

“Objects of the Highest Importance to Spain and the United States”: American Cartographic Challenges to Spanish Imperial Power in North America

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On the evening of July 6, 1818, United States Secretary of State John Quincy Adams was “roused from bed by a servant from the Spanish Minister to the United States Luis de Onís,” who delivered a note “asking for an interview as soon as possible upon objects of the highest importance to Spain and the United States.”¹ Word had reached Minister Onís that American General Andrew Jackson had invaded Spanish Florida in retaliation against Seminole raids on the Georgia frontier. The result of the dispatch was a series of meetings between the two diplomats that not only addressed the immediate issue of General Jackson’s violation of Spanish territorial sovereignty, but also concerned long unsettled boundaries between New Spain and the U.S. west of the Mississippi River.

In the week that followed, the idea of a transcontinental boundary agreement was discussed, one that would definitively mark the geographic limits of New Spain and the U.S. to the Pacific Ocean. Adams and Onís continued to engage each other diplomatically over the course of the next year with regard to details of an authoritative boundary that would settle the long and contentious debate over Louisiana’s western border.² The Spanish imperial map and the American national map met on the borderlands of North America to finally establish borderlines between them.

The cartographies of the Spanish and the Americans were the products of very different social and political conditions. Spanish mapmakers produced maps that reflected not only their society but also their plans for empire in North America, steeped in deference to absolute authority and the will to isolate their empire from other European powers on the continent. American cartographers produced maps that, like the rhetoric of revolution, deferred to nothing; neither preexisting claims nor natural boundaries stood in the way of American expansion to the Pacific Ocean. Where the historian Carl Wheat considered these circumstances in the

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first two volumes of his authoritative *Mapping the Transmississippi West 1540-1861*, it is his concession that “there remain many individual problems relating to Western mapping not susceptible of adequate treatment in this particular overall investigation” that this inquiry is built upon.³ By applying J. Brian Harley’s manner of “deconstructing” maps in order to recognize them as cultural texts, this article seeks to highlight the significance of such radically different social systems coming into conflict, using the maps they produced as prisms to refract their values and understandings of the territory they both sought to claim dominion over.

“Los Dominios del Rey”

Spanish maps of North America from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century were characterized by strong centers of official authority, or “metropolises,” and weak boundaries that fluctuated with the ability of the sovereign to exert political and military influence outside of the metropole.⁴ Just as the king held absolute power by religious justification, his role on the map became not only more prominent, but indeed *central* by highlighting monarchical and state ascendancy as it manifest wherever the king’s agents of empire were found.

An analysis of the 1579 map of Meztitlán by its mayor Gabriel Chávez demonstrates this idea of “official centrality” (Figure 1). Chávez’s map illustration highlights the official presence of the Spanish as it manifested in architectural form. Churches and official buildings dominate the center of map, which dissipates and gives way to natural rather than state-imposed boundaries. This metrocentric approach to cartography reflected the nature of the Spanish imperial government that emphasized official centers of power at the expense of clearly articulated limits of influence. The availability of land did not make the demarcation of imperial boundaries a colonial priority, until the presence of another imperial power challenged Spanish territorial hegemony.

One such challenge came from the French explorer Rene Robert Cavalier Sieur de la Salle in 1682. When la Salle descended the Mississippi, French minister to King Louis XIV the Marquis de Seignelay considered its significance:

The principal purpose of Sieur de la Salle in making this discovery was to find a port on the Gulf of Mexico on which could be formed a French settlement to serve as a base for conquests upon the Spaniards.⁵

Though the La Salle colony collapsed of its own accord, the vulnerability of New Spain’s perimeter was an issue of concern in the Spanish court. After nearly a century of exploration in Texas and after nearly thirty years of continuous occupation of several points within the province, the district seemed to have been almost unknown to the Spaniards. But French



Figure 1. Gabriel Chávez, Map of Meztitlán, 1579. University of Texas at Austin, Benson Latin American Collections.



