“Companion to . . . the Pending Struggle”

1862’s “Marking Maps” and the Civil War Spatial Imaginary

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“War Telegram Marking Map” (1862). Base map printed in brown ink.
L. Prang and Co. Library of Congress.
The digital humanities project *Civil War Washington*, published during the war’s sesquicentennial by the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and funded in part by a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, features among its collection of hospital and census records, letters, and photographs an interactive map. Using a project geographical information system (GIS), the map layers historical maps of Washington, DC, and its environs with data on the city’s Civil War-era hospitals, bawdy houses, freedmen’s villages, and so on. Visitors to the site can add and subtract layers, toggle between the historic DC map and modern topographical and satellite images, and watch the war-torn city grow and diminish over the course of the conflict. *Civil War Washington*’s dynamic map is one example of the many forms of interactive cartography made possible through GIS software and other advances in technology that allow active manipulation, an intercession that Robert Roth deems “limited only by the objectives of the map user, the skill set of [the] developer, and the input, processing, and display limits of the hardware.” These technologies promise to bring the once-static map into the increasingly multidimensional twenty-first century.

Yet the desire to manipulate maps did not arise with the digital capacity to do so. The *War Telegram Marking Map* (Figure 8), made and sold in 1862 by Boston lithographers L. Prang and Company, exemplifies the many analog interactive maps produced during the Civil War, a period when the human urge to understand and manipulate space was heightened by the particular temporal and spatial circumstances of reported events. Prang’s map also reveals a shifting relationship between American citizens and the spatiotemporal dimensions of the nation. During the war, commercial maps invited citizens on both sides of the conflict to participate in the war, even from afar. While Civil War battlefield maps have long been a topic of inquiry for historians because of the importance of topographical knowledge for military strategy, these were far from the only form of map that proliferated, North and South (as well as abroad), during the war. The advancement of technologies such as the telegraph, the train, and the steam-powered printing press allowed for the mass production of commercial maps and, for the first time in such large quantities, newspaper maps. With access to these maps and to news reports and letters sent from the front, people could follow the war’s events (and, often, the movements of their loved ones and friends drawn onto the maps by hand) in close to real time.

For those at home, this act of tracing out movements on the map became both a patriotic duty, evincing their
close attention to the events of a war that threatened to alter the country forever, and a deeply personal way of connecting with family at war. Lydia Watkins, for instance, wrote to her son Benton W. Lewis while he served in Company C, 8th Michigan Cavalry, “I bought a map the other day where I can trace you every small place is marked down I should like to know who your Brig Gen is, it seems to me you are on the advance again.” The intimacy of Watkins’s act is present in her phrasing—“I can trace you” on the map, not simply your troop’s movements—as is her advanced knowledge of her son’s whereabouts, almost certainly based on newspaper accounts and telegraphic bulletins. As historian Susan W. Schulten writes, with the advent of the telegraph “local papers now had the capacity to report national events to their readers in a timely manner, so that ‘the news’ gradually came to connote not just events, but events happening at almost that very moment.” For Watkins and countless others, commercial maps provided a form of intimate communion with the absent soldier and a sense of control in a time of unrest and upheaval.

Early on, publishers realized they could monetize the public desire to follow the war’s progress on maps—to not simply view the places made important by battle but also to mark them. After 1861, such maps fed the desire for near-instantaneous news from the war’s fronts and underscored the ways in which the war expanded individual consciousness of U.S. geography. Louis Prang, a German immigrant who would become famous as a chromolithographer and as the “father of the American Christmas card,” had supported himself by making wood engravings for a variety of publications for more than a decade before Fort Sumter fell. In 1860, he became sole owner of the Boston-based L. Prang and Company, which produced lithographs and copper plates among other printed ephemera.

The Civil War introduced another way that Prang could market his prints to American households: with “extraordinary large scale” maps that allowed for marking troop movements in Virginia, where, the mapmaker’s prediction about Virginia’s importance proved true: the second year of the war saw General George B. McClellan launch a major offensive in southeastern Virginia that would become known as the Peninsula Campaign, while Stonewall Jackson rampaged through the Shenandoah Valley in the state’s western reaches. Given the map’s scale and size (88 centimeters by 57 centimeters), those at home could follow along as Jackson moved east to join Lee; while McClellan snaked northwest to clash with their combined forces in the Seven Days Battles around Richmond in July 1862, readers could “mark the change of positions . . . on the receipt of EVERY TELEGRAM from the seat of war.” The design purposefully struck a balance between “distinctness” of detail—town names, railroad lines and roads, topographical features like the mountain ridges of the Shenandoah—and “plenty of space” for marking. As the “explanations” included on the map advertised, it was to be “the most distinct Map ever published of the whole Virginia Territory.” Indeed, the map was a hit: it went through at least six editions and inspired Prang and others to produce a host of similar prints for the home throughout the war’s duration.

