



International Boundary Study

No. 157 – July 23, 1976

Guatemala – Honduras Boundary

(Country Codes: GT-HO)

**The Geographer
Office of the Geographer
Bureau of Intelligence and Research**

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GUATEMALA – HONDURAS BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Guatemala–Honduras boundary is 256 kilometers (159 miles) long and extends between the Caribbean Sea and the tripoint with El Salvador on Cerro Monte Cristo. It is demarcated throughout by pillars or rivers. In addition to rivers, the boundary follows various water divides and straight line sectors.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Boundary disputes between Guatemala and Honduras began shortly after the dissolution of the Federation of Central America in 1843. Unsuccessful attempts were made to resolve the controversies by treaties in 1845, 1895, and 1914. In accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Arbitration, signed in Washington on July 16, 1930, the disputed line was submitted to a Special Boundary Tribunal presided over by Charles Evans Hughes, Chief Justice of the United States, for a decision on the delimitation of the boundary.¹

The award of the Special Boundary Tribunal was based on the principle of *uti possidetis* as of 1821. Thus the award referred to the territory under the administrative control of Guatemala and Honduras at the time of their independence from Spain on September 15, 1821. The Treaty of Arbitration did not, however, completely limit the Tribunal in its deliberations to the line of *uti possidetis*; it provided that modifications could be made if it were determined that the subsequent development of the states had established significant interests beyond the line. Because available topographical data were inadequate for the boundary work in many of the disputed areas, the Tribunal directed the making of an aerial survey.

With respect to the line of *uti possidetis*, the Tribunal decided that: (1) the claim of Honduras to the territory adjacent to the Caribbean coast between the Rio Motagua and British Honduras (Belize) was not sustained; (2) east of the Rio Motagua along the Caribbean coast, available information did not afford a sufficient foundation for the assignment of the Omoa area and the contiguous Cuyamel area to either Guatemala or Honduras; (3) available data did not afford an adequate basis for the assignment of the territory from the Rio Motagua eastward to the Cordillera del Merendon to either of the two states; and (4) in the southern part of the disputed territory, administrative control was not continuous.

The Tribunal then was able to establish a definitive Guatemala–Honduras boundary between El Salvador and the Caribbean Sea. From the tripoint with El Salvador to a point

¹ Alexander Marchant. *Boundaries of the Latin American Republics, an Annotated List of Documents, 1493–1943*, Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944, State Department Publication, Inter-American Series 24, pp. 317–19.

near the confluence of the Rio Motagua and the Rio Managua, the Tribunal determined that the boundary should follow the line of actual possession of the respective states except where departures were necessary for practical considerations. Between the referenced point and the Caribbean Sea, the boundary was fixed with regard to developments that each of the two states had made in good faith since their independence.

Guatemala was confirmed in its possession of the territory north and west of the Rio Motagua, and of the territory lying east and south of that river to the extent that it had taken control since independence. Honduras was confirmed in its possession of the Omoa and Cuyamel areas, which it had held for about 100 years, and of its developments to the west of the Cordillera del Merendon.

On January 23, 1933, the Special Boundary Tribunal gave an opinion and an award which affords the present delimitation of the Guatemala–Honduras boundary. A supplemental treaty signed in Washington on July 16, 1930, had provided for the demarcation of the boundary by pillars or monuments. In consultation with the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, Chief Justice Hughes appointed Sidney H. Birdseye of Washington, formerly the senior engineer in charge of the aerial survey directed by the Tribunal, as Chief of the demarcation commission.

The commission erected 1,028 pillars and completed its work between 1933 and 1936.² On March 26, 1936, a protocol was signed by Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador accepting Cerro Monte Cristo as the tripoint of the boundaries of the three states.

III. ALIGNMENT

The delimitation of the Guatemala–Honduras boundary in accordance with the opinion and award of January 23, 1933, is as follows:³

...from the Salvadorean boundary at the point nearest the summit of Cerro Montecristo, north straight to the headwaters of the nearest stream tributary to the Frio or Sesecapa river, northerly along the median line of this tributary downstream to its confluence with the Frio or Sesecapa river, along the median line of that river to its confluence with the creek called El Chaguiton, along the median line of that creek upstream to its headwaters and continuing due north on the summit of the water divide between the drainage basins of the Atulapa and Frio or Sesecapa rivers, easterly straight to the southernmost and higher of the twin peaks of Cerro Tecomapa, easterly straight about 400 meters to the confluence of two small creeks

² *Informe Detallado de la Commission Tecinca de Demarcation de la Frontera entre Guatemala y Honduras*, Washington, W.F. Roberts Company, 1937, and *Mapas Que Acompanan de la Comision Tecnica de Demarcation del la Frontera entre Guatemala y Honduras* (1936).

