

You Can't Get There From Here

The Story of Point Roberts and the Northwest Angle

by

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Did you know there are two inhabited places in the contiguous 48 states that you can't drive to without going through Canada?

Welcome to the Americans Apart. Welcome to Point Roberts, Washington and the Northwest Angle, Minnesota.

Northwest Angle

The story of the Northwest Angle starts with doctor and botanist John Mitchell. Born in Virginia in 1711, Mitchell moved to London in 1748 and gained a reputation as a botanical expert among the gardeners of British society.

One of the gardeners who benefited from Mitchell's expertise was George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax. Because Mitchell was a transplant from the American colonies, Montagu-Dunk considered Mitchell to be a resource for all things colonial.

The relationship between Mitchell and Montagu-Dunk pulled Mitchell out of his botanical world and into British politics. Mitchell's interests expanded further, into geography, when Montagu-Dunk asked him to create a map of eastern North America.

Mitchell scoured London for all the reference material he could find and produced his initial map in 1750. Due to the source materials, it wasn't as detailed as Montagu-Dunk wanted; therefore, Montagu-Dunk ordered the governors of the British colonies to send new maps for Mitchell to work from.

Mitchell's second map, published in 1755, was the most comprehensive map of eastern North America ever seen. After receiving comments, he revised and republished in 1756. (The map continued to be updated and corrected even after Mitchell's death in 1768.)

At the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War, the Mitchell map was used to determine the border between the United States of America and British lands to the north (aka Canada). The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, stated that the border would run "...through the Lake of the Woods to the northwestern-most point thereof, and from thence on a due west course to the river Mississippi..."

The only problem was, the border as described was a physical impossibility. If you start at the northwestern-most point of the Lake of the Woods and head due west, you'll never intersect the Mississippi river.

But that was not known at the time, and the Mitchell map shows the Mississippi river continuing far north of where the actual headwaters are in Lake Itasca, Minnesota.

The Treaty of 1818 resolved the matter by establishing the border through the Lake of the Woods and then running it due south to the 49th parallel, and due west from there to the Rocky Mountains. But this arrangement caused a small portion of American land to be cut off from the rest of the states.



(map from minnesotafunfacts.com)

If the Mississippi river had indeed continued as far north as the Mitchell map showed, today the northern borders of most of Montana, North Dakota, and part of Minnesota would be about 20 miles farther north than they are today. But because it didn't, the Northwest Angle remains the only part of the contiguous 48 states above the 49th parallel.

Most of the Northwest Angle is held in trust by the Red Lake Indian Reservation, but there are two communities: Angle Inlet and Penasse. Both communities are in the northernmost part of the Angle.

It's possible to sail or fly to the Northwest Angle while remaining in the United States. But driving there means crossing into Canada and taking Canadian highway 308 to 525, which crosses into the Northwest Angle.

According to the 2010 census, Angle Inlet has a population of 60.

Point Roberts, Washington

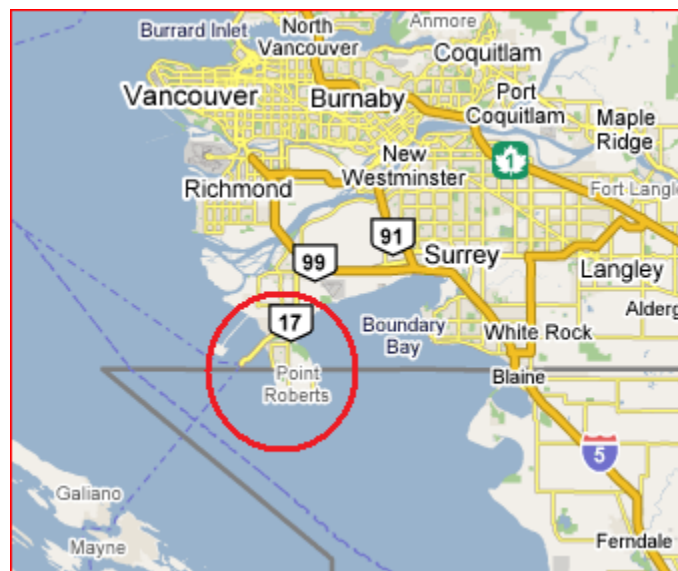
The treaty that created the Northwest Angle is also somewhat responsible for the other isolated, populated bit of the contiguous 48 states.

When the Treaty of 1818 set the northwest border of America at the 49th parallel, it did so only to the Rocky Mountains. As both Americans and Canadians moved westward, the border needed to keep up.

The Oregon Treaty of 1846 did just that, continuing the border along the 49th parallel all the way into the Strait of Georgia (the northwest-to-southeast body of water west of Vancouver).

Once in the Strait of Georgia, the border then turns south and curves around the bottom of Vancouver Island, keeping the island in Canadian hands.

However, surveyors eventually discovered that before the border turns south, it runs through a small peninsula south of Vancouver. South of this line is a few square miles of land which, per the treaty, is part of the United States.



(map from blog.proud-geek.com)

Far more populous than the Northwest Angle, Point Roberts boasts a population of 1,314 (2010 census), a post office (zip code 98281), and a [tourism website](#).

To drive there, you take Interstate 5 from Washington State into Canada, where it becomes highway 99. Follow 99 to highway 17 and turn south, then take 56th street down to Point Roberts. It's about a 30-minute drive through Canada to get from the United States to the United States.