

Remapping a Historical Geography: An Un-Essay to Unsettle Perceptions of the Antebellum North

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To teach about places is to teach about placings. Whether intentionally or not, the way we locate certain regions of the world shapes how we see the individuals, resources, activities, and environments that exist within them. Boundaries, place-names, and other geographic descriptors direct our gaze. They influence not only how we define the places that come into focus but also how we distinguish those places from surrounding regions. In the process, they also inform the stories we tell about ourselves and others. And, as sources deliberately designed to organize space, maps are particularly impactful in shaping our sense of place.

The connection between maps and the ways we perceive place has long been recognized by scholars of spatial theory, geography, and the history of cartography. In the early 1990s, in a now canonical study of maps and the power they wield, Denis Wood described maps as spatial arguments that “construct—not reproduce—the world.”¹ Like those of others publishing at the outset of what scholars have now termed “the spatial turn,” Wood’s study underscored the importance of examining the mapmakers behind the cartographic texts, together with the assumptions and agendas that informed their work.²

In the past two decades, historians and scholars in other allied disciplines have increasingly approached maps as objects of study. To be sure, much of their work has taken the form of scholarly publications, with pedagogical application coming at a slower rate. As Christopher Saladin and Shana Crosson have recently argued: “While many historians are using GIS to explore spatial questions in their own research, a smaller number have brought it to their classrooms.”³ Nevertheless, there is a growing appreciation of the instructional value of incorporating geospatial tools in history classrooms. In a recent study, Sarah Fayen Scarlett and peers contend that “HGIS-based projects integrate space and time in ways that make history immediately relevant and accessible, and, in so doing, promote the cultural value of history in the daily lives of students and their communities.”⁴

In part, the increasing appreciation for the inclusion of geospatial tools in history courses has benefitted from the not-unrelated explosion of new digital mapping software. Platforms like Neatline, Carto, and Knight Lab’s StoryMap JS provide instructors and students alike with multiple alternative options to less accessible and less user-friendly GIS mapping software (such as ArcGIS). These developments have not only paved the way for more spatially-conscious instruction, but—as I argue in this article—they also provide an opportunity to design interactive student research assignments outside the mold of more conventional essay formats.

Rethinking John F. Smith’s “Historical Geography”

In the fall of 2019, I designed a student project premised on the understanding that maps influence the histories we narrate. It was part of a culminating class project for a course titled: “All Over the Map: Cartography and Historical Narrative,” an upper-division seminar that introduced undergraduate students to spatial theory and history of cartography. The assignment asked students to build off the knowledge that maps could shape historical narrative—a connection we had already established in earlier class discussions of assigned readings. The purpose of the project was to enable students to push past that awareness. It prompted them to not only

¹ Denis Wood with John Fels, *The Power of Maps* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1992), 17.

² For other seminal studies that helped spark the spatial turn, see especially J. B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” *Cartographica* 26, no.2 (Summer 1989): 1-20; Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

³ Christopher Saladin and Shana Crosson, “Spatial Approaches to the Past: Story Maps in the History Classroom,” *The History Teacher* 55, no. 1 (November 2021), 36.

⁴ Sarah Fayen, et al., “Out of the Classroom and Into History: Mobile Historical GIS and Community-Engaged Teaching,” *The History Teacher* 53, no. 1 (November 2019), 12.

analyze the connection between a particular map and the histories it helped make visible, but also required that they unsettle the source's narrative power by producing an alternative map of the same place. Our ultimate goal was to identify some of the different historical experiences that an alternative mapping of a familiar place could help bring to light. The familiar region at the center of the project was the United States' antebellum North.

To begin the project, I facilitated an in-class analysis of a map from the late 1800s: John F. Smith's "Historical Geography" (see Map 1 in the Appendix). The map, as is immediately clear, is focused on the United States, though only outlining the forty-eight contiguous states that made up the nation at the time it was created. Incomplete representations of Canada and Mexico also appear on the map, but only as a means to orient the map viewer. By defining the U.S.'s northern and southern borders, these two nations help the viewer find geographic purchase within the continent of North America. Simply by framing the map in the manner he did, Smith was making a subtle argument about place (communicating the primacy of the United States even while including its surrounding nations). Within that frame, though, the viewer can trace a much a more intentional, not to mention conspicuous, argument about the history of United States and its geographic tenor.