Figure 2. Louis Hennepin. Carte de la Nouvelle France et de la Louisiane Nouvellement Decouverte, 1683. Louisiana State Museum.

efforts to occupy the region west of the Trinity River compelled the Spanish to defensively expand their claim in order to defend it and maintain the allegiance of its natives.⁶ Despite the short-lived presence of the French colony, Louis Hennepin's 1683 map based on la Salle's expedition entitled "Carte de la Nouvelle France et de la Louisiane Nouvellement Decouverte" [Map of New France and Newly Discovered Louisiana] imposed French cartographic hegemony at the expense of longstanding Spanish claims to the region. The Spanish presence was relegated to Mexico and Central America on Hennepin's map, and was not represented any farther north with the exception of *Floride* (Figure 2).

Spanish imperial boundaries also were defined by native populations, which successfully checked Spanish expansion through warfare and negotiation for 300 years. While Spanish missionaries, operating in the words of Father Zephryn Englehart as "merely for the purpose of securing territory for the Spanish king," sought to expand both the Catholic faith and Spanish territory, native populations offered checks to stem the flow of Spanish interests in the Southwest. Missionaries abandoned posts on the Neches River in 1693 under intense Indian pressure, and the territory remained "Indian" rather than "Spanish" as a result.⁷ A cartographic depiction of a similar situation can be found on a map drawn of the north Texas borderlands between 38 and 42 degrees north latitude by Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco in 1777. On it, the Spanish presence is limited, and the map conveniently ends where Miera depicted the presence of "Terra Incognita que poseen los Cumanchis," whom he described as "muy belicosa y feroz" (Figure 3).

The metrocentric view of Spanish empire was clearly reflected in cartographic representations of territory claimed by the Spanish. In Joseph Urrutia and Nicolás La For's 1769 "Mapa, que comprende la Frontera, de los Dominios del Rey," a number of towns of varying size surround the official administrative center of Quajuguilla as represented by the symbolic representation of churches, which by law were situated in the center of town plazas (Figure 4). Farthest away from the official center is the mission of Las Toacas, which the map as the smallest of the communities. The implication of this design was that the further away from the official center the church went, the less influence it would have in the imperial design.

Of all the tactics the Spanish used to impose geographical autonomy in North America, secrecy with regard to the scope and extent of its imperial efforts was the primary policy of control. The unauthorized dissemination of geographical information resulted in challenges to Spanish claims of colonial sovereignty. This policy of secrecy with regard to geographical knowledge would have grave consequences for the authority of the Spanish crown in North America, when faced with an adversary who had long since dismissed the rhetoric of deference to absolute power.

The lengths to which the Spanish went to keep their geographical knowledge secret were extraordinary. To protect territorial claims from



Figure 3. Bernardo Pacheco y Miera. “Plano Geografico de la tierra descubierta,” (Detail) 1777. University of California at Berkeley Map Collection.



Figure 4. Jose Urrutia and Nicolás LaFora, “Mapa de toda la Frontera de los dominios del Rey en la America septentrional,” (Detail) 1771. University of Texas at Arlington Special Collections.

imperial rivals, Spain kept its geographical knowledge of the western hemisphere literally under lock and key. The master chart of Spanish imperial claims, the *Padron Real*, was kept in the *Casa de la Contratación* in Seville,

Spain.⁸ Two keys were held to it, one by the Pilot Major, the other by the Cosmographer Major, and both had to be present for the map to be viewed.⁹ This mysterious “master chart” quickly fell into disuse, and has long been lost. The inability to produce such important maps at critical times of diplomatic negotiation would hamstring Spain’s imperial abilities centuries later, when negotiations over boundaries in North America became a primary political concern.

With the establishment of the U.S. government—one that was independent of obligation to Europe—Spain would find itself challenged directly, and its lack of cartographic record would severely limit its ability to defend its claims to vaguely articulated borderlands when the U.S. was systematically expanding and articulating clearly defined borderlines.

