[One Mississippi: Coloney & Fairchild's Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters (1866)](#)

1. *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters*, by Coloney & Fairchild (St. Louis, 1866). Mounted on original wooden scroll and lined on linen. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

To look at the *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters* on a computer screen is to see all 2,600 miles of the Mississippi River at once (fig. 1). It begins as a

barely perceptible stream in the upper left of the image, eventually taking shape as a hand-colored blue line winding its way through ten different states (the boundaries of which are indicated by block letters that parallel the river on either side). Seeing the river in this way conveys the fluctuating nature of the river's course, from the bulbous expansion of Lake Pepin between Minnesota and Wisconsin to the looping cutoffs below Natchez, Mississippi, and offers a visual contrast between the sparsely populated upper river and the more densely settled lower portion. The user can zoom in at any point to read the names of towns, landings, and tributaries in amazing clarity, and then toggle back to the comprehensive view, controlling his or her own experience of the map.

In this image the map has been segmented into eight pieces, but the actual *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters* is one continuous strip that measures nearly eleven feet long and a little over two inches wide. When encountering it in person, the river only gradually comes into view over time, making the experience of using the map more like traveling on the river itself. The digital image serves as a solution to a representational problem: namely, how a map of such an unusual size and shape can be made to conform to a rectangular screen. This twenty-first century challenge seems remote from the context of the post-Civil War era to which this map dates, but it mirrors difficulties that nineteenth-century Americans faced in translating their ideas and experiences of the river into visual representations. Published in 1866 by St. Louis-based entrepreneurs Myron Coloney and Sidney B. Fairchild, the ribbon map's singular focus on the river and its exaggerated dimensions assert the enduring relevance of the Mississippi River after the Civil War, both to the nation's identity and to its commercial future.

2. *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters*, by Coloney & Fairchild, in *Edwards' Mississippi River Gazetteer & Directory* (St. Louis, 1866). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The map is a hand-colored lithograph that was initially printed on one sheet of paper (fig. 2). One version of it appeared in the 1866 edition of *Edwards' Descriptive Gazetteer and Commercial Directory of the Mississippi River*, where the *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters* can be found between an advertisement for Barnum's Hotel in St. Louis and an account of the Mississippi's "discovery" by Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this context, the map helps to fold the river into popular contemporary narratives of U.S. history while also signaling that it was intended for use by travelers.

3. *Traveller's Guide: A Map of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Extending from Pittsburgh to the Gulf of Mexico*, by Joseph Duff (Cincinnati, 1840). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

As a single, foldout sheet, the map was similar to maps and guides produced for a growing tourist and transportation industry. By the mid-1830s, examples such as J. Duff's *Traveller's Guide* were available for sale on western steamboats (fig. 3). They typically indicated the general shape of the river channel, gave the location of towns and cities, listed distances between landings, and sometimes included a range of steamboat fares. As might be expected, they almost always focused on the portion of the river system that was actually navigable by steamers. If one were to depart from the main stem of the river to embark on an overland journey, a river map would have been useless because it usually did not give information about the broader region or network of transportation options. By 1866, however, it was imperative to represent the host of railroad tracks increasingly extending from large and small cities alike. Bold black lines extend from various points along the Mississippi and testify to the centrality of the river's location between western and eastern markets.

4. Detail of title and scroll, *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters* by Coloney & Fairchild (1866). Courtesy of the [David Rumsey Historic Map Collection](#).

Coloney and Fairchild's patented apparatus required that the single sheet be cut into strips, attached end-to-end, mounted on linen, and then rolled inside a wooden, metal, or paper spool (fig. 4). The resulting portability of the map was crucial because, as advertisements indicated, it was intended for business travelers, steamboat navigators, and tourists. Of this form, the Newberry Library and the Minnesota Historical Society Library hold what seems to be a first edition, while nearly a dozen archives around the U.S. hold an updated second version. With the addition of hundreds of towns, mile markers, islands, landings, landowner and plantation names, and significant Civil War locations, the Lower Mississippi appears to be a settled and thriving commercial space.

5. John Banvard's panorama apparatus, published in *Scientific American*, Vol. 4, No. 13 (Dec. 16, 1848). Courtesy of the American Periodical Series Online.

In the scroll form, the map's user pulls the bottom tab to travel upriver from the Head of Passes, where the river empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The seamless and gradual way one would have encountered the river led the *New York Sun* to christen the Coloney and Fairchild map "[t]he latest style of panorama," recalling the moving panorama craze of the late 1840s and early 1850s (fig. 5). These gigantic scrolling paintings were presented to seated audiences in darkened rooms and accompanied by narration and music. Moving panoramas presented the river as a comprehensible succession of picturesque landmarks, burgeoning towns, western metropolises, and notable historical sites, simulating an imaginary steamboat journey. Scholars have asserted the central

role that these popular spectacles had in supporting the ideology of Manifest Destiny, as the imagery naturalized a continuous and conflict-free progression through the American continent. The *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters* capitalizes on this well-known visual form but allows users to enact their own imaginative travel up the length of the Mississippi. At the same time, since the ribbon map lacks a second spool around which to wrap the already viewed portion, the object had the potential to be as unruly and excessive as the river itself was during periods of high water (fig. 6).

