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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

EDMUND T. FRITZ,  
*Deputy*

*Solicitor.*

WESTERN BOUNDARY OF THE  
COLORADO RIVER INDIAN  
RESERVATION

*January 17, 1969.*

To: Secretary of the Interior  
From: Solicitor  
Subject: Western boundary of the Colorado River Indian Reservation from the top of Riverside Mountain, California, through section 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M., California

This is in response to your request that we review and define the location of the western boundary of the Colorado River Indian Reservation from the top of Riverside Mountain, California, to its intersection with the line between the second and third tiers of sections in T. 5 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M., California (hereinafter referred to as from the top of Riverside Mountain through section 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M., California).

The Colorado River Indian Reservation was established by the Act of March 3, 1865, 13 Stat. 541, 559. Subsequently, its boundaries were modified by the Executive Orders of November 22, 1873, November 16, 1874, May 15, 1876, and November 22, 1915. The unallotted lands of the reservation are held by the United States in trust for the Colorado River Indian Tribes. Act of April 30, 1964, 78 Stat. 188.

The Colorado River Indian Tribes have requested that the western boundary of the reservation be finally determined. Until such determination is made the leasing provisions of the Act of April 30, 1964, *supra*, do not extend to lands south of section 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M., California.

The Executive Order which describes the portion of the boundary considered in this memorandum is as follows:

EXECUTIVE

MANSION,

*15, 1876.*

*May*

Whereas an Executive Order was issued November 16, 1874, defining the limits of the Colorado River Indian Reservation, which purported to cover, but did not, all the lands theretofore set apart by act of Congress approved March 3, 1865, and Executive Order dated November 22, 1873; and whereas the order of November 16, 1874, did not revoke the order of November 22, 1873, it is hereby ordered that all lands withdrawn from sale by either of these orders are still set apart for Indian purposes; and the following are hereby declared to be the

boundaries of the Colorado River Indian Reservation in Arizona and California, viz:

Beginning at a point where La Paz Arroyo enters the Colorado River, 4 miles above Ehrenberg; thence easterly with said arroyo to a point south of the crest of La Paz Mountain; thence with said mountain crest in a northerly direction to the top of Black Mountain; thence in a northwesterly direction over the Colorado River to the top of Monument Peak, in the State of California; thence southwesterly in a straight line to the top of Riverside Mountain, California; thence in a direct line toward the place of beginning to the west bank of the Colorado River; thence down said west bank to a point opposite the place of beginning; thence to the place of beginning.

#### U.S. GRANT

This opinion deals only with that portion of the above-described boundary from the top of River side Mountain through section 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M., California.

As established by the Act of March 3, 1865, *supra*, and enlarged by the Executive Order of November 22, 1873, the Colorado River Indian Reservation was located in the Territory of Arizona and bounded on the west by the Colorado River. Lands in California were first added to the reservation by the Executive Order of November 16, 1874. The record discloses that this latter Executive Order enlarging the reservation was designed to make possible control of access to the reservation from tile west and to avoid loss (transfer of land) caused by changes in the channel of the Colorado River. That segment of the west boundary of the

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reservation germane to this memorandum, i.e., from the top of Riverside Mountain to the west bank of the Colorado River, was described in the Executive Order of November 16, 1874, as a line "\* \* \* [from the top of Riverside Mountain] in a Southeasterly direction to the point of beginning \* \* \*."

When this segment of the boundary was surveyed in 1875 by Chandler Robbins, it was ascertained that this line severed a large tract of valuable land on the east side of the river which had been reserved for Indian use by the Act of March 3, 1865, *supra*, and the Executive Order of November 22, 1873. Because of this fact, the Indian Agent in charge of the reservation, by letter of January 31, 1876, requested the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to obtain an Executive Order changing the boundary line of the reservation between Riverside Mountain and the place of beginning, making the Colorado River the boundary line. Thereafter, by letter of May 10, 1876, from the Acting Commissioner to the Secretary of the Interior, it was recommended that the President be requested to issue an order changing this boundary line so that when it reached the west bank of the Colorado River it would follow said west bank down the river to a point opposite the point of beginning, thence to the place of beginning. Following a concurrence in the recommendation of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs by the Acting Secretary, the President

issued the Executive Order of May 15, 1876. For many years the proper location of the west boundary of the reservation, as described in the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, has been in dispute.