Although all maps, by their very nature, are arguments about space, Smith's main argument is particularly overt. It, therefore, served as an especially rich source for class analysis. Superimposed onto an otherwise familiar cartographic representation of the continental U.S. are two trees in abstract form; one is shaded in a grey-blue tone while the other is a darker brown-black tone. The bases of the trees stem from two different points along the Atlantic seaboard: the British colonies of Plymouth and Jamestown. Those colonies are the two conventionally-recognized "starting points" of the nation despite the fact that neither could claim to be the first settlement in the already-inhabited territory that became the United States.⁵

Smith associated the two trees with contrasting moral standings. Metaphorically, New England was the seed of an upright, symmetrical tree he labeled "God's Blessing Liberty," while the Chesapeake was rendered the seedbed of the much more disfigured tree he branded "God's Curse Slavery." As students were quick to point out, his contention was clear. From Puritan Plymouth's colonial model springs forth such blessings as "Knowledge," "Virtue" and "Equal Rights." From the model set by Jamestown, emerge the contrasting vices of "Ignorance" and "Lust," as well as various legislative bills and compromises associated with slavery (i.e., the Kansas Nebraska Bill, the Compromise of 1850, etc.). Smith's antebellum America, in short, was comprised of two foils, and those two foils could be mapped.

Notably, Smith's overarching argument in "Historical Geography" rests on various other, more subtle arguments about the United States' history, which students and I explored. Although created in 1888, part of Smith's message is as much about the early 1600s as it is about the late 1800s. As mentioned above, Smith designated two British colonies as the geographic beginnings of the United States. In doing so, he both reflected and reinforced a still common tendency to reduce British colonial history to a pre-history of the United States.⁶ His preference for one colonial experiment over the other is, of course, evident from the very labels he applied to each tree. Yet, there are other, more subtle clues that betray his partiality. Next to Plymouth and Jamestown, for example, Smith included a year—a detail prompting viewers to situate themselves not just geographically but also temporally. Surprisingly though, both locations bear the same year: 1620. Although the date make sense when it comes to Plymouth (which was founded in 1620), it does not in connection to Jamestown (which was founded in 1607). As a class, we considered this inaccuracy and questioned what assumptions this revealed about the mapmaker himself.

Together, we discussed the kinds of creation stories that factor into American's collective national memory. We shared personal anecdotes about the various ways we had observed or participated in commemorations of certain national founding stories. We also discussed the sorts of narratives we had encountered in readings.

⁵ In fact, neither Jamestown nor Plymouth were even the first *colonial* settlements in the region, as Spain's St. Augustine predated both by more than forty years.

⁶ For a notable critique of that tendency, see Claudio Saunt, *West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014).

After sharing our personal experiences with different United States creation stories, I highlighted short excerpts from various scholarly works that touched on the topic. One of those was historian Karen Kupperman's monograph, *The Jamestown Project*. In her study, Kupperman examined the colony's early history, questioning the creation myths associated with it and acknowledging the complicated and violent legacy of the of the colony. "Jamestown," she explained, "makes us uncomfortable."⁷ It tells a tale of greed, exploitation, slavery, and hostile relations with Native Algonquians. Instead, Kupperman acknowledged, "Americans prefer to think of Plymouth colony in New England as our true foundation."⁸

Yet, as scholars like Kupperman point out, the tendency to contrast Plymouth from Jamestown can lead many Americans to award British New England a benevolent image it does not deserve. That tendency, which continues to exist today, was evidently operating in the late 1800s as well, as Smith's map makes visible. Students and I considered the likely possibility that it could help explain the hold 1620 had on Smith's conceptions of the nation's beginning. Given his key attention to detail, it is unlikely that he was unaware of Jamestown's founding date. In any case, regardless of intention, his inclusion of 1620 next to each colonial enterprise enabled New England's curated image, together with its chronology, to eclipse that of the Chesapeake's in more than one sense.

