

The Social Life of Maps in America, 1750–1860. By MARTIN BRÜCKNER. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Published by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. 370 pages. Cloth, ebook.

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We live in a cartographic age. Our phones and computers can both navigate us where we want to go and give us virtual tours of countries we will never visit. With Google Street View, we can toggle between a bird's-eye view and street-level vistas of countless cities or towns. Cartography has never been more ubiquitous, but paradoxically physical maps are no longer a defining tool of the traveler or geographically curious. Well before the rise of digital cartography, however, maps existed as cultural and aesthetic objects. In *The Social Life of Maps in America*, Martin Brückner traces the rise of map culture in the United States by demonstrating that maps, in addition to their utilitarian value, were prominent commercial and social objects that shaped the way people thought about themselves and their surroundings. Over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, maps—which hung in shop windows, large exhibition spaces, parlors and libraries of private homes, and schoolrooms—accrued “material and cultural utility and value” (3). Unlike authors of previous studies on map creation, use, and imperial or national significance, Brückner emphasizes a world in which maps shaped—and were shaped by—commercial interactions, social status, and geographically minded citizens.

Brückner's work unfolds in three parts, tracing first the map's rise as a saleable commodity, then the map as a cultural marker and object of aesthetic beauty, and finally the map as an ephemeral and portable tool that framed how people understood their place in the geographic and social world. The book's initial section explores how maps were made and sold from the Seven Years' War to the American Civil War. In the earlier period, individual artisans—Lewis Evans, for example—constructed maps by working as general contractors who relied on the collaborations of a series of experts ranging from geographers and surveyors, copper-plate manufacturers, and engravers to paper producers. This type of map production included high costs and narrow margins, and sales depended heavily on marketing the “map's social life when it was *becoming* a map, when it was still one step removed from being the finished product and consumer good that was poised to enter offices, school, and homes and ultimately attract the scrutiny of post-production map users” (19). The map's “social life” Bruckner refers to here depended on the connections among artisans and journeymen in cities such as Philadelphia, where a cohort of laborers

produced maps that began challenging more established British geographers—Thomas Jefferys, for instance.

Advances in economies of scale and new technologies changed how maps were made, as map publishers such as Mathew Carey and John Melish centralized the process and assumed more risk for the potential of greater reward. This transition thrust the map publisher—rather than the geographer or engraver—into the public mind as the source for geographic information. Only by consolidating and reorganizing the way maps were made could publishers satisfy the demands of their customers and increase their profit margins. “By subcontracting maps to several engravers at once,” Brückner argues, publishers “created competition among the engravers and forced them to agree to lower fees” (58). This process divorced the mapmaker from the map, as the publisher owned the rights and collected the profits. Accordingly, publishers devised new patterns of distribution. Rather than run advertisements for subscriptions in the press as geographers had done in the past, publishers such as Carey sold their maps through traveling salesmen. An additional advancement in manufacturing came in the early nineteenth century when Melish went a step further than Carey and “pushed for the consolidation of all work stations under one roof” (75) rather than among several independent journeymen in Philadelphia. Melish and others who followed his model remained susceptible to market changes—personnel turnover, recession, and fluctuations in real estate prices—that could lead to bankruptcy. The full industrialization of map publishing witnessed the rise of firms such as Henry Schenck Tanner & Co. These publishers took full ownership of production—most significantly the engraving process, which was the most expensive element—and benefited from the introduction of new methods of making maps such as lithography. Machine-made paper and the steam-powered lithographic press “revolutionized the American map industry between 1820 and 1860” (93). Maps became more finely detailed, more readily available, and more affordable.

Equally important to map sellers was the rise of display windows along commercial streets. Pedestrian culture increased window shopping, which expanded sales of maps for the home. Potential map purchasers existed in a world that increasingly featured cartographic elements. And maps, especially large ones, made a statement. In galleries and exhibition spaces, “spectacular” (126) maps could, on the one hand, naturalize what could be controversial imperial or national territorial claims and, on the other hand, demonstrate the status, wealth, and education of gallery owners and patrons. As Brückner notes, maps became tools that helped create the public sphere and imagined community because they were easily recognizable cultural and political objects that citizens encountered and employed in their daily lives. In official spaces such as statehouses, maps provided a sense of political importance by framing the room in such a way as to keep eyes trained on objects of geopolitical significance, regardless of the content of

the map itself. Of course, few early Americans spent much time in state-houses, but in taverns, in coffee shops, and along commercial promenades, regular citizens encountered cartographic displays that normalized the presence of spatial materials and also served as what Brückner calls a “material conduit for expressing everything from public policy to moral conduct” (159). But maps’ effects could diverge according to the spaces of their presentation. In official settings such as galleries, schools, or government buildings, maps were used to sharpen the mind and underscore authority. In less formal sites—taverns and coffeehouses—maps could be used as props to critique and question those in power. Maps were thus tools of authority or subversion, depending on their social setting and audience.