The Mississippi Was Never Designed as the Western Boundary of the American Empire

The poorly defined borders of eighteenth-century North America were the result of conditional assumptions of territorial ambiguity and diplomatic protocol by imperial authorities that claimed the territory west of the Mississippi. The agents of the Spanish empire had believed that the western hemisphere would remain a distant part of the European colonial system, and also that the territory was so unwieldy that any attempt to challenge their imperial authority would fail. As long as the continent was subject to the political and economic conditions of the empire, these were safe assumptions to make. When the U.S. began to expand westward, the new conditions they imposed placed the imperial project in North America at a disadvantage. A consideration of American “national” cartography helps to illuminate this situation.

Unlike the Spanish imperial map, which followed territory, the American national map, as Beaudrillard so aptly stated, preceded territory.¹⁰ The rectilinear grid applied by the confederate government could be projected over territory to provide the illusion of control where little actually existed. Much as early Americans looked to classical history for everything from architecture to political theory. The Roman cartographic practice of centuriation, dividing territory into equal parts of one hundred proved to be the ideal method of national expansion. Centuriation applied to the national map by the 1785 Land Ordinance thus became the ideal cartographic representation of neoclassical republican political theory, as it visually represented the diffusion of power among the citizenry previously concentrated in centers of royal authority. The strict limits of political power under the republican system were analogous to the clearly defined boundaries of territorial possessions on its maps, which sharply contrasted with the lack of clearly defined boundaries characteristic of the imperial map.

Initial American expansion into the Ohio country provided a blueprint for American expansion using the cartographic discourse of nation

rather than empire to expand U.S. territorial holdings. A series of maps drawn of the Ohio territory demonstrate the ability of the national map to incorporate territory in a manner that the imperial map could not. Seth Pease's "Map of The Connecticut Western Reserve," drawn in 1797, shows the rectilinear grid stalled in its westward approach by "Unsurveyed Lands, Subject to Indian Claims" just west of the "Cayahoga" River (Figure 5). In contrast, John Melish's 1812 "Map of Ohio" shows national control of those same lands, neatly ordered under the 1785 Land Ordinance. Population, the imperially accepted means of territorial control, was light at best, but the map provided an illusion of authority that satisfied both economically and politically interested parties that the land was firmly within the national domain. Though the grid had not yet been projected west of the Sandusky River, Melish makes no reference to any native populations that might stand in the way of national expansion (Figure 6). Not coincidentally, William Savory's 1826 map of the Western Reserve shows the centuriated grid successfully imposed over those unsurveyed parts of Melish's map (Figure 7).

Unlike the imperial map, the republican national map was (and still is) characterized by strongly delineated boundaries, as *exclusive* as they were *inclusive*. In this sense, the map was truly reflective of early American social and political attitudes. Indian policy in the Old Northwest Territory demonstrates this quite clearly. The policy of Indian assimilation espoused by Thomas Jefferson allowed for Native Americans to live within the cartographic limits of the expanding nation, provided they "either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States, or move beyond the Mississippi."¹¹ The map, with its inclusive or exclusive boundaries, was

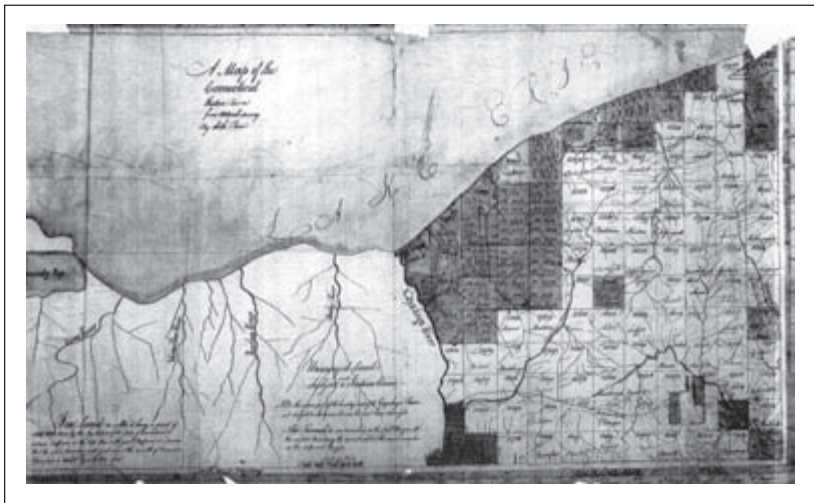


Figure 5. Seth Pease, "A Map of the Connecticut Western Reserve," 1797. Western Reserve Historical Society.