6. Author's hand holding the ribbon map, August 2009. Photo by the author.

Certain locales would have had particular resonance to the map's postbellum viewers (fig. 7). The portion of the Mississippi that had been Confederate territory was the focus of a number of strip maps during the war. In January and May of 1862, *Harper's Weekly* published depictions of the river between Cairo and New Orleans to orient readers in anticipation of military action in the region. The same year, advertisements for J.T. Lloyd's *Map of the Lower Mississippi from St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico* asserted that Union commanders requested his version for use in the field.

7. Detail of Vicksburg, Mississippi, from *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters*, Coloney & Fairchild (1866). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Just one year after the end of the Civil War, Coloney and Fairchild incorporated significant battle sites on and along the river into their ribbon map. The location of batteries, Jefferson Davis's plantation, and even "Grant's Cutoff"—an attempt to bypass the Confederate-controlled section of the river at Vicksburg that was ultimately abandoned—are all included. These new landmarks form elements of a newly unified river's historical landscape and reinforce the notion that the Mississippi was national terrain.

8. Detail of Alton, Illinois, to St. Louis, Missouri, from *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters*, Coloney & Fairchild (1866). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Part of the reunification effort, as far as St. Louis businessmen like Coloney and Edwards were concerned, was the reestablishment of St. Louis as the preeminent commercial center of the West (fig. 8). Momentum had shifted away from St. Louis and the Lower Mississippi to Chicago and its rail networks by

the end of the 1850s. Yet even in 1866, St. Louis boosters did not view Chicago's permanent ascendance as inevitable. They put their stock in their city's geographic position near the confluence of both the Missouri and the Ohio rivers. They continued to push for navigation improvements and strengthened their connection to the port at New Orleans. Additionally, in his position as commercial editor of the *Missouri Democrat*, Coloney was a vocal advocate for updating the city's waterfront by adding grain elevators and using barges to transport grain in bulk. Although [some railroad maps](#) tried to shear St. Louis from the region, the *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters* pictures St. Louis as the natural repository for the agricultural bounty of the Upper Mississippi.

9. Detail of headwaters to Crow Wing River, Minnesota, from *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters*, Coloney & Fairchild (1866). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In the uppermost 470 miles of the *Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters*—from St. Anthony Falls to the river's headwaters—the Mississippi flows mostly west to east, though that is not made evident by the consistent linearity of the map (fig. 9). Despite the fact that [others had shown this to be quite a watery area](#), only a few patches and lines of blue disrupt the relatively vacant space of the map. The two named lakes inscribe the river with national significance as the monikers refer to expeditions by territorial governor [Lewis Cass](#) and [Henry Rowe Schoolcraft](#) to locate the source of the great river in 1820 and 1832, respectively. To reinforce the authenticity of his findings, Schoolcraft renamed what had been known as Elk Lake or Lac La Biche to the indigenous and French inhabitants of the area as "Itasca," the composite of parts of two Latin words: *veritas* (true) and *caput* (head).

This uppermost portion—nearly one-sixth of the map's total length—would have been unnecessary information for a steamboat traveler in 1866, as it is far beyond the head of navigation and there was no touristic infrastructure in the area. Its presence serves other ideological purposes, naturalizing the boundaries of the nation and emphasizing the connectivity provided by a unified river.

The completely unfurled map extends beyond the limits of the user's reach, wondrously embodying the scope of the river in the time it took to unroll it and in the eleven feet of space it now occupies. At the same time, the care required to wind the strip back into Coloney and Fairchild's patented spool apparatus reiterates the precariousness of human control—either representational or environmental—over the mercurial Mississippi. While digitization has immense value for the preservation of historical objects and for making archival collections more accessible, in this case, the opportunity to experience the map on its own material terms opens up layers of meaning that a digital interface obscures.

Further Reading

For a multifaceted discussion of the history of maps, see James R. Akerman and Robert W. Karrow Jr., eds., *Maps: Finding Our Place in the World* (Chicago, 2007). Martin Brückner has written about maps as mobile objects in "The Ambulatory Map: Commodity, Mobility, and Visualcy in Eighteenth-Century Colonial America," *Winterthur Portfolio* (2011): 141-160. Recent attempts to relate the experience of nineteenth-century travel to its representation are Anne Baker, *Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum America* (Ann Arbor, 2006) and Alison Byerly, *Are We There Yet? Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (Ann Arbor, 2013). Louis C. Hunter's *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949) is a classic introduction to the steamboat age. On the Vicksburg campaign and the battle for the Mississippi River during the Civil War, see Lisa M. Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens, Ga., 2012) and William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winschel, *Vicksburg Is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (Lincoln, Neb., 2003). William Cronon tells the story of Chicago's rise to prominence over St. Louis in *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), while Adam Arenson details the perspective of St. Louisans in *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011). On the ways that the search for the river's "true source" is related to claims about knowledge and authority, see Rich Heyman, "Locating the Mississippi: Landscape, Nature, and National Territoriality at the Mississippi Headwaters," *American Quarterly* 62:2 (June 2010): 303-333.

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