Maps performed social functions in both their content and their style. Wealthy landowners might protest if local maps failed to note their plantations, but when hung in houses these same maps were favored as much for their appearance as for their accuracy. Considerations of style and taste accumulated more significance with the expansion of distribution networks, and map purchasing among private individuals experienced a “decorative turn” (171) in the nineteenth century, one that was not limited to citizens with means. By examining maps as decorative objects, Brückner finds evidence challenging Carole Shammas’s argument that most rural Americans did not decorate their rooms.¹ Instead, advances in map production resulted in lower prices and wider availability, which enabled the less affluent to mimic the decorative and intellectual stylings of wealthier Americans, who were themselves borrowing from British practices. There were different ways for Americans to incorporate maps into their private worlds. The elite commissioned portraits in which they held maps of their estates, while those with few means could use cheaper wall maps to trace the travels of absent family members. Maps hung on walls and decorated everyday objects found around the home. In both instances, as Brückner eloquently notes, maps worked to link “the hearth and the heart” (199).

Though early Americans might have found themselves pouring from porcelain pots decorated with maps or eating fruit from bowls featuring cartographic designs, learning to read those maps required both instruction and intuition. Map readers had to look closely to decipher how lines, shapes, images, and texts interacted; they could also step back to cast a glance over the map in its entirety, which illuminated a separate body of spatial information. Engaging with maps required visual literacy, and map publishers offered guides that outlined how their maps should be read. Even for the uninitiated, the map’s constituent parts—its cartouche, border, and picture insert—could tell a story. Often, that story concealed some of the darker elements of the settlement project inextricably linked to the map

¹ Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (New York, 1990), 172.

itself. A picturesque landscape cartouche, for example, influenced how readers might interpret the map, but in doing so it elided the story of territorial invasion, slave labor, and Indigenous removal required to claim lands for the early Republic. The ubiquity of these maps, however, kept a specific narrative of the republic in its citizens' minds and rendered a large continent comprehensible.

Material culture items such as tea sets were only one of a diverse array of objects that enhanced cartographical knowledge. Smaller maps could be found in the pockets and purses of early Americans. Brückner argues that these small maps helped normalize the spectacle of large maps and facilitated cartographic thinking during the nineteenth century. Young students learned to make maps, a skill that enabled them to marry geography with national identity. As boys and girls grew into young men and women, maps remained part of their lives. Gentlemen carried pocket atlases—often featuring older maps enjoying a second life in portable form—in trouser and jacket pockets specifically designed for the purpose; men or women might use decorative handkerchiefs with a cartographic design; and women wove maps into needlework, using whatever materials they could afford. Small maps made geography accessible, kept older maps in circulation, and ensured that lessons in nation making were always near at hand.

The Social Life of Maps in America takes readers through the creation, marketing, and various uses of maps to demonstrate that they were cultural objects with a value determined by aesthetic appeal and sentimental attachment. As political objects, maps could only succeed if they penetrated the daily lives of those who acquired them for reasons often divorced from politics or wayfinding. The book itself is a testament to the inherent beauty of early maps, featuring nearly 150 images that both illustrate arguments and illuminate ideas. They enable the reader to participate in the process of becoming geographic consumers that Brückner so eloquently describes. That parts of early American life receive less coverage in this book—for example, the use of maps by Indigenous peoples and slaves, especially those forced into systems of education meant to make them more “American”—should not be understood as a shortcoming but rather as an invitation to employ Brückner’s insights in ways that further complicate life in the early Republic. The same is true for the broader continental history of maps, especially given the frequency with which non-American places—particularly the British colonies and Mexico—are featured on these putatively “American” maps. Brückner has charted new territory and, like the maps he describes, revealed new intellectual boundaries ripe for resurveying.