

COLE CITY HOLLOW, Tenn. — Nearly two centuries after a flawed survey placed Georgia's northern line just short of the Tennessee River, some legislators are suddenly thirsting to set the record straight.

A historic drought has added urgency to Georgia's generations-old claim that its territory ought to extend about a mile farther north than it does and reach into the Tennessee — a river with about 15 times greater flow than the one Atlanta depends on for its water.

"It's never too late to right a wrong," said Georgia state Sen. David Shafer, whose bill would create a boundary line commission that aims to resolve the dispute.

Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen's reaction: "This is a joke, right?"

In Cole City Hollow, an obscure border community where some northwest Georgia residents rely on Tennessee roads, the river is so close to crossing the state line it almost juts into the yard of a Georgia house.

If Tennessee's southern border were the 35th parallel — as Congress designated in 1796 — Georgia would have a share of the Tennessee River. But a surveying team sent by Georgia to chart the line in 1818 was a bit off the mark.

Historians say mathematician James Camak, who led the team, begged the state to provide him the latest equipment, but instead he had to rely on an English sextant — an instrument more familiar to sea captains than land surveyors. Other stories say Camak's team was scared away by an American Indian party.

Surveyors now know that the Georgia-Tennessee border was placed about 1.1 miles south of where it should be. But that, surveyor Bart Crattle said, is history.

"Just because you have more accurate equipment, you can't start moving border lines," said Crattle, a Georgian who works in Chattanooga and is licensed to survey in both states. "Can you imagine what would happen to our boundary lines? They'd be all willy-nilly."

"It's correct — no matter how wrong it is."

Here are just two side effects of making the 35th parallel Tennessee's southern line: Not only would Georgia get a chunk of Chattanooga, Mississippi would get a slice of Memphis.

The border has been in place for generations, though there's some dispute over whether Georgia ever formally agreed to it. In any case, Georgia partisans say they want what's rightly theirs.

"A state boundary can only be changed by the legislatures of the states, with the consent of Congress," said Shafer, a Republican from Duluth. "It cannot be changed by a mathematician with a faulty compass or a skittish surveying party afraid of the Indians."

The drought has whetted Georgia's thirst for the river, but this is far from the first attempt to redo Camak's math. Shafer's resolution traces efforts as far back as 1887, when North Carolina — another state affected by the line — authorized its governor to appoint commissioners and a surveyor to meet with neighboring delegations over the boundary. No record of such a meeting exists, it said.

The river winds closest to Georgia near the Camak Stone, a slab placed by surveyors to mark the corner where Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee meet. Georgians here drive on Tennessee roads to get to their homes, and few locals on either side of the line are happy with the idea of moving it.

"All they want to do is get them some water, and I'm against it," said 70-year-old Freddy McCulley, who lives on the Tennessee side. "They ought to control their growth in Atlanta. This has nothing to do with the people. It's the politicians."

He was standing at the Camak Stone, which resembled a picnic site Thursday as several neighbors gathered to vent about the Georgia proposal.

"That would be ridiculous. I'd have to move my phone line and everything," said Joe Dugger, a 63-year-old Tennessean. "This is a forgotten part of Georgia, and they have nothing to do out here except pave the roads every once in a while."

Jerry Body interrupted him.

"They don't have hardly anything — they don't even have dog catchers," quipped Body, a 66-year-old Georgia resident whose mailing address is in Tennessee.

Some influential Georgia politicians have suggested using old-fashioned horse trading to broker a water deal, saying Georgia should offer a high-speed rail line from Atlanta to Chattanooga in exchange for rights to the river. But Tennessee's governor said he was unaware of the Georgia legislation until he was told of it by The Associated Press earlier this week.

Bredesen, a Democrat, said he doesn't believe the resolution is a step toward a more heated battle over water rights in the region.

"I would say it represents the ratcheting up of a PR war, and nothing else," he said.

Just in case, he added, "We will protect our borders here in Tennessee."