Connected to Smith's assumptions about the United States' founding are his ideas about its historical and geographic progression. Because he locates its beginning along the eastern Atlantic seaboard, it is not entirely surprising that he portrays its history as one that moves westward, following the symbolic growth of the trees.⁹ In a sense, he is correct; the United States' boundaries shifted to reflect the nation's increasingly westernmost territorial acquisitions. Yet, in the process, Smith's cartographic depiction silences the different colonial and Native histories that also shaped the regions eventually located within the United States' boundaries. As one student pointed out, the map was a cartographic reflection of what historian Juliana Barr has described as American history's "east-coast bias"—an argument we had engaged with earlier in the semester.¹⁰ Barr's claim is that most histories of early America begin on the east coast and then move west, as the nation's boundaries did. In doing so, though, most histories of the continent west of British America (and, later, the United States) fall out of view until they intersect with those of Britain or the U.S.¹¹ Given Smith's depiction of the nation's geographic progression, it is clear he not only viewed American history as something that had moved west, but also considered the westward progression an extension of one of the two colonial models he viewed as foundational.

After analyzing some of the more subtle details in Smith's "Historical Geography," we considered the broader, more overt argument he set out to make. Despite its chronological foundation in the 1600s, his map's overarching argument was about the antebellum United States geography. In Smith's view, the antebellum North, a region he conflated with the image of New England, was a region of freedom and benevolence, while the South nurtured slavery and avarice. In viewing the nation's geography this way, Smith was in good company.

⁷ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Jamestown Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ For more on John H. Smith's map and the ways it reflected a conscious effort to use maps in order to shape Americans' understanding of their national history in the nineteenth century, see Susan Schulten, *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 56-70.

¹⁰ Much of Juliana Barr's scholarship challenges the east-coast bias of early American history, but the specific material I assigned in this class was a recorded talk she delivered for Humanities Texas. See Juliana Barr, "The Spanish Colonial Period," lecture delivered at the *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library* (Austin, 2010) <https://www.humanitiestexas.org/archives/digital-repository/barr-spanish-colonial-period-2010>

¹¹ One consequence of early American history's east-coast bias is the common—but mistaken—perception that the histories of Native polities and different colonial powers constitute a pre-history of the United States. That, in turn, can lead to the equally flawed notion that the nation's eastern region is somehow older than its western territory. It is worth noting, however, that scholars of early North America have increasingly worked against this narrative bias. Indeed, the geographic boundaries of the field have increasingly expanded to reflect growing engagement with scholarship of different regions of the Americas—a historical trend that has led scholars in the field to adopt the regional description of "Vast Early America" to locate their work.

Although most students had never encountered Smith's map before, all them expressed a familiarity with the suggested binary.

Although created in the 1800s, the map reflected geographic assumptions that still operate today. It is not uncommon to encounter descriptors like the "Free North" and the "Slave South" in educational material like textbooks. And, for many reasons, those descriptors are justified. Students and I acknowledged some of the ways in which they are appropriate. The reality was that states in the United States' South maintained the enslavement of African Americans as a legal practice throughout the Antebellum period. Enslavement informed the social structures, economies, political and cultural practices of the region. Designating that same region the "Slave South" reflects the legal realities that systematically aimed at dehumanizing enslaved individuals.

In contrast, in the north (and in some western territories), state constitutions legally prohibited the practice of slavery. Referring to northern states as free states while labeling those in the south slave states, therefore, reflects that important legal reality. However, we also recognized that binaries such as these could obscure nuance. In particular we wondered about the north's classification. We questioned if the outlawing of slavery naturally led to the promotion of freedom in its broadest sense. To that question, we added the related query: Was the region as antithetical to slavery as its common designation suggests?

The Free North?

As students embarked on the project, the class, as a whole, considered the difficulties of the research ahead. We acknowledged that the histories we were searching for were not going to be straightforward. We were looking for sources, events, individuals, and practices in the antebellum North that were connected to slavery but in ways that were less directly linked to it than those which conventional histories have tended to privilege. We likewise recognized that those connections would be varied in nature. If we were looking to question the veracity of the "Free North" as a regional descriptor, we could do that through several different avenues. Students could accomplish that by identifying examples of individuals or organizations in the north benefitting from the existence of slavery in the south or even examining instances in which the meaning of freedom for free people of color was constrained in the north.