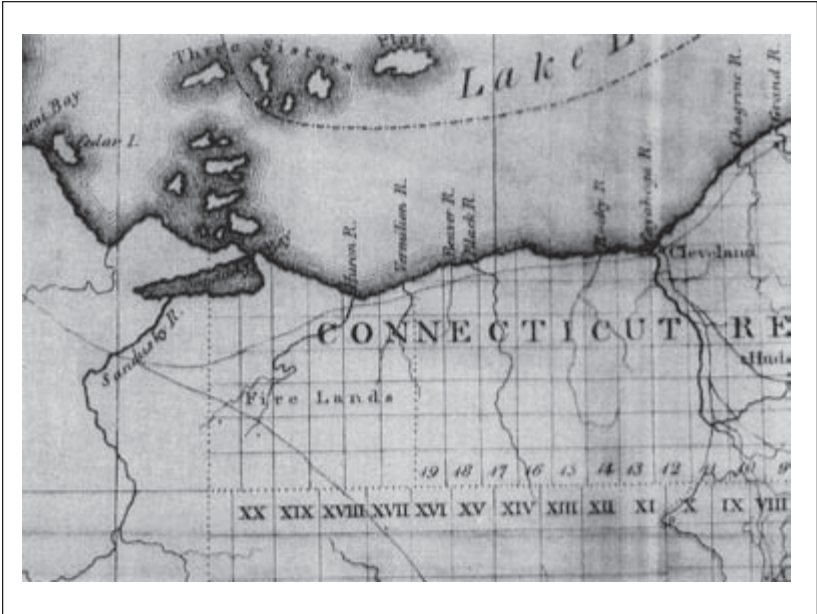


Figure 6. John Melish, “Map of Ohio” (Detail) 1812. Western Reserve Historical Society.

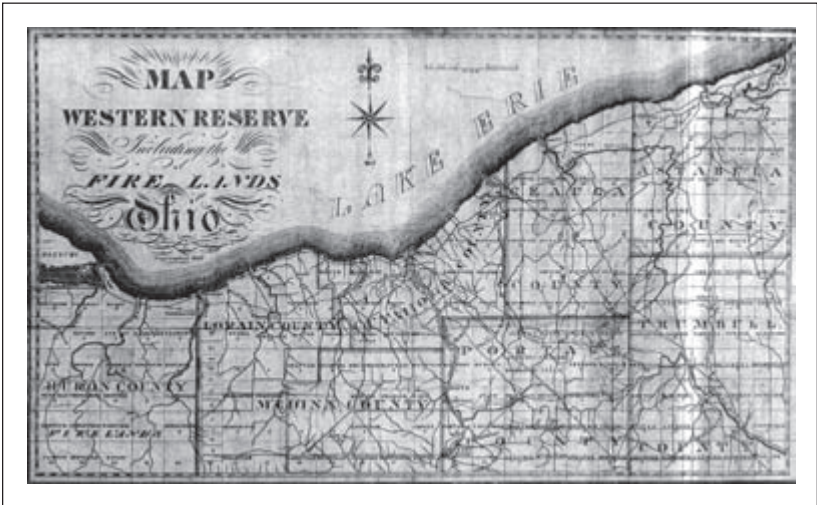


Figure 7. William Savory, “Map of the Western Reserve, Including the Firelands, Ohio,” 1826. Western Reserve Historical Society.

very much reflective of “the rules of social order” in early America.¹² The silence of the latter two maps as to the “Indian Claims” initially portrayed by Pease in 1797 is indeed deafening.

The most widely read source of geographical information in the U.S. in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was *The American Geography; Or, A View Of The Present Situation Of The United States Of America* by Jedidiah Morse. Published in 1789, *The American Geography* was a conscious attempt to position the U.S. as the seat of geographical relevance, where previous English texts written after the American Revolution tended to marginalize North America and particularly the U.S. to downplay the loss of those imperial holdings.

