

ECOTECH NETWORK

An Explosion of Maps at the Start of the First Lincoln Administration

By Larry Stipek

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February 12th marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, the nation's 16th President. I recently guest lectured on the topic of, "What can be learned from maps as documentary evidence?" As I looked at the historic maps, it struck me how relatively few maps were available in Virginia before Lincoln's first administration compared to the explosion in map making that accompanied the Civil War.

The earliest maps of Virginia were made by mariners who saw and mapped the coast as viewed from the deck of a ship. Maps through the years were made to bolster the land claims of the major powers, to entice settlers to the newly discovered land, for military intelligence, to advance scientific knowledge, promote commerce, plan for improvements, convey land, and to spread geographic knowledge.

At the start of the Civil War, however, large scale maps needed by both armies simply didn't exist and both armies at first relied on the map of Virginia by Herman Boye, which was revised by Ludwig von Buchholtz and published in Richmond in 1859. Published at a scale of 1 inch equals 5 miles, it provided little of the detail needed by the officers on both sides.

There were a handful of detailed, commercially produced county maps available at the start of the war which were commandeered by both sides. The map of Loudoun County, surveyed by Yardley Taylor and published by Robert Pearsall Smith in Philadelphia in 1853, was one such map. Smith was a very prolific map publisher whose business was ended by the war. In a letter to the American Philosophical Society in March 1864, Smith included a map of the counties he had mapped which indicates that he was involved in the mapping of several Virginia counties including Henrico in 1853.

His and other county maps were very detailed showing residences with the names of the owners, post offices, mills, churches, roads and railroads, canals and streams, and mineral deposits. These were many of the features of interest to military commanders, and because of this they were highly prized at the start of the war. Their real purpose, however, had been to promote commerce in the counties for which they had been made.

LINCOLN, TELEGRAPHS AND MAPS

Lincoln was a hands on commander in chief who was known to wait at the telegraph office for news from his officers. In order to understand tactics and battlefields, he most certainly would have been a consumer of the many maps produced during the war, many of which were filed in reports of battlefield action. He certainly had experience. After his general store in New Salem, Illinois failed in 1835, he was appointed postmaster of New Salem. To supplement his income, he became the deputy surveyor of Sangamon County.

The war started almost immediately after Lincoln was elected on November 6, 1860. South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860, and on April 15, 1861 the President issued a call to raise an army. Because there was very little mapped information available, commanders were fighting blind and the need for maps was great. In 1862 General George B. McClellan commented during the Peninsula Campaign, “correct local maps were not to be found, and the country, though known in its general features, we found to be inaccurately described in essential particulars, in the only maps and geographical memoirs or papers to which access could be had; erroneous courses to streams and roads were frequently given, and no dependence could be placed on the information thus derived.”

MAPPING A UNION ADVANTAGE

Mapping began immediately. The Union side had a great advantage over the Confederate in that it had experienced personnel and the necessary equipment. The Army’s Corps of Topographical Engineers and Corps of Engineers, the Navy’s Hydrographic Office, and the Treasury Department’s Coast Survey produced an incredible number of maps throughout the war. The Superintendent of the Coast Survey reported in 1862 that more than 44,000 copies of maps, charts, and sketches had been produced in the last year. The number of printed maps reached 65,897 by 1864. In that same year, the Corps of Engineers produced 20,938 map sheets. This tremendous rate of production was made possible by the introduction of lithographic printing. These numbers do not count thousands of maps produced in the field or made to accompany reports.

The Confederate army was hampered by a lack of trained personnel, equipment, and printing presses. General Robert E. Lee took steps to remedy the situation when he assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia on June 1, 1862. A former army engineer, Lee appointed Captain Albert H. Campbell to head the Topographic Department and the mapping of the area around Richmond began almost immediately. The engineers also hit upon the idea of using photography to reproduce their maps in the field.

MAPS AS ECONOMIC STIMULUS

Maps were not just made by the military. Commercial maps of the theater of war and individual battlefields were popular both here and abroad. Maps in newspapers and journals also became quite common.

The war also stimulated industry in the north and attracted immigrants from Europe. Lincoln signed three bills in 1862 to promote settlement: the Homestead Act which offered settlers 160 acres of land; the Morrill Act which gave the states land for agricultural and mechanical colleges; and the Pacific Railway Act which consolidated the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads to construct the transcontinental railroad. All of these bills stimulated new surveying and mapping.

Under the Lincoln administration, because of the Civil War, there was an explosion of large scale, detailed map making. Our knowledge of the geography of the country was significantly advanced, and the historic record of the struggle was established. Perhaps more significantly, both the military and the public learned about maps and how to read them, and detailed maps of Virginia and elsewhere were made that served for years to come. Deputy surveyor Lincoln could probably not have foreseen this cartographic legacy while on the frontier in 1835.

There are several references where you can learn more about Virginia’s historic mapping including: Virginia in Maps. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, 2000; Swem, Earl. Maps Relating to Virginia. Virginia State Library and Archives. Richmond, 1989; Stephenson, Richard. The Cartography of Northern

Virginia. Fairfax County, Virginia, 1983; and Nelson, Christopher and Brian Pohanka. Mapping the Civil War: Featuring Rare Maps From the Library of Congress. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. Washington, D.C., 1992. Please also visit the Library of Congress at <http://www.loc.gov/index.html> and the Library of Virginia at <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/index.htm>.



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