With that in mind, students formed groups based on the topics or themes they were most interested in exploring. One group, for example, opted to explore different ways in which northern industries and companies financially benefitted from slavery. Another group explored the existence of legislation that constrained the political freedoms of free Black Americans in northern states. Taking a more thematic approach, a third group set out to identify rhetoric and activity that attacked abolitionism and its proponents, whether symbolically and physically. The remaining groups took on topics that overlapped with some of the themes and topics other students were researching. For instance, one group examined connections between the nation's first northern universities and wealth generated through the transatlantic slavery.

Student research uncovered histories that were both surprising on their own and in relation to each other. The group focused on the economic profits of northern industries and companies, for example, identified histories that were specific to a single insurance company as well as general trends among the wider cotton industry in the north. One of the sources they discovered was an advertisement from a northern insurance company that marketed insurance policies on the human "property" of southern enslavers. At the same time, they were able to speak to broader connections between various cotton manufacturing companies in the New England region (see Image 5 in the Appendix). The scope of student research topics, therefore, often depended on the specific primary and secondary sources they could find.

The broadly defined topics or themes that each group took on also prompted them to place different kinds of historical events in conversation with each other. For instance, the group that examined various ways in which freedom and abolitionism came under attack in the north uncovered sources that described very different forms of violence in very different regions of the north. Images 2 and 3 in the Appendix below display two of their findings. The first episode describes racially-inspired vigilante violence directed at a building

designed to house abolitionists: Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Hall, which was funded by the state's Anti-Slavery Society in 1838. The other describes a short-lived abduction of a well-known northern abolitionist. As that group demonstrated, even when sources concerned dissimilar forms of violence, they could nevertheless spark important questions and reveal new histories when considered alongside each other.

After dedicating several weeks to researching their topics, students and I shifted our focus to the un-essay assignment's ultimate goal: the creation of an alternative map of the antebellum North. The platform I chose to use for the project was Knightlab's StoryMap JS. It offered many advantages including the fact that it was free, easy to use, and could contain all of the class's findings in a single map. However, the aspect that most appealed to me when designing the assignment was its storytelling features. As its name implies, StoryMap JS enables its users to map both places and stories about those places at the same time (see Images 1-8 in the Appendix for sample entries). Given that the project directed students to produce an alternative map of an engrained geography and the histories it privileged, the platform proved to be an ideal tool.

Within their groups, student decided which of their research findings to highlight (each group produced three StoryMap entries). They then crafted short, digestible overviews of the histories they wanted to communicate, weaving together description and analysis (with each member writing one or two entries that featured histories they had taken the lead in researching). As they crafted their narratives, we discussed the importance of audience. Like more traditional essay assignments, students made thoughtful choices about organization and evidence use. However, because the finished un-essay would exist as a digital and publicly-accessible interactive map, audience factored into class conversations much more frequently than has been the case when I have assigned essays. I also noted that students were afforded the ability to take on the role of the assignment's audience in new ways. Because each narrative overview was relatively short, we were able to do a general class peer-review session in which we read and provided feedback on every entry. One consequence of this was that each group had the opportunity to share their findings while simultaneously considering—and seeing—the ways their work connected to that of their peers.

The final product was a multi-layered map we titled “The Free North?” It was a deviation from the title I had originally planned: “Remapping the Antebellum North.” During our class peer review session, students and I recognized that the stories the project highlighted were doing more than merely producing a different cartographic depiction of the United States in the decades prior to the Civil War. Both individually and collectively, the mapped stories would equip their audience to not only consume alternative histories, but to formulate questions about the region of their own. “The Free North?” was an open-ended interactive text designed to invite its audience to remap a familiar geography alongside it. As a result, the interactive map that was the result of an un-essay student assignment designed to engage with geospatial and digital humanities pedagogy became a pedagogical tool of its own. In fact, since the spring of 2020, I have regularly assigned it to students in my U.S. History survey classes.