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Prang’s oversized contribution was not the first of its era that encouraged viewer interaction. In 1861, *Harper’s Weekly* warned its readers to “cut this Number open cautiously” because the periodical had devoted four pages to a “large war map of the southern states.” The editors encouraged those who wished to keep “posted” on the war’s events to “paste or otherwise fasten this map on a large board against a wall. A series of pins, alternately black and white, should be inserted at the various points occupied by the National and the Rebel forces, and shifted as often as authentic accounts of movements are received.” The newsmagazine warned, however, that “care should be taken . . . not to confound newspaper rumors with authentic intelligence.” *Harper’s Weekly* empowered its audience to become active participants in the war, not sidelined at home but able to track military movements and, moreover, to distinguish “newspaper rumors” from “authentic intelligence.” It is not clear how readers would acquire their information—from the weekly, or perhaps letters sent home by soldiers—but in stressing the ability to know truth from fiction, the magazine enlisted its readers as strategists and journalists tracking every battle: “The adoption of this simple expedient will render the otherwise confused accounts of the war in Missouri and Kentucky perfectly intelligible, and will shed a flood of light on the newspaper narratives of current events,” the editors promised.  

Marking maps harnessed telegraphed news to deputize and empower those not on the war’s front lines.

Prang went one step further than the publishers of *Harper’s Weekly* by asking buyers to mark the map not with black and white pins, but with red and blue pencils that were sold with the map—red for the Union forces and blue for the rebels. L. Prang and Company advised that these pencils should be “used with a light hand to enable obliterating the marks with a little soft bread, if found necessary.” While reports from the front might arrive more quickly than ever, that news was not infallible, nor was the hand marking the map. With this detail, in addition to planning for erroneous reports, Prang acknowledged that the war would not be a static affair but a long series of confrontations between red and blue, Union and Rebel, treading and retreading the same ground.

As the marking maps make clear, telegraphic technology carried the Civil War into a different temporal register than previous conflicts. Despite the far-flung outposts where battles occurred, newspapers and recently founded newsmagazines allowed those at home to track movements and battles almost in real time. Literature of the period also focused on the drama created by this new relation of people at home to the temporality of war. Herman Melville’s poem “Donelson,” published in his *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), catalogs the range of emotions that occurs when, day after day, a crowd gathers around a bulletin board on which is posted the news of then-brigadier general Ulysses S. Grant’s five-day siege of Fort Donelson in February 1862. The poem nests various temporalities within one another: the time of battle (which spanned five days) is translated into the time of reporting, relayed in the poem through mock news reports set off in italics, with headlines in small caps. Eventually the time of reporting gives way to the time of posting bulletins in an unnamed icy location and of “a band / Of eager, anxious people” reading the reports, “every wakeful heart . . . set / On latest news from West or South.”

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the crowd awaiting news of the battle to the soldiers at the front, writing that one of the bystanders’ “battered umbrella” looked “like an ambulance-cover / Riddled with bullet-holes, spattered all over.” As “Donelson” makes clear, while the telegraph may have made news from the front arrive more quickly, there nonetheless remained a delay that exacerbated worry and “dismal fear.” After the victory was secured, the Chicago Tribune summed up this emotional tumult: “Such events happen but once in a lifetime, and we who passed through the scenes of yesterday lived a generation in a day.” In its reference to the expansion and contraction of time felt during the course of battle, the newspaper reiterates the palpable tension of anticipation and dread explored in Melville’s poem.

In addition to revealing an altered relation between the citizen at home and the temporality of news, “Donelson” highlights the ways in which the Civil War exposed people to unknown geographies. The poem’s mock news reports attend to the questions that Melville’s presumably Northern crowd would have had about distant Tennessee.

[Fort Donelson] crowns a river-bluff,
   A good broad mile of leveled top;
Inland the ground rolls off
   Deep-gorged, and rocky, and broken up—
A wilderness of trees and brush.
The spaded summit shows the roods
Of fixed intrenchments in their hush;
   Breast-works and rifle-pits in woods
Perplex the base.—
   The welcome weather
Is clear and mild; ’tis much like May.

