarra 1987:8].

This boundary was resurveyed in 1853 under the Gadsden Purchase of December 30, 1853, which either added or subtracted land to an otherwise contorted boundary (Barlow et al. 1897:12).

According to the resurvey report of 1897:

In later years settlers entered upon the lands adjacent to the boundary, and mines were discovered in its immediate vicinity. Difficulties then arose regarding the exact location of the line, it being charged that some of the original marks had been destroyed or removed. To put an end to these difficulties a convention between the two Governments was concluded at the city of Washington, July 29, 1882 [Barlow et al. 1897:13].

The convention outlined what was to be done to resurvey the border (Barlow et al. 1897:4). This convention of 1882 was “revived by the convention of February 18, 1889 and continued until October 11, 1896, by that of April 24, 1894” (Barlow et al. 1897:4).

The new monuments were instrumental for the fact that in addition to the 6 monuments, which remained to mark the California boundary, the commissioners reported that 47 had been placed along the line from the Rio Grande to
the Colorado. These were all shown upon the Mexican copy of the joint map, while upon the American copy but 46 were represented. Of these 53 boundary marks, alleged to have been placed along the entire line west of the Rio Grande, the majority were but rude piles of stone; a few only being of a durable character, and provided with proper inscriptions, while the intervals between them were found to be in some cases as great as 20 or 30 miles (32 or 48 kilometers), and in one instance 101 miles (163 kilometers). The durable monuments were, notably, Nos. 1, 2, and 3 on parallel 31° 47', and those marking the extremities of the meridian section, the latter and No. 1 being of dressed stone laid in mortar [Barlow et al. 1897:12].

The two commissions worked together under the 1882 convention, for each country had duties and costs associated with the survey, for which each country paid, with the exception of the stipulation in Article VI.
Figure 3. Monument 185 is on a mountain peak east of Yuma, Arizona (International Boundary Commission; archives of IBWC).

Article I. The expense of each reconnoitering party shall be borne by the government in whose behalf it operates. These reconnaissance parties shall report to their respective Governments, within eight months from the exchange of the ratifications of this convention —

(a) The condition of the present boundary monuments.
(b) The number of destroyed or displaced monuments.
(c) The places settled or capable of eventual settlement, where it may be advisable to set the monuments closer together along the line than at present.
(d) The character of the new monuments required, whether of stone or iron, and their number, approximately, in each case [Barlow et al. 1897:13].

Under Article II, they worked together as an “International Boundary Commission” (Barlow et al. 1897:13) (Figure 3). Article III allocated with monument replacement and other matters and set a precedent:

In rebuilding and replacing the old monuments and in providing for new ones the respective reports of the reconnaissance parties, provided by Article I, may be consulted: Provided, however, That the distance between two consecutive monuments shall never
exceed 8,000 meters, and that this limit may be reduced on those parts of the line which are inhabited or capable of habitation [Barlow et al. 1897:13].

As written in Article III, a new standard was set for the maximum distance between monuments. The monuments were also to be permanent in nature, as stated in Article IV:

Article IV. Where stone shall be found in sufficient abundance the monuments may be of stone, and in other localities shall be of iron, in the form of a simple tapering four sided shaft with pediment, rising above the ground to a height of 6 feet, and bearing suitable inscriptions on its sides. These monuments shall be at least two centimeters in thickness and weigh not less than 500 pounds each. The approximate number thereof to be required may be determined from the reports of the preliminary reconnaissance parties, and the monuments, properly cast and finished, may be sent forward from time to time to such spots as the commission may select, to be set in place at the sites determined upon as the work progresses [Barlow et al. 1897:13].

Under Article VI, the costs of the monuments and transportation to each location were to be shared by both governments (Barlow et al. 1897:13). Interestingly, Article VIII described this “present convention as continuing in force until the conclusion of said work, provided that such time does not exceed four years and four months from the date of the exchange of the ratifications hereof” (Barlow et al. 1897:14). Article IX made vandalism of the monuments a misdemeanor, punishable according to the justice of the country of the offender's nationality, if he be a citizen of either the United States or Mexico; and if the offender be of other nationality, then the misdemeanor shall be punishable according to the justice of either country where he may be apprehended [Barlow et al. 1897:14].

Today Article IX is rarely enforced, as many of the monuments are isolated behind the border walls or only accessible from Mexico (Figure 4). This is the case today, because after 9/11 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was formed and the need to keep out terrorists trumped state sovereignty along the borderlands. Vandalism of the monuments is, unfortunately a common occurrence today.

Article VIII expired before the time specified, and the convention of 1882 was convened to complete this resurvey (Barlow et al. 1897:14). Under Article II of the 1889 convention, the resurvey “is hereby further extended for a period of five years from the date of the exchange of ratifications hereof” (Barlow et al. 1897:14). Later treaties based on the relocations continued until a final report of the completion of the relocations and re-monuments was submitted to Congress on August 14, 1896. It should be noted this was completed by Lieutenant Colonel J. W. Barlow for the United States and Jacobo Blanco for Mexico, both as commissioners after whom the survey is named (Timm 1941:25). Monuments 1 to 71 are located in New Mexico, Monuments 72 to 204 are in Arizona, and 206 to 258 are in California (Figure 5).