Concluding Thoughts

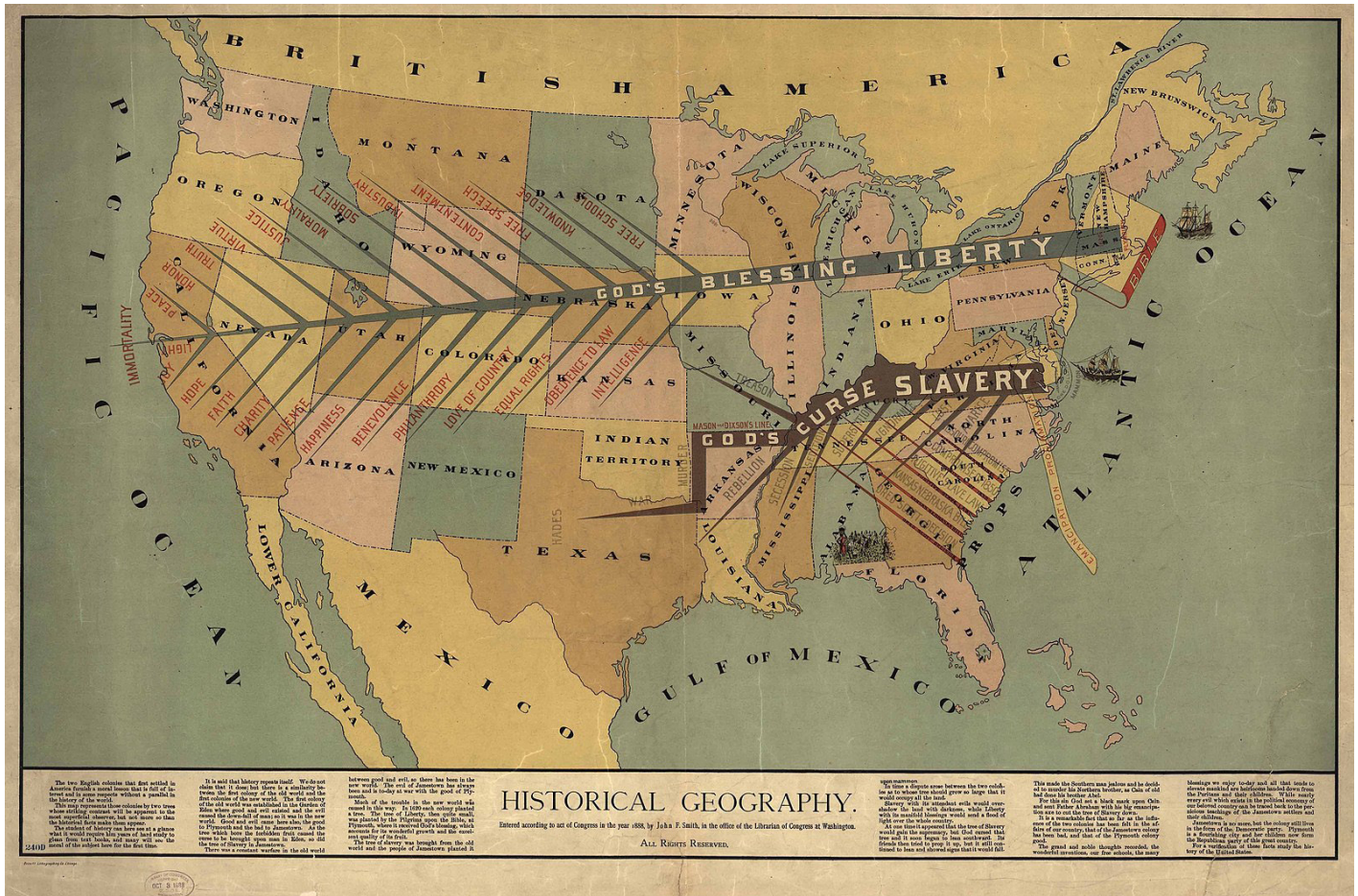
Rethinking maps and the ways they inform historical narratives can take various forms. The specific un-essay assignment I designed revolved around the remapping of a relatively old source (a map produced in the late 1800s). Yet, past maps are not the only cartographic texts that shape the ways we perceive places and the stories we associate with them. Recently-produced maps can have similar effects. And notably, they continue to be utilized as standard visual aids in history educational material and textbooks. Indeed, one of the first pages you will encounter when opening the most recent edition of Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!* (one of the most commonly adopted history textbooks in high school and university U.S. History classes) is a map of the political boundaries of the nation.¹² Unless we take the time to critically consider the narrative power of these kinds of reference maps, we risk adopting both their biases and their blind spots. As “The Free North?” helps

¹²Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* 6th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2019).

illustrate, one of the most visually impactful ways to undermine the influence of an engrained geography is to create alternative maps of the same place.