Morse's work is of relevance for many reasons, but for this inquiry it is his treatment of the western lands held by the U.S. as well as lands in North America still held by imperial powers that commands attention. He wrote, "Besides, it is well known that empire has been traveling from east to west. Probably her last and broadest feat will be America."¹³ Morse went on to propose that "Judging on probable grounds, the Mississippi was never designed as the western boundary of the American empire." The western territory was to be a proving ground before America began to challenge the imperial rulers of Europe for control of the remainder of the continent.

Turning attention to America's rivals west of the Mississippi, Morse had great respect for the potential of the trans-Mississippi west but little respect for the Spanish who claimed imperial title to it. He wrote of its inhabitants:

The characteristics of the Californians are stupidity and insensibility, want of knowledge and reflection, inconstancy, impetuosity, and blindness of appetite; an excessive sloth and abhorrence of labor and fatigue; an excessive love of pleasure and amusement of every kind, however trifling or brutal; pusillanimity; and, in fine, a most wretched want of everything which constitutes the real man, and renders him rational, inventive, tractable, and useful to himself and society.¹⁴

Morse noted that the Jesuits had misrepresented the geography of the far west "for political reasons, by representing the climate as so disagreeable and unwholesome, and the soil as so barren," but that "the falsehood of this representation, however, has since been detected, and a very favourable account has been given of the climate and soil."¹⁵

Over 100 years earlier, English geographer Robert Morden made similar observations in his book *Geography Rectified, Or a Description of the World*. Published in 1680, Morden refers to "the inexhaustible Mines of Gold and Silver," and "the Air exceeding Temperate, though seated in the Torrid Zone."¹⁶ His map also marginalized Spanish claims in North America, making no articulation of any noticeable claim above the 30 degrees north latitude on his map (Figure 8). Both Morden's and Morse's accounts demonstrate an inclination toward expansion, based on the potential of the land and the inability of the Spanish to fully utilize these resources.



Figure 8. Robert Morden, "Mexico or New Spaine," from *Geography Rectified*, 1680. University of Michigan Map Collection.

Americans were beginning to justify the idea of taking land from the Spanish empire.¹⁷ By American standards, the Spanish were simply not realizing the potential of the territory they laid claim to. Their imperial model of territorial control would eventually be overtaken by the American model of national expansion that should "not be incompatible with republican principles," provided of course it did not assume the characteristics of empire in the process.¹⁸ The map served as a progress chart to determine how far along the national project had come; as the centuriated grid expanded westward, U.S. citizens could see in clear terms the advancement of their ideals and vision for the nation upon the continent they believed was theirs by right and design. Once the native populations had been removed from the map, only the Spanish empire stood firmly between the American nation and the Pacific Ocean.

The Representation of the United States is the Most Prominent Feature

When the U.S. purchased Louisiana from France in 1803, neither party (nor the Spanish for that matter), could articulate the western claim to the territory. As the U.S. came into conflict with Spain over the boundaries of the Louisiana Purchase, imperial and national cartographies competed for legitimacy in the global sphere, at the ultimate expense to the Spanish crown. In comparing cartographic assertions of authority in North

America during this period, this contest also has parallel significance as a competition between absolutist and republican forms of governance and their means of territorial expansion, imperialism and nationalism respectively. How both Spain and the U.S. applied the use of geographical knowledge would have everything to do with the degree of success they realized in this territorial competition.

Aaron Arrowsmith's "Map Exhibiting All The New Discoveries in the Interior of North America" drawn in 1795 depicted a *tabula rasa* for the American expansionist project (Figure 9). Save for the Rocky Mountain range running up the western third of the map, very few features are displayed with any prominence west of the Mississippi. Americans wanted desperately to fill that map in on their own terms.



Figure 9. Aaron Arrowsmith, "A Map Exhibiting All the New Discoveries in the Interior of North America," 1795. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.