The directives at the time for official documents are exemplary in content, form, and decorum as to what was to be done and what was done (Barlow et al. 1897:3, 13). Further information on the survey gave the convention members the duty to repair and accept as “positive boundary markers, the monuments by the International Boundary Commission of 1849-1856” (Barlow et al. 1897:17). This boundary was then a permanent line of Manifest Destiny and territorial expansion of the United States. It set the boundary as the line between the two nations, one that was only a point before but now is slowly becoming a wall.

MONUMENT 258

The monuments in California extend from the Colorado River to San Diego and end at number 258, just above the Pacific Ocean. Monument 258 in San Diego was originally a marble monument shipped from New York City (Figure 6). Captain Edmund L. F. Hardecastle ordered this monument and
six iron monuments to be transported around Cape Horn to San Francisco. The new monument arrived in San Diego in March 1851 (Hughes 2007:141). On July 14, 1851, Hardcastle and Ricardo Ramirez of Mexico (Representative), along with other dignitaries on both sides of the border, held a dedication at the monument and deposited a sealed bottle at the base containing a sheet of parchment commemorating their actions, this location being the initial point of the 1849-51 boundary survey (United States Senate Executive Document 1849:58-59). Additionally, a newspaper article in the San Diego Herald of July 24, 1851 states a “time capsule” was deposited below the marble monument, and another capsule was “encased in a copper tube” when the monument was replaced in 1894 (CWH & Associates 2011:2; San Diego Herald, 24 July 1851:2). The 160th anniversary was in 2011, and the USIBWC had a study done by CWH & Associates for this. The study reported that the 1894 capsule may have been added to the 1851 capsule, or they may have been the same; there may be two capsules under or near the monument now (CWH & Associates 2011:2).
Figure 5. Monument 221 as it is today (United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission, Boundary and Realty), and Monument 256 (Google Earth street view photo) in California.

Figure 6. Monument 258, San Diego, California, 1873 and 1894 on right, Pacific Ocean in background. Note that the top capital is missing in the 1894 photo (Racine & Laramie Ltd, Collection, Archives of USIBWC; United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission Archives).
THE MONUMENTS TODAY

The monuments run from the Colorado River to San Diego in California. Monument 206 was the easternmost monument in California. It was located in the flood plain of the Colorado River but was washed away during a flood and has not been replaced.

Monument 207 recently was undercut on the Mexican side of the border by people needing borrow material; over the course of many years, it became increasingly unstable. It is located on loose river sediments, but at the time of its construction it was on high, stable ground (Figures 7 and 8). Stabilization of the monument by Mexico began in 2013 and was completed early in 2014. Construction consisted of rock and cement cribbing, stabilizing it on the Mexican side. This continued up the side of the area to the middle of the monument (the United States boundary). This is one example of both commissions working together to fix these historic monuments and preserve them.

The area along the United States-Mexico border has changed dramatically over the last 116 years. This is seen in an examination of one photograph of Monument 221 from 1890 (Figure 9). How the border region has changed compared to the time this photo was taken is shown by a Google Earth street view photo of 2010 (Figure 10). Many of the monuments in California are behind the border wall and only accessible from Mexico. Vandalism to these monuments occurs, as seen in Figure 10. The USIBWC, with CILA, attempts to do what is possible to protect the monuments (Figure 11).

Cooperation by USIBWC and CILA in maintenance, construction, and cleaning is an ongoing process in which both work together to preserve these historic monuments. In 2007 and 2008, an Interagency Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the USIBWC was signed (International Boundary and Water Commission 2008). This MOA was in response to the Patriot Act of 2001 and the ensuing increased presence by DHS personnel along the border. Construction of fences, towers, and other security measures along the border has only isolated the monuments in scope and feeling. It is hoped that in the future access to the monuments from both sides of the border will once again be free. As the first Cultural Resources Specialist in the history of the USIBWC, the senior author is working on site nominations, site forms, and, hopefully, National Historical Landmark status for each monument in the future.

This is just a short history of the California IBWC monuments and what the IBWC (USIBWC and CILA) has completed in preservation. In all, this is a partial story in the larger history of the United States of America from 1848 to today (Figure 12).

The views, opinions, or statements presented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the IBWC or the USIBWC.

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Figure 7. Sometimes the monuments, which are historic sites, need stabilization work. Monument 207 repairs, near Yuma, Arizona (United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission; G. Duran, photographer).
Figure 8. Stabilization work on Monument 207 on Mexico side of the border (United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission; G. Duran, photographer).

Figure 9. Monument 221 from the 1890s Barlow-Blanco Survey (International Boundary Commission; Archives of USIBWC).
Figure 10. Monument 221 today (United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission; Google Earth Street View).
Figure 11. Monument 258, San Diego, California; Pacific Ocean in background. From the 1890s Barlow-Blanco Survey (International Boundary Commission; archives of USIBWC).
Figure 12. Today, many of the monuments are behind the border fence (United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission; David J. Taylor, photographer).