Appendix

Map:



Map 1: John F. Smith, "Historical Geography" (1888)

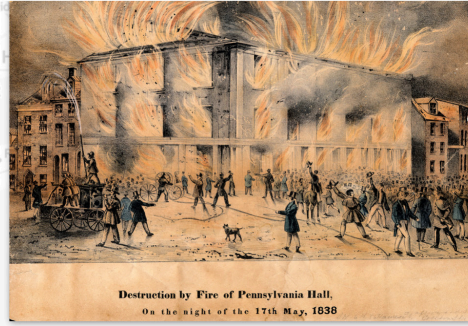
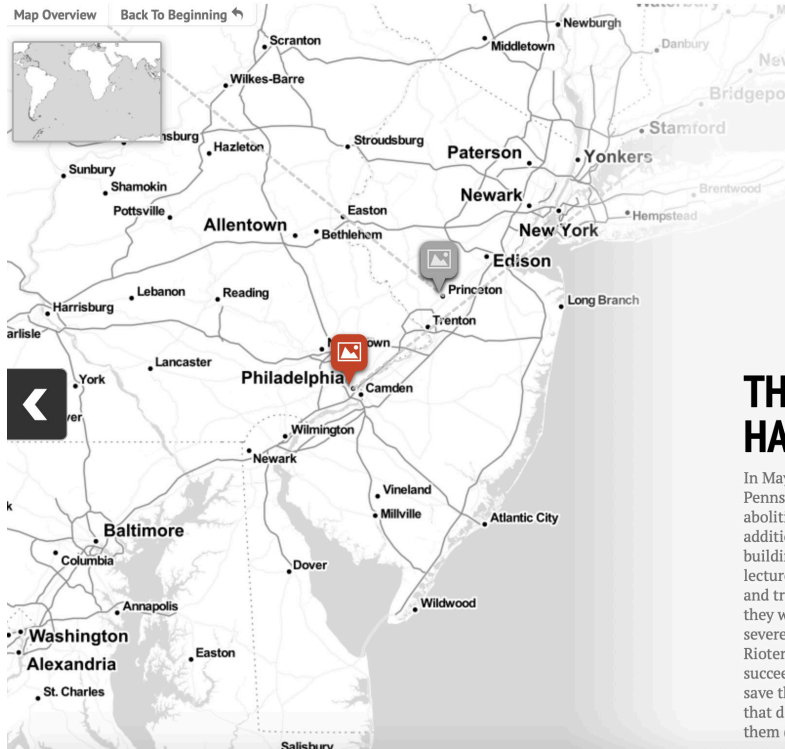
Images

A Note on the selected images below: The images below represent a sample of the StoryMap entries students submitted as part of their projects. Each entry featured a short narrative of a history different groups chose to spotlight as a way to reframe the engrained geography of the Antebellum United States. At the bottom of their entries, groups listed their works cited information as well as suggested sources for further reading.

An interactive, digital map of student entries is available on my personal website: www.jacquelinereynoso.com



Image 1: "The Free North?" (Map Overview)

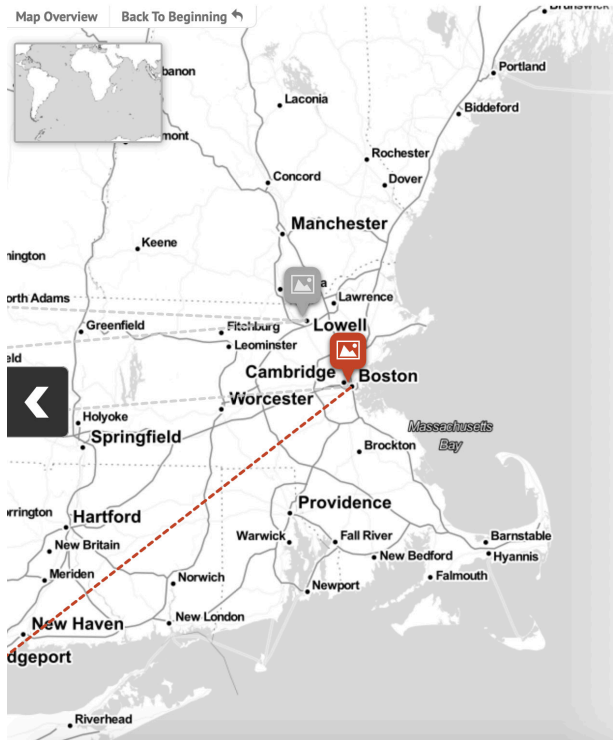


John Caspar Wild, "Burning of Pennsylvania Hall" (print)

