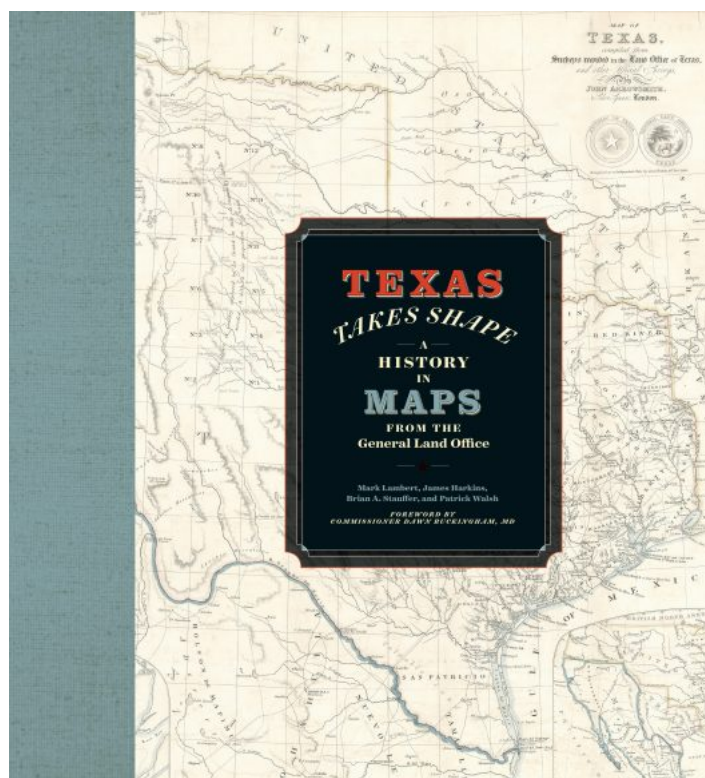




[< issue toc next >>](#)

Book review: Texas Takes Shape: A History in Maps from the General Land Office

reviewed by Paige G. Andrew



Lambert, Mark, James Harkins, Brian A. Stauffer and Patrick Walsh. Texas Takes Shape: A History in Maps from the General Land Office, foreword by Commissioner Dawn Buckingham, MD. First edition. Austin, [Texas]: University of Texas Press, 2025. 359 p. ISBN: 978-1-4773-3092-0

It's big, it's beautiful, it's a historical biography of Texas and the region that it was formed from. The title of this atlas says it all – using maps from the General Land Office (GLO) the authors created a comprehensive historical atlas of present-day



Texas. The Preface gives the reader the background story about why and how this publication came into existence, “*Texas Takes Shape* ... is the result of over ten years of planning and research. Momentum grew in 2015 when the GLO partnered with the Bullock Texas State History Museum to curate several small map exhibits from the GLO’s collection. Around this time, a collaboration with the Witte Museum in San Antonio led to ‘Mapping Texas: From Frontier to the Lone Star State’, a major exhibition exploring Texas’s formation through maps.” The foreword gives further details and is contributed by Dawn Buckingham, M.D., Commissioner of the Texas General Land Office.

The contents of this atlas are laid out as follows: two primary sections with Part I titled “Defining Texas” and Part II titled “Developing Texas.” Part I includes the first five chapters, beginning with the Age of Discovery as it involved Europeans sailing to and discovering new lands in what is now known as the Western Hemisphere and concluding with how the state began to first take shape as part of the United States. Part II includes chapters 6 – 9 with Chapter 6, *Contested Frontier* focused on military maps and the final chapter of *The Growth and Urbanization of Texas* focused on city maps.

Each chapter has a specific title and subtitle which further specifies the content and timeframe of said chapter, followed by one to three pages of introductory text that is an overview of the topical area involved. For instance, Chapter 2 is titled *Competing Empires, Maps as Knowledge and Power, 1671-1830*. Following this introductory layout are a number of mostly colored map images from GLO collections, each with its own explanation, that have been used to highlight the specific content to that chapter. Each image includes an attribution to the cartographer, the date of the map, the method of creation such as “engraving,” the size in both inches and centimeters, and the GLO Map number assigned to it. In some cases an inset from the map has been made to further elucidate a key point made in the text. There are also a handful of instances where other forms of illustration are included, again to help highlight specific points from the text. The accompanying information about each map has obviously been well-researched and conveys clearly the who, what, when and where of that snapshot of history as it applies to the territory of modern-day Texas.

Of considerable note, following each chapter is a summary text panel titled “Beyond the Neatline” in which the authors focus in how the included group of maps contribute to knowledge from and about specific groups of people impacting the cartography of that timeframe, historic events, or topics of interest such as how



surveying was done in Texas to undergird the legal aspects of land ownership. I particularly learned a lot of new information from the first Beyond the Neatline panel which focused on how Indigenous peoples of the region in its earliest history impacted and contributed to the geography and cartography of their lands.

The map images throughout the atlas are crisp and sharp, making reviewing and reading the details on each one a pleasure. The overall quality of the book is excellent with all contributors having done a lot of research in order to provide the reader with accurate and comprehensive information regarding the history of Texas through the lens of cartographic works by both well-known and lesser-known cartographers. I found this coffee-table sized book to be a bit awkward to hold and read but it was a joy to do so each time I picked it up to continue where I left off. I look forward to going back and delving into many more of the details of each map as well as further contextualizing the history of how the Lone Star State came to be.

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[< issue toc next >>](#)