Envoys Livingston and Monroe settled on the price of sixty million francs (\$11,250,000) with chief French negotiator the Marquis de Barbé-Marbois for the purchase of Louisiana. Determining the boundaries of Louisiana then became the focus of the diplomatic proceedings. According to the final wording of the treaty signed on April 30, 1803, France transferred to the U.S. "the Colony or Province of Louisiana, with the same extent that it now has in the hands of France, & that it had when

Spain possessed it; and Such as it Should be after the treaties subsequently entered into between Spain and other states.”¹⁹

The terms of the purchase claimed that France ceded to the U.S. what Spain had ceded to France in 1800. What Spain ceded to France in 1800 was based on what France had ceded to Spain in 1763 at the Treaty of Paris. When Spanish Boundary Commissioner Sebastian Calvo de la Puerta y O’Farril, formally the marqués de Casa Calvo, requested maps of the territories bordering New Mexico and Louisiana from Spanish Governor of Louisiana Nemisio de Salcedo in 1803 (France had still not undertaken the duties of government in Louisiana since San Ildefonso three years earlier), Salcedo’s most recent maps were from 1785; he remarked that “besides the utter impossibility of copying them” they would be of little use “because of the little accuracy I judge them to possess.” He insisted that more maps were likely available in Nueva España, but that there were “no intelligent persons here to whom I can entrust the matter.”²⁰ The inability of Spanish colonial bureaucrats to access the imperial cartographic record was now endangering their entire project.

Spain did in fact have an official cartographic record of the territory in dispute. With Bourbon rule, the rise of a rank of professional statesmen unknown under the Habsburgs theoretically gave colonial administrators more power to deal with such events as they occurred. As the Bourbons expanded the colonial bureaucracy, their official representatives began to undertake the task of geographically accounting for the territory they claimed dominion over. In New Mexico, Spanish intendent Juan Batista Anza vigorously pushed forward the crown’s plan of organization. As part of this work, Anza had Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco map the province, which carried the information that each town was to have at least twenty families in from the countryside exposed to Apache and Comanche attack. (Figure 10).²¹ That Salcedo did not take advantage of the Miera map was more a failing of bureaucracy than of Spanish cartographic competence.

While Spain protested the purchase without the benefit of geographical counterpoint, the American Corps of Discovery was pushing westward with a wealth of trade goods to win favor among the native populations, and the Spanish correctly believed their intention was to “discover the Pacific Ocean, following the Missouri, and to make intelligent observations, because he has the reputation of being a very well educated man and of many talents.”²² It was actually William Clark who was the expedition’s chief cartographer. The map drawn by Samuel Lewis (no relation to Meriweather), published in Nicholas Biddle’s 1814 edition of the Lewis and Clark journals, was based on Clark’s manuscript maps (Figure 11). It showed that the continent extended further to the west than had initially been supposed, connected by the Missouri basin to the Northwest region exploited by the fur-trading companies and opened up a route to the Pacific via the Columbia River. It was thus of major importance for



Figure 10. Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, "Plano geográfico, de los Descubrimientos," 1778. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

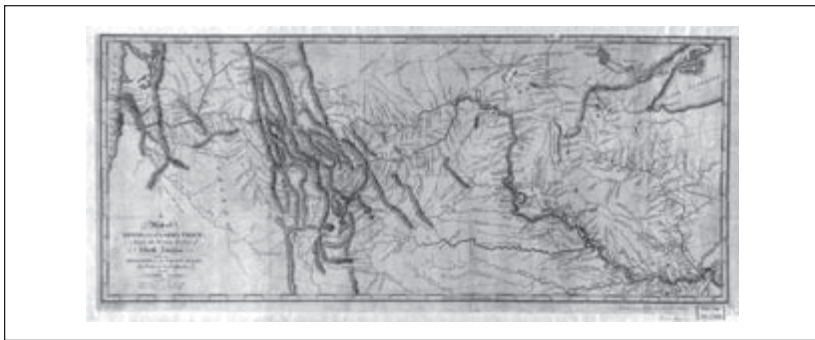


Figure 11. Samuel Lewis, "A Map of Lewis and Clark's Track..." 1814. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.

the westward advance of the American Frontier. William Clark had, in effect, filled in Aaron Arrowsmith's 1795 map from 38 to 49 degrees north latitude. As the Corps of Discovery moved west, they were engaging in a form of cartographic determinism that would expand the territorial interests of the U.S. at the expense of Spanish claims to the region.