THE BURNING OF PENNSYLVANIA HALL

In May of 1838, in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Hall was built by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. It was intended to be a meeting place for abolitionists, but could be rented by other organizations or individuals (for additional historical context of the building, see Webb). Mere days after the building's completion, while an audience of 3,000 abolitionists gathered to hear a lecture, an angry mob formed outside. It soon grew violent as men broke windows and tried to get inside the building. As audience members attempted to leave in fear, they were pelted with rocks and had insults shouted at them. Police and others were severely injured by rioters with clubs as they attempted to break up the disturbance. Rioters, broke down the doors of the hall and set the building on fire, eventually succeeding in burning it to the ground. The city's firefighters did nothing attempt to save the hall, concentrating their efforts only on surrounding buildings. One unit that did attempt to spray water on the fire had the hoses of other units turned on them (see especially Brown, 157-160).

Image 2: "The Burning of Pennsylvania Hall"



William Lloyd Garrison

THE ABDUCTION OF WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to cast the North as "good" and the South as "evil." However, the history surrounding abolitionists in the North undermines that rigid dichotomy. The reaction to the mere presence of abolitionists in the North was sometimes incendiary and frequently lead to violence, with incidents of mobs in cities all over the North attacking abolitionists and Black Americans.

On October 21, 1835, The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society held a meeting at the headquarters of an abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator* (for more on the . William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the paper, was to give a speech at the meeting. An angry crowd of men assembled outside the offices, reportedly led by the mayor of Boston. After surrounding the building, they forcibly separated the women outside, and took hold of Garrison. The mob bound him with a rope, treated him roughly and marched him through the streets while threatening to kill him. The mob intended to tar and feather Garrison, but before that could happen he was rescued by a few men who intervened (see especially Garrison and Lyman).

Image 3: "The Abduction of William Lloyd Garrison"



Image 4: "Slavery in California"