The ancient boughs that lace together
Along the stream, and hang far forth,
Strange with green mistletoe, betray
A dreamy contrast to the North.

Here Melville conveys how the war brought previously unheralded national spaces to prominence, stressing how these warm and fertile southern climes, such a “dreamy contrast” to the North, seem foreign even as Union troops fight to keep this place a part of the nation. We might think back, here, to Lydia Watkins’s account of tracing the “small places” on the map of Kentucky where her son might be. In her letter, she follows this remark by writing, “I often think of you if you should get kill’d there among strangers how could we hear from you.” The vast distance between Michigan and Kentucky, a small place filled with strangers, resonates in her words, as does Harper’s Weekly’s allusion to “confused accounts of the war in Missouri and Kentucky” that are rendered intelligible by their map. This reference makes clear that the presumed reader is not a citizen in Missouri or Kentucky but most likely in the North.

The Civil War, therefore, brought places that had previously been neglected or forgotten in the national spatial imaginary to new and sometimes permanent prominence. Major examples of this phenomenon would later include Gettysburg and Andersonville and Appomattox, place names that became synonymous with reported events that happened there. But the war’s incredible scope meant that multitudes of other distant places entered national consciousness, however briefly. Published in the same year that Prang’s marking map was first produced, an eight-page supplement to the

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influential *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* titled *Frank Leslie’s War Maps* further demonstrates how the war created a conversation about the relationship between the local and the national. While the supplement’s front page focused on the South Carolina coast, with a richly detailed image of Fort Walker at Port Royal, its interior pages featured maps on scales ranging from Charleston Harbor, to the juncture of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, to the Battle of Belmont, to the entire scope of the Southern and border states. These maps were not arranged in any apparent chronological or geographical order: Charleston Harbor and Fort Sumter, which would come first in most chronological renderings of the war’s important places, instead came after the initial maps of Port Royal, and this fairly small map of Charleston Harbor sat opposite another full-page map of “the seat of war on the Potomac,” which displayed the then-current positions and fortifications of Rebels and Nationals. Frank Leslie’s War Maps presented a new map of America that mingled scales, ignored major cities, and re-centered the nation around its margins and forgotten interiors.

Directed to the person reading about the war from home, these maps drew the reader into wartime operations, aligning her with both the general in the field and the reporter in the newsroom. On the first page of the supplement, for instance, the publisher reminds the citizen at home of the necessity of geographic knowledge for military leaders as well as civilians. As pedagogical tools, the supplement states, “the importance of Maps to the proper comprehension of military operations cannot be overestimated, and is universally conceded.” However, both generals in the field and citizens at home receive “barely the vaguest impression” from intelligence “unless we at once follow them out on the map.” Beyond deputizing followers at home with the same intelligence granted to the war’s leaders, the editors of *Frank Leslie’s* also transformed its readers into reporters in the newsroom. Declaring maps “indispensable companions of the newspaper,” the Frank Leslie’s writers described how they “had put together a series of such maps, illustrating the whole field of the war, complete and in its parts,” in order to track the war in the newsroom. Having realized through their own use the immense “utility” of such maps, the staff announced their intention to “reproduce them for the benefit of the public, at a price little more than nominal.” Sharing maps between newspaper writers and readers put those not near the seat of battle into the shoes of eyewitness reporters. Further, by ostensibly charging little more than nominal fees to reproduce the maps, the illustrated weekly was publicly performing its civic duty to disperse the knowledge found in the newsroom to the general public.

Instructions stating that military movements must be “follow[ed] . . . out” on the map in order to be understood brought spatial and temporal experience into play. Understanding was achieved through approximating troop movements in space and time. The publishers of *Frank Leslie’s War Maps* further emphasized this experiential relationship when they explained that the maps were interactive. Readers were invited “to follow with eye and pencil every future movement.”

We may soon expect to hear of active operations at Port Royal and the mouth of the Savannah River; at the mouth of the Mississippi; as well as in Kentucky and Tennessee. With these maps before him, the extent and bearing of these operations will be clear and intelligible.

