Teaching Resource - Maps and Motives: A Primer on Early American Cartography

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Introduction

Maps are products of their cultural, social, and political contexts. As such, they cannot be viewed as neutral testimony for illustrating history—and are all the more interesting for it. As primary documents, maps provide a perspective on the contemporary perception of the landscape. Maps also shape the knowledge and understanding of the areas they portray. The creation of a map involves a complex filtering of available information, as well as the use of symbols which may have ambiguous meanings. In the words of cartographers Denis Wood and John Fels, “a map is a consequence of choices among choices.” The mapmaker’s choices in turn influence those of the map’s users. As a result, maps do not just reflect reality, they shape it. By describing an area in terms of ownership rather than ecology, for example, they affect the behavior and actions that will take place there.
Mapmakers depend on a variety of sources to compile a map, using older maps and new information, some collected through surveying. Because accurate surveying and land measurement are costly enterprises, they are often performed for political or economic gain. Surveys and land division impose order and, in so doing, ‘civilize’ the landscape. Accurate mapping is often a prerequisite to the sale and transfer of land. Precise surveying thus facilitates land speculation, which sees land as a commodity rather than a resource. The expense of integrating new geographic data and producing, publishing, and distributing maps makes cartography inherently conservative.

Throughout history, the information on published maps usually has lagged behind updated information or new discoveries. Exceptions to this situation occur only when rapid map publication supports a specific, often political, agenda. A brief time span between territorial change and map documentation can be viewed as a cartographic power play. Maps that continue to preserve past artifacts show the slow pace of editorial revision.

In the maps that follow, we will explore the changing representations of the Oneida and Iroquois territory on maps produced during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Consider the maps in their overall effect, but also in their details. Look for revealing clues by zooming or consulting the map enlargements.
Part One: The Colonial Era

Maps 1 (complete) and 1a (detail). Guillaume Delisle, “Carte de la Louisiane et du Cours du Mississippi” (Paris, 1718). Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library.

Exploration of North America was a competitive enterprise. Britain and France in particular vied with one another to control the continent and its peoples, or at least prevent their European foes from doing so. But subordinating the Natives proved difficult, and the continent was vast. Thus, they resorted to cartographic ‘spin’ to bolster their claims.

How does the map’s overall composition, as well as its use of line and lettering, support French colonialism?

How are Indians represented? The English colonies?

France advanced the notion that the ‘discovery’ of a river by a European gave his nation control of the entire watershed. How does this map represent riverine resources to the advantage of France?
Map 1
Map 1a
By 1771, France had been forced out of North America. However, Iroquois military power and diplomatic influence ensured their territorial rights were still respected. New York’s claim to much of its central and western territory was based largely on its ‘special relationship’ with the Iroquois. The map’s author was deputy to Sir William Johnson, the British superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Northern Department.

How does this map make Iroquoia appear in relation to New York? How do the map’s details and key represent Iroquois residence and activity? How is this map a bid for greater influence by its creator? What kind of information did the author convey with all that text?
Map 2
Part Two: The Early National Period

MAP 3 Simeon De Witt’s state map of New York, 1792-1793. Courtesy of the New York State Library.

Simeon De Witt was appointed surveyor general to the Continental Army in 1780 and headed the small mapmaking corps attached to Washington’s headquarters that made surveys and road traverses for strategic locations. In 1784, De Witt resigned his commission and became surveyor general of New York—a position he held until his death in 1834. Throughout his career, he was personally involved in not only supervising the state’s cartography, but also the acquisition of land from Indians and others, as well as with the development of roads and canals.

How has the representation of Iroquois territory changed since Guy Johnson’s 1771 map?

How does this map document the 'civilization' of this part of New York State?

With what subjects and activities is this map concerned? With what subjects is it not concerned?

How is the Oneida presence represented? What does this map suggest will happen to the Oneidas with the passage of time?
After the Oneidas ceded their principal settlement, the state commissioned a plan for its sale and settlement. The surveyor, John Randel, Jr., achieved somewhat greater renown for the grid he plotted on another area of New York state: Manhattan Island.

To what purposes was this tract to be put?
What kind of settlement was envisioned at Oneida Castle?
What activities would take place there?
How did the plan relate to the natural landscape? To prior uses of the land?
Suggested Reading


