

Isle Royale and The Treaty of Paris

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I started my research for today's journal entry to answer the question: **Why is Isle Royale in Michigan?** This Lake Superior island is, after all, about 55 miles from Michigan shore. It is far closer to Ontario (about 22 miles) and to Minnesota (about 17 miles). So why is it in Michigan?

Although I did a fair amount of research, I still don't know **why**. But I do know **when** or at least when it became American and not British (and ultimately Canadian).



The *when*, surprisingly, was **1783**. The **Treaty of Paris of 1783**¹ between the United States and Great Britain ended the American Revolution. It established the boundaries of the United States. And it granted Isle Royale to the U.S.

The treaty specifically mentions Isle Royale (although it doesn't mention Michigan or the many other territories and future states which were to be carved out of the territory). The United States was well represented in the treaty negotiation. It was signed, on behalf of

the United States, by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and John Jay – an august delegation indeed.

For all of its historical significance, the treaty was relatively short.² In fact, the introduction (a flowery discourse about forgetting “all past misunderstandings and differences that have unhappily interrupted the good correspondence and friendship which they mutually wish to restore”) is longer than all but one of the treaty's ten articles.

As an example of this, Article I contains a single sentence in which Great Britain recognizes the independence and sovereignty of its former twelve colonies. {This is not a Wolverine Café typographical error. The treaty lists the twelve now independent states, but for some reason, **omits Delaware**. I do not know why Delaware wasn't listed, or whether Britain had some lingering claim to this colony. I have been to Delaware on a number of occasions, and I do not

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/treaty-of-paris>

² The full text of the treaty is at <http://www.revolutionary-war-and-beyond.com/treaty-of-paris-of-1783-september-3-1783.html>

recall seeing the likeness of Queen Elizabeth on Delaware money. This may be a subject to be addressed by someone at the Delaware Café.}

It took the treaty writers considerably more space to address fishing rights, in Article III, than it did to provide for American independence, in Article I. Interestingly, Americans could fish off the coast of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Labrador and other areas off the coast of Canada. They could also dry or cure fish on these shores (except for Newfoundland which, for some reason, remained off limits). Articles IV, V, VI and VII essentially related to the settlement of individual claims from the Revolutionary War.

Article VIII provided, in a single sentence: *”The navigation of the river Mississippi, from its source to the ocean, shall forever remain free and open to the subjects of Great Britain and the citizens of the United States”*. Since I have never seen one of Her Majesty’s ships patrolling the Mississippi, this may be one of the few treaty provisions which has not survived to the present.

Which brings us back to Article II, which is the primary subject of this journal. In addition to the original thirteen (or twelve?) states, Article II carved out a region for the United States which ultimately became Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Tennessee, and nearly all of Mississippi and Alabama, and the portion of Minnesota east of the Mississippi River – a total of ten additional states.



Pull out your atlas and follow Article II (which will be described soon). You do not have to be a surveyor or a geographer or an historian to enjoy this 18th Century mapping of the eastern United States. It was a little off in spots but surprisingly accurate for the pre-GPS era.

The tracing of the map shows that the treaty negotiators put Isle Royale on the U.S. side of the line. This still doesn’t suggest *why*. (I wonder if the negotiators traded Isle Royale for Nova Scotia?) It also doesn’t answer the question *why Michigan* as opposed to Minnesota. I suspect it was because Michigan became a state first, and took Isle Royale as part of the Upper Peninsula in the Toledo War³ settlement.

Isle Royale is the least used of the United States National Parks. The primary reason is that you can’t get there by Winnebago. Check out the official National Park Service⁴ website, this National Park Foundation⁵ site, and this National Geographic⁶ site. All three are great sources of

³ <https://clandonnell.net/the-toledo-war/>

⁴ <https://www.nps.gov/isro/index.htm>

⁵ <https://www.nationalparks.org/explore-parks/isle-royale-national-park>

facts and figures. There is also a website devoted to the wolves and moose of Isle Royale⁷. If you are unfamiliar with the location of this island, check the map on this page.



The United States according to the Treaty of Paris of 1783

1. Start at **Nova Scotia**, then to the mouth of the **St. Croix River** (which partly serves as the modern day border between Maine and New Brunswick).
2. Then travel due north from the source of the St. Croix to the *highlands* (which is the rest of the modern Maine/New Brunswick border).