In 1806, as the American Corps of Discovery was crossing the Bitter-root Mountains on its way back from the Pacific Ocean, another American military detachment, led by Captain Zebulon Pike, was preparing to march directly into the center of the Spanish empire in North America—Santa Fe. Pike's detachment set out on July 15, 1806, and was captured by a Spanish detachment in February the next year. When Pike's detach-

ment arrived in Santa Fe under armed guard, he was left in a room where “the maps of the different provinces as taken by...other surveyors had been hung up against the walls, but the day we arrived they had all been taken down.”¹³ Despite the Spanish attempt to keep Pike geographically ignorant of his visit to the interior provinces of New Spain, both Pike and another member of his party, Dr. John Robinson, produced maps of their travels in New Spain.

Pike’s “Chart of the Internal Part of Louisiana,” drawn upon his eventual release and return from Santa Fe, boldly proclaims “To go to Sta. Afee [Santa Fe] it is best to ascend the third fork of the Mountain, thence along the foot of said Mountain to the pass at Tons [Taos], as was the route of the Spanish cavalry while returning” (Figure 12). His map is nothing short of an invasion route to the heart of the Spanish Empire in North America. It shows “The route pursued by the Spanish Cavalry while going out from Sta. Fee...in search of the exploring parties commanded by Major Sparks and Captn. Pike in the year 1806,” and makes observation of every Spanish town and fortification on the Rio del Norte. Pike noted that “There is but one troop of dragoons in all New Mexico of the regular force, which is stationed at Santa Fe, and is 100 strong... The men capable of bearing arms in this province may be estimated at 5000: of those probably 1000 are completely armed, 1000 badly, and the rest not at all.”²⁴ Pike made another map, “A Map of the Internal Provinces of New Spain,” which points out every provincial capital, fortified town, and village. The long protected geographical composition of New Spain was finally being revealed (Figure 13).

When the Spanish ordered a general accounting of Louisiana’s boundaries to provide cartographic counterpoint, no authoritative description could be produced. While German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt was preparing his 1811 manuscript “A Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain” commissioned by the Spanish Crown, he remarked of the Spanish master map “I have made no use of it. It appears exceedingly defective... Those countries... are better detailed in *A Map of Louisiana published at Philadelphia in 1803*.”²⁵ While Humboldt did pay some obligatory rhetorical deference to the quality of Spanish cartography in his essay (as it was commissioned by the Spanish crown), it was clear that the Americans were literally drawing the map of Spanish possessions, and the Spanish could offer no substantive cartographic reply.

By 1819, at the Adams-Onís negotiations to finally draw a firm borderline where the once vast borderlands had protected the Spanish from imperial incursions, American cartographer John Melish’s “Map of the United States and the Contiguous British and Spanish Possessions” was used as a cartographic reference, despite minister Onís’ charge that the map had been drawn at the behest of the American government to support its boundary pretensions (Figure 14).²⁶ First published in 1816 and having been revised many times since, it was first presented in his book *A*