During the trial of *Arizona v. California, et al.*, the United States claimed water rights for an extensive area of irrigable lands along the west side of the river. California resisted the claim of the United States for any lands south of section 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., on the grounds that there were no such lands within the boundary of the reservation. California's contention was based upon the fact that the west bank of the river, which was the call of the west boundary of the reservation in the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, established a boundary that would change with movements of the river. The United States contended, among other things, that this Executive Order established a permanent and unchanging boundary along the west bank of the river as it existed in 1876.

The Special Master ordered that the proper position of the boundary be litigated and, following trial, the Special Master made Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law which, in effect, held that the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, established a boundary which changes as the course of the Colorado River changes, except when such changes are due to an avulsion. He further held that two avulsive changes had severed lands from the reservation and placed these lands on the west side of the river. The effect of the Master's holding was to disallow any claim of the United States for water for lands south of section 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., which were located on the west side of the Colorado River except in the two areas the Master found to have been severed from the reservation and placed on the west side of the river by manmade avulsive changes in the river's course.

Before the Supreme Court, California excepted to the Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law of the Special Master. In ruling thereon, the Supreme Court disagreed with the Special Master's decision to determine the disputed boundary of the Colorado River Indian Reservation. *Arizona v. California, et al.*, 373 U.S. 546, 601 (1963). The effect of the Supreme Court's decision was to leave the boundary question open for future determination.

#### LOCATION OF THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN RIVERSIDE MOUNTAIN AND THE WEST BANK OF THE COLORADO RIVER

The proper position of the first segment of the boundary from the top of Riverside Mountain to the west bank of the river presents little difficulty. The first question that arises is which of two peaks on Riverside Mountain is the top. Absent specific definition in the Executive Orders of November 16, 1874, and May 15, 1876, it is believed that the term "top of Riverside Mountain" should be given its commonly accepted meaning and, therefore, means the highest point of that mountain.

The "top of Riverside Mountain" was supposedly monumented during a survey in 1912, by R. A. Farmer; however, there is evidence that this corner was not placed on the highest point of the mountain and, therefore, does not represent the true corner of the reservation boundary. In these circumstances, the language of the Executive Orders of November 16, 1874, and May 15, 1876,

must control and the erroneous Farmer survey should be suspended in the reach from Riverside Mountain to the Colorado River for reasons hereinafter stated.

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It is concluded that the reservation boundary in this reach should follow a line from the highest point on Riverside Mountain on a direct bearing toward the place of beginning as described in the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, until it strikes the proper location of the west bank of the river as it existed in 1876. This line should terminate at the point it intersects the west bank. The Executive Order clearly stated the line should go to the west bank, not halfway down the bank, to the water's edge, or any other place. The bank of a river is the water-washed and relatively permanent elevation or acclivity at the outer line of the river bed which separates the bed from the adjacent upland, whether hill or valley, and serves to confine the waters when they reach and wash the bank without overflowing it. *Oklahoma v. Texas*, 260 U.S. 606 (1923). It is, therefore, concluded that the call to the west bank must be taken to mean the line of ordinary high water as it existed in 1876.

In determining the location of a boundary, when the United States has not conveyed its title to the abutting lands, it may survey and resurvey what it owns and establish and reestablish boundaries. *United States v. State Investment Co.*, 264 U.S. 206 (1924). The record discloses that all the lands outside the reservation boundary in this reach are owned by the United States and are under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. The lands inside the boundary are owned by the United States in trust for the Colorado River Indian Tribes. No private ownerships are involved. In 1879, W. P. Benson established a meander corner common to sections 25 and 36, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M., at a point on the west bank of the Colorado River which also fell on the line between the highest point on Riverside Mountain and the place of beginning. In these circumstances, as a matter of administrative convenience, it may be determined that the reservation boundary can and should be reestablished as a line between the highest point of Riverside Mountain and the meander corner common to the aforesaid sections 25 and 36. This line is sustained by adequate evidence of the proper location of the boundary as described in the Executive Order of May 15, 1876.

#### LOCATION OF THE BOUNDARY FROM SECTION 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., THROUGH SECTION 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M.

From the point where the line from Riverside Mountain intersects the bank of the river, as described above, the second segment of the boundary should follow downstream along the bank of the river at the line of ordinary high water as it existed at the time of the issuance of the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, to the south boundary of section 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., S.B.M., subject to the application of the doctrine of erosion and accretion and avulsion to any intervening changes. *Oklahoma v. Texas*, *supra*.

With regard to such intervening changes, when the banks of a river change gradually and imperceptibly, the process is called erosion and accretion and a riparian owner's boundary will remain the stream. In cases where a river suddenly abandons its old bed and seeks a new course, the change is termed an avulsion and a riparian owner's boundary will become fixed and permanent along the line of the former channel. *Nebraska v. Iowa*, 143 U.S. 359 (1892).