⁶ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/national-parks/isle-royale-national-park/>

⁷ <https://isleroyalewolf.org/>

3. Then travel along the *highlands*, which seems to be the watershed divide between the St. Lawrence River and the U.S. New England coast. This divide is, at least approximately, the current Maine/Quebec border).

4. Continue along the highlands to the source of the **Connecticut River**, and then follow the river to the 45th parallel. This portion of the river is the New Hampshire/Quebec border. The 45th parallel is, by the way, half-way between the Equator and the North Pole.

5. The head west along the **45th parallel** until you reach the **St. Lawrence River**. The 45th parallel here is Vermont and New York's border with Quebec. [The treaty doesn't refer to the river as the St. Lawrence. Rather, it provides for the traverse along the parallel "until it strikes the river Iroquois or Cataraquy". Someday I will try to sort this one out. Also, the treaty did not identify or discuss any of the **Thousand Islands** between mainland New York and Quebec. This is curious in light of the subsequent specific mention of Isle Royale.]



6. Once on the river (whatever it may be called), the boundary is the center of the river until it reaches **Lake Ontario**. The boundary is the center of this Great Lake, until the "communication" between this lake and Lake Erie. The *communication* is the Niagara River. This, of course, is the modern New York/Ontario border. I also suppose that the middle of the river divides the American Falls and Canadian Falls of Niagara.

7. **Lake Erie** is similarly divided in the middle, as well as communication between Lake Erie and Lake Huron. This communication is otherwise known as the Detroit River, Lake St. Clair, and the St. Clair River.

8. Along the same vein, **Lake Huron** is divided in half, as is the next water communication (the St. Mary's River)

and as is **Lake Superior**. This is the modern Michigan/Ontario border. [Left unassigned are the numerous **North Channel islands** of Lake Huron. Perhaps this is why some are within Ontario and others in Michigan.

9. Finally we get to **Isle Royale**. Article II provides for the traverse of Lake Superior *”northward of the Isles Royal and Phelipeaux to the Long Lake”*. I could not find Isle Phelipeaux on any atlas, nor could I find the *Long Lake*. Nevertheless, the Treaty of Paris made it abundantly clear - **Isle Royale was American!**

10. The boundary then goes from Long Lake (wherever that is) to the water communication between it and Lake of the Woods. (My guess from this description is that Long Lake is the body of water between Isle Royale and Ontario). The water communication is the Pigeon River, which serves as the Minnesota/Ontario border for a stretch.

11. The **Lake of the Woods** boundary extends *”to the northwesternmost point thereof”*, and then from there *”due west”* to the Mississippi River. This was a mistake, and created what is known as the **“Northwest Angle”**⁸, or simply, the **“Angle”**. The mistake is that the source of the Mississippi is Lake Itasca, Minnesota, which is considerably south of Lake of the Woods. This error was corrected, sort of, in a 1818 treaty, which had the boundary run due south from the northwest corner of Lake of the Woods, and then due west at the 49th parallel. The problem with this correction is that most of this north-south line runs through water, which cut off a small portion of U.S. territory from the rest of Minnesota.

12. The next stretch of the boundary description is easy – it is the middle of the **Mississippi River** from present day Minnesota to present day Louisiana.

13. Here the boundary gets interesting again, since it does not traverse the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. Rather, the boundary stops at **the 31st parallel**, and then due east from there. This degree of latitude is the top of the Louisiana **“foot”**, and this creates **Louisiana’s** boot-shape.

14. This line continues east until it meets what is now the northern boundary of the **Florida panhandle**. This means that the territories which are now the States of Alabama and Mississippi did not have a gulf coast. Someday I will have to research how these states got their saltwater frontage.

15. From here, we reach what was then, we presume, the defined southern border of Georgia. The line runs from the Chatahouche River for a stretch to the Flint River, then a straight line to the St. Mary’s River, and through the middle of that river to the **Atlantic Ocean**.

16. One would think that this would end the description, but it does not. While this final description is confusing, it is essentially a line from Florida’s Atlantic shore to the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. This is not a straight line, but extends twenty leagues (60 miles or so) from the United States shores. Unfortunately, the line wasn’t far enough out to include **Bermuda**.

⁸ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/minnesotas-northwest-angle-an-american-geographic-odddity/>