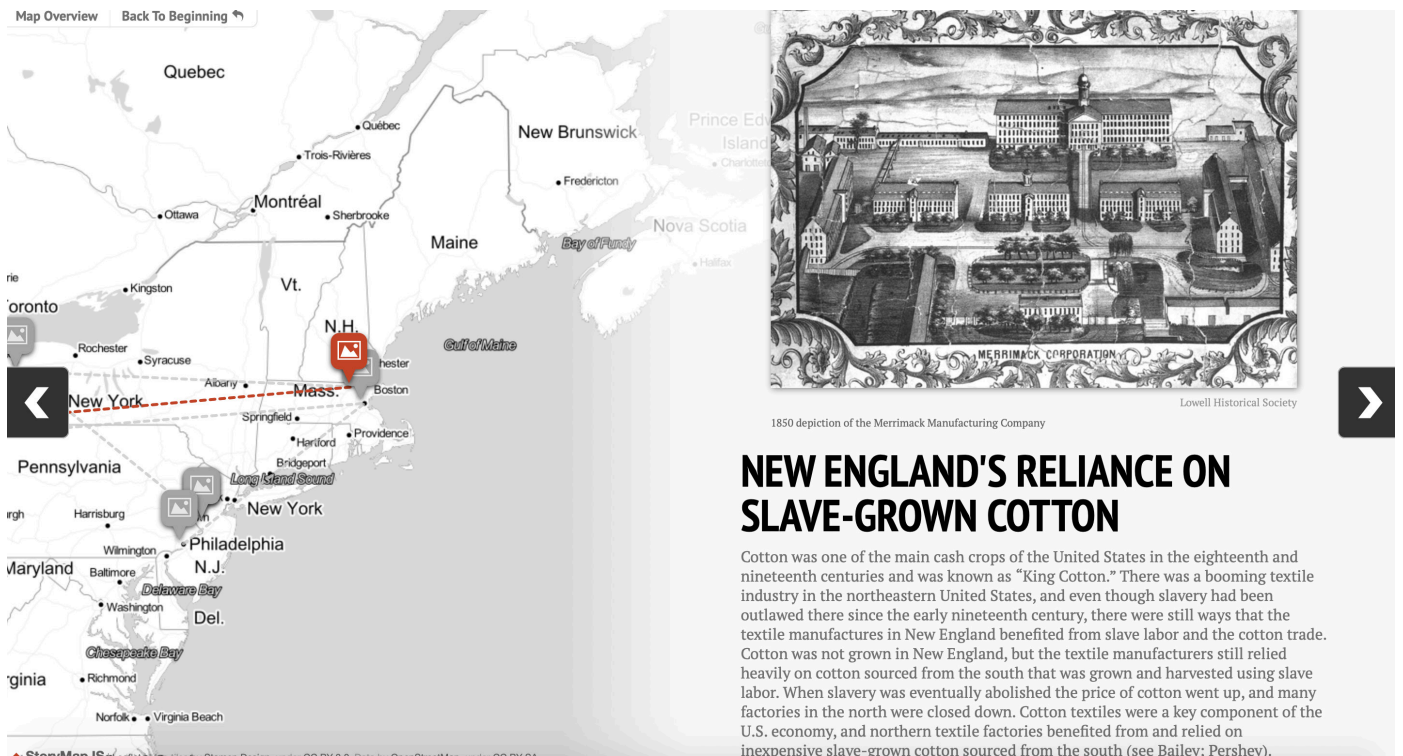


Image 5: "New England's Reliance on Slave-Grown Cotton"

Map Overview Back To Beginning

John Chase Lord, Presbyterian Minister

THANKSGIVING SERMON & THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW

The antebellum period of US history was rife with conflict and contention over the issue of slavery. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, tensions between the North and South increased dramatically. The new law required those in the North to assist in the apprehension and recovery of fugitive slaves. Despite the common perception that the Northern religious ideology was at the center of the anti-slavery movement, the truth is not black and white. In reality, there were many in the North who, drawing from biblical scripture, reasoned that the institution of slavery was just. Prominent Northern religious figures from various Christian denominations made use of their positions in the church to not only advocate for obedience to the highly controversial Fugitive Slave Law, but to also reinforce institutional slavery in the U.S. (see Keller; Corbett; Elliott). This seemingly hidden aspect of Northern religious support for the institution of slavery in antebellum

Image 6: "Thanksgiving Sermon & the Fugitive Slave Law"

Map Overview Back To Beginning

Charles Hodge

NORTHERN THEOLOGIAN: CHARLES HODGE

As mentioned in the previous mapped entry, Prominent Northern religious figures from various Christian denominations made use of their positions in the church to not only advocate for obedience to the highly controversial Fugitive Slave Law, but to also reinforce institutional slavery in the U.S. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 required those in the North to assist in the apprehension and recovery of fugitive slaves. Despite the common perception that the Northern religious ideology was at the center of the anti-slavery movement, the truth is not black and white.

Many religious authors in the North drew from biblical scripture to support the institution of slavery (see Keller; Lord; Corbett; Elliott). This seemingly hidden aspect of Northern religious support for the institution of slavery in antebellum America is an important factor one must examine when one considers how some in

Image 7: "Northern Theologian: Charles Hodge"

Map Overview Back To Beginning ↶

Greenway Meadows

Springdale Golf Club

West Windsor Playing Fields

Milstone Reservoir

Institute Woods

Princeton Battlefield

Princeton University

Nassau Street

Washington Road

Brunswick Pike

Princeton University

Ken Lund, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kenlund/40545844173/>

Nassau Hall (Princeton University's Oldest Building)

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

The enslavement of Africans and African Americans deeply shaped our nation's history. Everyone associates the South with slavery, but slavery resided in the North as well. Even after slavery was outlawed in the North in 1804, ideals of slavery and white privilege were engraved into different parts of society, such as the local universities. Enslaved Black Americans even helped build some universities (see Ellis and Smith; Walters). This was especially true in parts of the north that remained slave-holding states, such as New Jersey. Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey was an example of the universities that built their foundations on slavery and where money passed hands with blood and anguish. Although slavery was not practiced at the university, the institution was connected to individuals who shaped and attended Princeton since its founding in 1746 until the mid 1800s, such as its trustees, presidents, and white students (see Wilder).

Image 8: "Princeton University"