The Executive Order of May 15, 1876, which included lands located east of the west bank of the river, would operate as to all those lands not previously disposed of by the United States, as unquestionably the President had the power to reserve the lands by Executive Order. *Sioux Tribe of Indians v. United States*, 316 U.S. 317 (1942); *United States v. Midwest Oil Co.*, 236 U.S. 459 (1915). A portion of the west half of the riverbed, however, was owned at that time by the State of California because the Colorado River has been held to be a navigable stream in the reach here under consideration. *Arizona v. California, et al.*, 283 U.S. 423 (1931). The soil beneath navigable waters was not granted by the original states under the Constitution to the United States but was reserved to the States. *Pollard v. Hagan*, 44 U.S. (3 How.) 212 (1845). Upon the admission of a new State into the Union on an equal footing it acquires all the rights of the original States which, it has been held, includes title to the lands underlying navigable waters. *Mumford v. Wardwell*, 73 U.S. (6 Wall.) 423 (1867). The extent of the ownership acquired by the States upon admission is the soil below ordinary high-water mark. *Mobile Transp. Co. v. City of Mobile*, 187 U.S. 479 (1903). Thereafter, where a navigable stream is a boundary a riparian owner's title will extend to low or high-water mark or to the center of the stream according to the law of the State in which it is situated. *Packer v. Bird*, 137 U.S. 661 (1891). The United States like any other riparian owner takes such title to submerged lands as may be conferred by State action. *Donnelly v.*

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*United States*, 228 U.S. 243 (1913).

In 1873, California enacted a law, now codified as Civil Code § 830, which had the effect of granting to riparian owners on non-tidal navigable waters ownership of the soil to low-water mark. It therefore follows that in those areas where the United States owned the uplands, it gained title under State law to the low-water mark. 43 Cal. Ops. Atty. Gen. 291 (1964); *Crews v. Johnson*, 21 Cal. Rptr. 37 (1962). It is concluded, therefore, that at the time of issuance of the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, the United States owned the area between ordinary high-water mark and low-water mark except in those areas where it may have previously disposed of lands abutting the ordinary high-water mark. The record discloses, however, that in 1876 the United States owned all the lands abutting the west bank of the Colorado River from the above mentioned section 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., south through section 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E.

In issuing the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, the United States effectively severed that portion of the lands between the high and low-water marks by including them in the reservation, thus, effectively segregating these lands from public lands lying to the west thereof. It must be

concluded that the Executive Order was effective to reserve any lands within the river then owned by the United States as such order clearly intended that the river be included in the reservation.

Thereafter, accretions forming against this shoreline to the east thereof would be lands held in trust for the Colorado River Indian Tribes in those areas where the river has moved to the east by the normal process of erosion and accretion. Similarly, in those areas where the river has moved to the west by the normal process of erosion and accretion, any accretions forming on the east side of the river are owned by the United States in trust for the Colorado River Indian Tribes.

In possible conflict with the reservation boundary, as hereinabove set out, are three tracts of school lands, these being sections 36 in Tps. 2, 3, 2nd 4 S., R. 23 E. While the Act of Congress which granted California its school lands was passed in 1853, 10 Stat. 244, 246, title to such lands does not pass until they are surveyed. *United States v. Morrison*, 240 U.S. 192 (1916). Moreover, title to the school lands thus granted was expressly subject to reservations created prior to survey. 10 Stat. 244, 246. These three sections 36 were surveyed in 1879. All three were fractional sections abutting the meander line run as part of the survey.

It is the general rule that a meander line is not a line of boundary but one used to delineate the sinuosity of the bank or shore as a means of ascertaining the quantity of land in a fractional lot, the boundary line being the water itself. *St. Paul and Pacific R. Co. v. Schurmeier*, 74 U.S. (7 Wall.) 272 (1869). Thus, the Department has held on numerous occasions that grants by the United States of lands shown on plats of survey as adjoining navigable waters are not limited to the meander line but extend to the water line. *Harvey M. La Follette*, 26 L.D. 453 (1898). *John J. Serry*, 27 L.D. 330 (1898). *Gleason v. Pent*, 14 L.D. 375 (1892). *Louis W. Pierce*, 18 L.D. 328 (1894). While this rule has been applied in cases involving the issuance of a patent, the certification of lands (such as school lands) is equivalent to patent and divests the Department of all jurisdiction over the lands or title thereto. *Frasher v. O'Conner*, 115 U.S. 102 (1885). *Smith v. Portage Lake and Superior Ship Canal Co.*, 11 L.D. 475 (1890). *State of California v. Boddy*, 9 L.D. 636 (1889).