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to the general reader, who otherwise will only be bewildered by what he reads. We know of no more rational occupation than that of ‘posting up’ the operations of the war, or ‘checking-off’ the movements of the troops, on both sides, on these maps. This can easily be done with differently colored pencils, the blue marks indicating the national forces, the red the rebel armies. The advance or secession of the respective colors will show, day by day and week by week, the loss or gain of the national arms, and in the end present a real historical picture of the war.23

With this invitation to mark the maps, Leslie’s gestured toward a form of geographical experience that combined the immediate sensory knowledge of place with the conceptual knowledge of space produced by maps. Marking the maps using blue and red pencils, just as L. Prang and Company encouraged consumers to do by selling pencils (and alternate instructions) with their map, was a “rational occupation” that promised to give the “general reader” a “clear and intelligible” knowledge of military operations otherwise unknowable.

Interactive commercial Civil War maps suggest a productive way to unsettle the stories we tell about the war by highlighting alternative geographical arrangements within the nation. What happens, these maps ask, when we read the war not as a struggle between North and South (and its concomitant associations with the urban and the rural, the slave-liberators and the slave-owners, the Nationals and the Rebels), but as a conflict that upturned geographical scales, brought unimportant local places to unexpected national prominence, and allowed Americans at home to follow along in almost real time, creating their own atlases of the war and narratives of its history? The tracing of the map was a patriotic duty, such that at the war’s conclusion, Harriet Beecher Stowe (writing under the name Christopher Crowfield) would commiserate with the “many, many homes where the light has gone out forever . . . you, O fathers, mothers, wives, sisters, haunted by a name that has ceased to be spoken on earth,—you, for whom there is no more news from the camp, no more reading of lists, no more tracing of maps, no more letters, but only a blank, dead silence!”24 These maps which served as a form of intimate, tactile connection with family far from home would become a testament to sacrifice. When the war finally ended, the maps were rendered silent. But as Ralph Waldo Emerson would write in his journal during the summer of 1865, the Civil War “added to every house and heart a vast enlargement. In every house and shop, an American map has been unrolled, and daily studied—and now that peace has come, every citizen finds himself a skilled student of the condition, means, and future, of this continent.”25 Reading and writing on maps during the Civil War had created a force of informed citizens. Armed with spatial knowledge and lived experience of war, these citizens would come to define a newly invigorated democratic engagement between the individual and the nation—one that might prevent civil wars to come.

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NOTES

1. Robert E. Roth, “Interactive Maps: What We Know and What We Need to Know,” *Journal of Spatial Information Science* 6 (2013): 64. Similarly, the Civil War Trust’s website features 17 animated maps of major battles and years of the conflict; https://www.civilwar.org/learn/maps.

2. While commercial maps and newspapers existed in the South, they were available in much smaller quantities due to the comparatively few printing presses, lithographers, and engravers and relative shortage of paper in Confederate territory. The commercial maps discussed in this article were generally published in the North and intended for Northern audiences, but Prang’s map did have sales agents in “all parts of the country.” Even if the South had boasted the industrial capacity to produce maps in greater quantity, it seems possible that they would have been less often purchased, since most of the war’s battles were fought in places familiar to Southerners. My focus is therefore primarily on the effect of these maps on Union-supporting homes.


5. Lydia Watkins to Benton Lewis, February 14, 1864, Lydia Watkins Papers, 1863–1865, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. I am grateful to Christopher Hager for bringing this letter to my attention.


8. Ibid.; emphasis in original.

9. Ibid.


13. Ibid., 39.

14. Ibid., 44. Grant’s own letters from this time attest to his awareness of the frustrating delay between telegraph messages. On February 9, 1862, just before the siege of Donelson began, Grant wrote to his sister, “Before receiving this you will hear, by telegraph, of Fort Donaldson [sic] being attacked.” See Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 981.


17. Lydia Watkins to Benton Lewis.

18. *Harper's Weekly* enjoyed a wide Southern readership before the war, but once the newsmagazine declared its support for Lincoln and the Union and, more importantly, the United States ceased mail delivery to the South in 1861, this readership dwindled.

19. We might draw a parallel between Fort Donelson’s sudden appearance and the ascendancy of U. S. Grant on the national scene. As Ron Chernow has observed, Grant’s refusal to accept anything but “unconditional surrender” and his subsequent victory “bestowed instant fame on Grant” (Chernow, *Grant*, 185).


21. Ibid.; emphasis in original

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.; emphasis in original.

24. Christopher Crowfield [Harriet Beecher Stowe], *The Chimney Corner* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1868), 280. My thanks to Kristen Treen for bringing this passage to my attention.


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