

American Shores: Maps of the Middle Atlantic Region to 1850



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American Shores: Maps of the Middle Atlantic Region to 1850

<http://www.nypl.org/research/midatlantic/index.html>

New York Public Library

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The New York Public Library is one of the most distinguished research institutions in the world, and its renowned Map Room contributes to that reputation. [American Shores](#) is a searchable Website created by the library with

a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to bring a portion of its cartographic resources to your own reading room, no matter how far you are from the library's famed lions on Fifth Avenue. The site's focus, the Middle Atlantic, is a less-celebrated descriptor for a piece of the geographical pie that was first the Dutch commercial outpost of New Netherland, then colonial British North America, and finally the early national United States.

Definitions of that region are legion. The project's choice—"from New York south to Virginia"—more closely follows the administrative usage of modern federal agencies than recent scholarly ones, which generally exclude Maryland and Virginia. Reflecting its title, the site's definition more problematically places the region "east of the Appalachian Mountains," without saying whether that includes their easternmost ridges, which parallel the Hudson, Delaware, and Susquehanna rivers and bisect the states in question. The project is not *about* definitions—its scope may reflect the contents of the maps in its constituent collections more than a definition of the region—but academic users should be aware of the implications of these organizational protocols.

The project itself seems designed to accomplish two objectives: to instruct visitors on the fundamentals and applications of cartographic scholarship and to let oriented users roam at will in search of early American spatial knowledge. This review takes the first objective on its own terms and the second one more literally, by testing it on an embryonic actual research project.

The iconic image of "American Shores," a colorful strip of Atlantic littoral running from south to north (and left to right) from the central Carolina coast to near Riverhead on Long Island, suggests this double objective. Four clickable headers across the top of the site—"Overview," "Basics of Maps," "Maps Through History," and "Geographical Areas"—summon a series of subheads running down the left side that preview the "Overview" section's stated design to "highlight and explain a few of the hundreds of maps that have been digitized, and offer suggestions for using them in the study of historical topics or geographic areas." With that opportunity either availed or declined, a large button—"Search Map Collection"—turns you loose into the database.

The clarity and utility of these preliminary elements varies considerably. The marginal subbars on the left border of the "Overview" section include the "Mid-Atlantic Region and [its] Wider World" and a group of narrower spatial frames from the "World" to the "Atlantic Ocean" to the "United States." Each of the latter brings up a map or two, with commentary and an interactive "catalogue record." Use of these maps provides a kind of tutorial on cartographic practice. The header "Basics of Maps" offers definitions used by specialists in the field and a "Note on the History of Cartography." "Maps Through History" is both intriguing and strange. When clicked, it lays out an asymmetrical and somewhat fragmentary categorical catalogue of the Website as a whole (one presumes), under the subheads "Nautical New York," "Coastal and Oceanic Nautical Charts," "Early Transportation," and, most oddly, "American Revolution

Battle Sites.” The specific rationale for the selection of these topics—or why other and potentially equally useful subjects, such as “Religious Denominations” or “Newspaper Circulation Zones”—are not included alongside these idiosyncratic headings is never articulated. “Geographical Areas” leads to a more predictable, conventional survey of largely political jurisdictions into which the larger region has been divided, each with its selection of illustrated starter maps.

This arrangement serves as a noncoercive introduction to the map collection itself, with no requirement to linger, and an early opportunity to actually interact with the maps. Clicking on thumbnail sample maps enlarges them but also discloses that running the pan and zoom features “require[s] *MrSid plug-in*.” A link takes you to a proprietary Website with free software downloads, but nothing clarifies what you are to do next. Once inside the larger map database, the efficacy of the interactive features, including pan and zoom, seems to vary considerably.

Rather than just browse randomly, I wanted to go into “Search Map Collection” with an actual research project. By chance, the invitation to do this review coincided with an embryonic project fit to the region: an inquiry into a migration and settlement salient in the 1720s and 1730s southwest from Esopus (Kingston), New York, on the Hudson River, to the Delaware Valley at Mahackamack (Port Jervis), and then down both sides of the Delaware through the “Minisink Country” to the famous Water Gap. The settlement process involved multiple jurisdictions, ordinary farmers, mysterious folkloric ancient miners, and alarmed royal and proprietary officials in Philadelphia and elsewhere wondering why it was happening. With mouse at hand, the possibility of discovery beckoned.

The resulting trip was both bumpy and intriguing. Under “Search Map Collection,” the subhead “search maps” offered a clickable “New Search Page (Digital Gallery),” which led into an ambiguous new space. Titled the “NYPL Digital Gallery,” it was not clear whether this was a *part* of “American Shores” itself or an auxiliary New York Public Library (NYPL) domain. The new page offered *two* search boxes, one of which seemed connected to the “Lawrence H. Slaughter Collection and Others” and the second of which linked to the “Digital Gallery.” It presented some background information on the NYPL, the history of the Slaughter Collection, and a bibliography on cartographic history.

Wanting to get on the ground in the Minisink as quickly as possible, I tried keyword terms in both boxes. It was unclear if either was connected to a database defined by information in the maps in question or just to their titles, but trial and error suggested the latter. Queries directed to names on the ground in adjacent parts of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania mainly went nowhere. *Esopus* produced no entries and *Kingston* only a few. *Minisink*, *Wallkill*, *Shawangunk*, and *Mahackamack* all failed. Queries aimed at counties in the area did better. *Ulster* brought up some maps, but figuring out how to manage and control the pan and zoom features was difficult. I wasn’t

sure whether I was even in the “Digital Gallery” or was instead in the “Slaughter Collection,” reminding me of the fact that early American regions were themselves layered and contested, with royal and proprietary holdings, overlays from New England’s “sea-to-sea” charters, and other murky phenomena. Several queries into the “Digital Gallery” search box returned large numbers of *photographs*, which suggested that I had wandered out of the Map Room. My sense of challenge intertwined with frustration.

Flailing about digitally for orientation did not help. A click on “Browse: Names A-Z” disclosed an “alphabetical list of 13,636 names [of] artists, authors, publishers, collectors, and others responsible for the creation of items found on the site.” “Browse: Subjects A-Z” brought an even more unwieldy list of “over 58,000 subject terms [which] includes people, places and topics . . . ,” along with the unsettling news that “many gallery records do not have subject descriptions.” It was starting to get dark, and I wanted to get back to “American Shores,” or to *any* shores, for that matter. This page at least had a tool, “Explore Subjects,” with an “Exact Match” and an “Expanded Search” option, which turned up intriguing items. It was at least the third search box I had encountered since leaving digital Manhattan. It bore the disclaiming title “BETA,” but it gave some sense of at least partial closure, albeit hardly one of real completion.

“BETA” sounds like an appropriate grade for the project as a whole at this early point. Any inquirer using this site will by definition learn some things about cartography, cartographic history, and cartographic approaches to historical interpretation. They may very well come away with useful insights into their own specific project or object of research. Whether the site, in its current configuration, is recommendable over a straight Google search—under “Images” and with the keyword “maps” and their topic—may be a matter of some debate. But, recalling my own first research expedition between the actual stone lions on Fifth Avenue, as a high schooler—when a foray for a paper on Mao Tse-Tung revealed thousands of interesting sources but *most of them in Chinese!*—I would suggest patience, resourcefulness, and regular return trips. The site will doubtless be fine-tuned, and your own instincts for virtual navigation will mature.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.3 (April, 2008).