Against this background, it can be expected that the State or its successors in interest might claim title to accretions to these three school sections. However, as above noted, title to these lands was expressly subject to reservations created prior to the survey thereof. Inasmuch as the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, effectively segregated the shoreline from these fractional sections 36 by including it in the reservation, it is concluded that accretions to this shoreline are lands held in trust for the Colorado River Indian Tribes and that they did not attach to the three fractional sections 36 as surveyed in 1879. For these reasons, correction surveys approved in 1964 which apportioned accretion lands to sections 36, Tps. 3 and 4 S., R. 23 E., should be suspended and the accretion surveys of these townships approved in 1962 should be reinstated in their entirety.

There are also three parcels of School Indemnity Lands in sections 1 and 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., selection of which was approved in 1926. All three parcels abutted the meander line as surveyed by O. P. Calloway in 1874. Congress had previously authorized Lieu Selections in California. 14 Stat. 218, 220. However, such Lieu Selections are limited to other lands of equal acreage. 26

Stat. 796. It may also be anticipated that the State or its successors in interest would claim accretions to these Indemnity

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parcels. The record discloses that, at the time California made its selection of these fractional lots, substantial accretions had previously formed between the meander line abutting these parcels and the course of the river. Since California was in any event limited to lands of equal acreage in making its Lieu Selections, it cannot be said that approval of these School Indemnity Lands carried accretions which had previously formed. To hold otherwise would mean that California acquired lands in excess of that which was permitted by law. This then, is an additional reason why the accretions would not have passed with title to the fractional lots. Of course, the rationale with regard to accretions to the school sections hereinabove discussed is equally applicable to the School Indemnity Lands in that the inclusion of the shoreline in the reservation prior to disposal of the fractional lots effectively segregated such shoreline from the abutting lands which the State eventually selected.

As mentioned above, the proper location of the boundary in the reach from section 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., through section 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., is the line of ordinary high water along the west bank of the river at the time of issuance of the Executive Order of May 15, 1876, subject to application of the doctrine of erosion and accretion and avulsion. Absolute certainty as to the location of the bank in 1876 is probably not possible to achieve. However, in fixing the boundary, all that is required is such certainty as is reasonable as a practical matter, having regard to the circumstances. *Arkansas v. Tennessee*, 269 U.S. 152 (1925). The record discloses that the reach of the bank of the river from section 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., through T. 4 S., R. 23 E., was meandered in 1879 and that portion of the right bank in sections 1 and 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E., was meandered in 1874. These meander lines were reestablished in a dependent resurvey made by the Bureau of Land Management in 1958.

As noted above, in 1876 the United States owned all the lands abutting the river on the west from the above-mentioned section 25, T. 2 S., R. 23 E., south through section 12, T. 5 S., R. 23 E. Also, the record indicates the present course of the river in this reach is now along or east of its position as surveyed in 1874 and 1879, except in two insignificant respects. The record also discloses that the lands presently lying between the meander lines of 1874 and 1879 and the right bank of the river were formed by accretion. Since the bulk of the lands abutting these meander lines on the west are presently owned by the United States and those lands in non-federal ownership located to the west of the meander lines are not entitled to accretions as against the United States in any event, these meander lines may be adopted as the boundary of the reservation as a matter of Administrative convenience. Only lands of the United States under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior are involved. Considering the nature of surveys in isolated areas and the limits of accuracy which could be achieved with equipment available nearly 100 years ago, it is concluded that these lines are adequate evidence of the proper location

of the reservation boundary as they are reasonable as a practical matter, having regard to the circumstances. *Arkansas v. Tennessee, supra.*

In summary, it is concluded that in those areas where the United States has not conveyed its title to the lands abutting the reservation, it may survey and resurvey what it owns and establish and reestablish boundaries. *United States v. State Investment Co., supra.* The United States may make or correct its surveys and such are not assailable in the courts, except in a direct proceeding. *Cragin v. Powell*, 128 U.S. 691 (1888). Therefore, in the above-mentioned areas, it is concluded the determination of the reservation boundary as herein made is not subject to collateral attack. As to those areas where the lands abutting the reservation boundary are in non-federal ownership, it may be expected that litigation will be necessary to extinguish claims of others which are adverse to those of the Colorado River Indian Tribes.

EDWARD WEINBERG