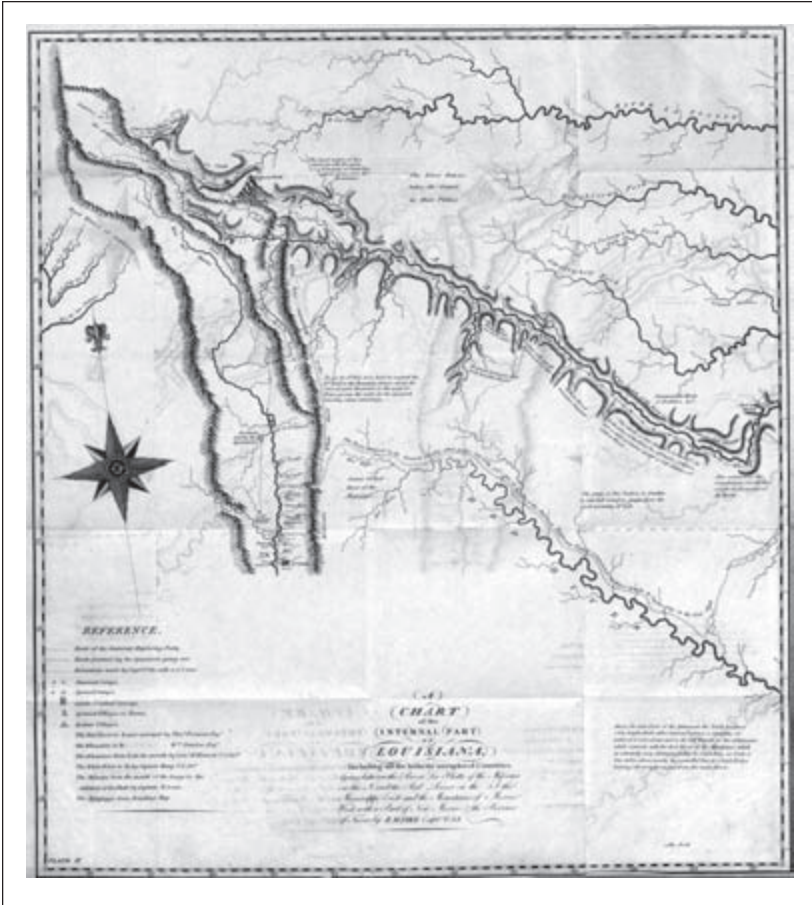


Figure 12. Zebulon Pike, “A Chart of the Internal Part of Louisiana,” 1810. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.

Geographical Description of the United States. Melish readily admitted “The representation of the United States is the most prominent feature” of the map.²⁷ In considering the limits of Spanish territory in North America, one of Melish’s primary sources was the 1721 *A New General Atlas* published by William Law in London, England.²⁸ No Spanish sources were consulted in Melish’s consideration of their imperial claims in North America. Despite Onís’ protests, Spain could offer no cartographic response to Melish’s map. The Spanish empire was penned in by American-made national borderlines before the treaty negotiations even began.

A Brief Conclusion

Cartography and geographical understandings played a vital role in the competition for territory in North America. Moreover, the cartographic



Figure 13. Zebulon Pike, "Map of the Internal Provinces of New Spain," 1810. University of Texas at Arlington Special Collections.



Figure 14. John Melish, "Map of the United States and the Contiguous British and Spanish Possessions," 1818. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.

systems employed by both the Spanish and the Americans were representative of their differing political and social conditions. The Spanish, with their absolutist model of government, naturally drew maps that prominently displayed the authority of the crown above all else. Their lack of attention to cartographic borders was a natural extension of the political model, which placed no limits on the power of the monarch. The Americans on the other hand, and their republican model of government, produced maps that were designed as systematically as their government was, and focused on boundaries much as their political system was concerned with limiting power. The grid design adopted by the new nation could easily be projected over territory where there was little actual control, creating a dialectic of cartographic legitimacy that the Spanish simply could not engage.

With the Adams-Onís Treaty, the circumstances of which began this query, state development had overtaken empire building as the preeminent political design in North America. Maps were no longer vague but precise. *Terrae Incognitae* gave way to sharply defined borderlines, and history continues to record bitter disputes over their placement to this day.

This national cartography that we have inherited is both ideal and problematic. Early national maps, like the social order they represented, failed to allow for differences to manifest inside their egalitarian design. While early Americans often fell well short of realizing the ideal conditions of equality they articulated with regularity and frequency, the parallels between republican political theory and its cartographic manifestations are evident as American society continues to make efforts to recognize a transcontinental nation with “the guarantee to everyone the free exercise of his [or better put: *their*] industry, and the fruits acquired by it.”²⁹

Notes

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