³ Gordon Ireland. *Boundaries, Possessions, and Conflicts in Central and North America and the Caribbean*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1941, pp. 93–94.

forming a tributary of Tecomapa or Agua Caliente creek, along the median line of that tributary downstream easterly to its confluence with Tecomapa or Agua Caliente creek, along the median line of Tecomapa or Agua Caliente creek downstream northeasterly to its confluence with the Olopa river, along the median line of the Olopa river downstream to its confluence with La Brea creek, along the median line of La Brea creek upstream to a point 60 meters below the confluence of that stream with El Incienso creek, easterly straight [2 miles] to the highest point of Cerro Oscuro, generally easterly along the continental water divide to its junction with the water divide of the drainage basin of the Blanco river, northerly along the water divide between the drainage basins of the Chanmagua and Blanco rivers to its junction with the water divide of the drainage basin of La Raya or Pezote creek, northerly straight to the headwaters of the nearest tributary of La Raya or Pezote creek, northerly downstream along the median line of said tributary to its confluence with La Raya or Pezote creek, northerly downstream along the median line of that creek to its confluence with the Playon river, upstream along the median line of the Playon river to its confluence with the Zanjón de Laguna Verda, northeasterly straight to the confluence of the Templador and Sulay rivers, northwesterly straight to the highest point of Cerro Ojo de Agua del Amate, northerly straight to the summit of Cerro San Cristobal, northwesterly straight to the summit of Cerro Sepulturas, northwesterly straight to Bonete del Portillo, northerly straight to Cerro Jute, northeasterly along the crest of the ridge on which Cerro Jute is situated to the water divide between the drainage basins of San Antonio and Tizamarte creeks, northeasterly along the water divide between the drainage basins of Seses miles creek and the Pexja river to its junction with the water divide of the drainage basin of the Managua river, northerly along the water divide between the drainage basins of the Pexja and Managua rivers to a point at the junction of the secondary water divide in the Managua river basin at the settlement called Palmichal, along this secondary water divide in a northeasterly direction to the Managua river, along the median line of the Managua river downstream to the mouth of the first creek north of the village of Aldea Nueva, northeasterly straight [12 miles] to a point on the Morja river due east of the southeast corner of La Francia clearing, northeasterly straight [24.4 miles] to a point at the junction of the secondary water divide between the Juyama and Encantado rivers with the main water divide between the Juyama and Encantado rivers with the main water divide between the Motagua and Chamelecon drainage basins, northeasterly straight [6.25 miles] to a point at the junction of the secondary water divide between the Bobos and Animas rivers with the main water divide between the Motagua and Chamelecon drainage basins, northeasterly straight to a point at the junction of the secondary water divide between the Bobos and Animas rivers with the main water divide between the Motagua and Chamelecon drainage basins, northeasterly straight to a point at the junction of the secondary water divide between the Animas and Negro rivers with the main water divide between the Motagua and Chamelecon drainage basins northeasterly following the meanders of the main water divide between the Motagua and Chamelecon drainage basins to a point at its junction with the secondary water divide between the two principal branches of the Chiquito or Platanos river,

northeasterly straight [5.75 miles] to the highest point of the mountain called Cerro Escarpado near the junction of the secondary water divides between the Chiquito or Platanos, the Nuevo or Cacao and the Chachagualilla river basins, northeasterly straight [11.2 miles] to a point at the center of the Cuyamel Railroad bridge over the Santo Tomas river, northeasterly straight to the southernmost point on the right bank of the Tinto river which flows out of the Laguna Tinta, along the right bank, taken at mean high water mark, of the Tinto river downstream to its point of discharge into the Motagua river, along the right bank, taken at mean high water mark, of the Motagua river downstream to its mouth on the Gulf of Honduras. As thus described, the boundary is established on the right banks of the Tinto and Motagua rivers at mean high water mark, and in the event of changes in these streams in the course of time, whether due to accretion, erosion or avulsion, the boundary shall follow the mean high water mark upon the actual right banks of both rivers.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Office of the Geographer, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of the Office of Management and Budget Circular No. A-16.

Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Office of the Geographer, Room 8742, Department of State, Washington D.C. (Telephone: 632-2021 or 632-2022).

