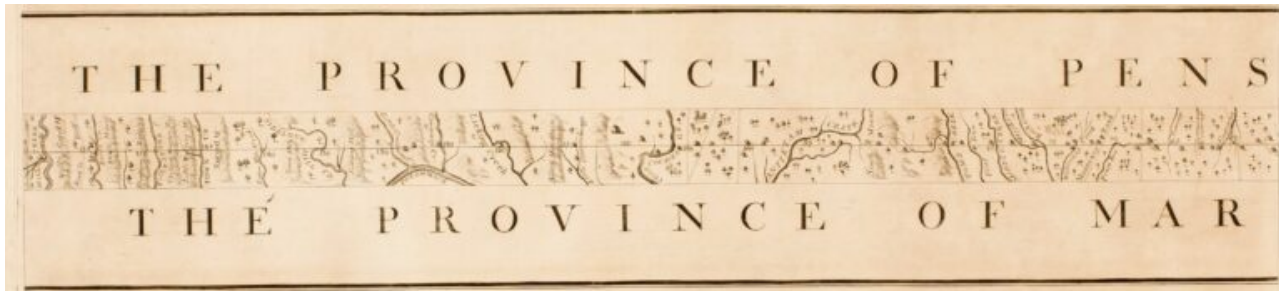


Mason-Dixon Lines



* Editor's note: This past December, shortly after completing this article, Edward Gray tragically and suddenly passed away. In addition to his award-winning teaching and scholarship, Ed was a central figure here at *Commonplace*. He served as our editor from 2005 to 2009 as well as the inaugural review editor from 2000 to 2004. Please read [this obituary](#) highlighting a bit of his full life.

Search engines usually list my new book, *Mason-Dixon: Crucible of the Nation*, somewhere among listings for the Dixie Belle Paint Company's chalk mineral furniture paint, Mason Dixon Gray (a children's book series about a fourth grader named Mason Dixon), and Thomas Pynchon's 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon*.

I can't vouch for the paint or the children's books, but I can say that Pynchon's novel and my book are very different. Mine is a work of non-fiction. It begins with the founding of colonial Maryland and ends in the era of the Civil War. Pynchon's centers on the eight-year partnership of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, the two English astronomers charged with establishing the boundary between the colonies of Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania.

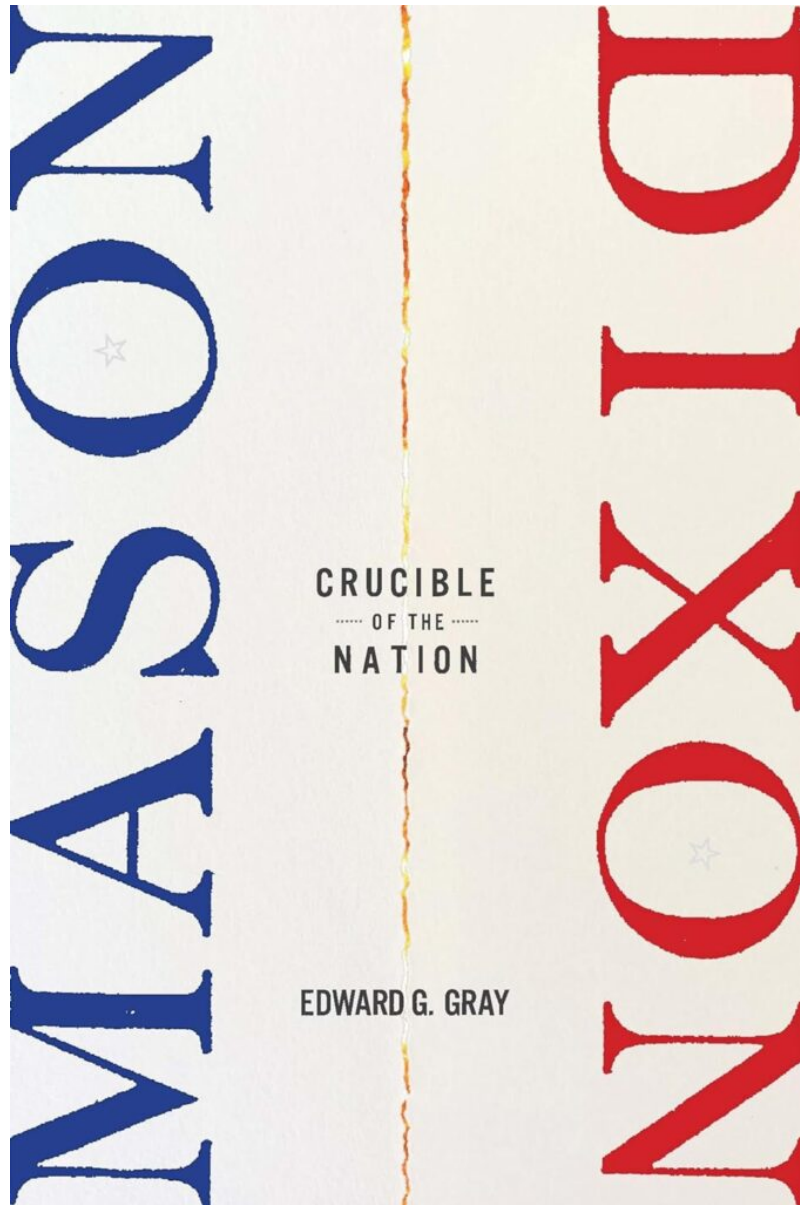
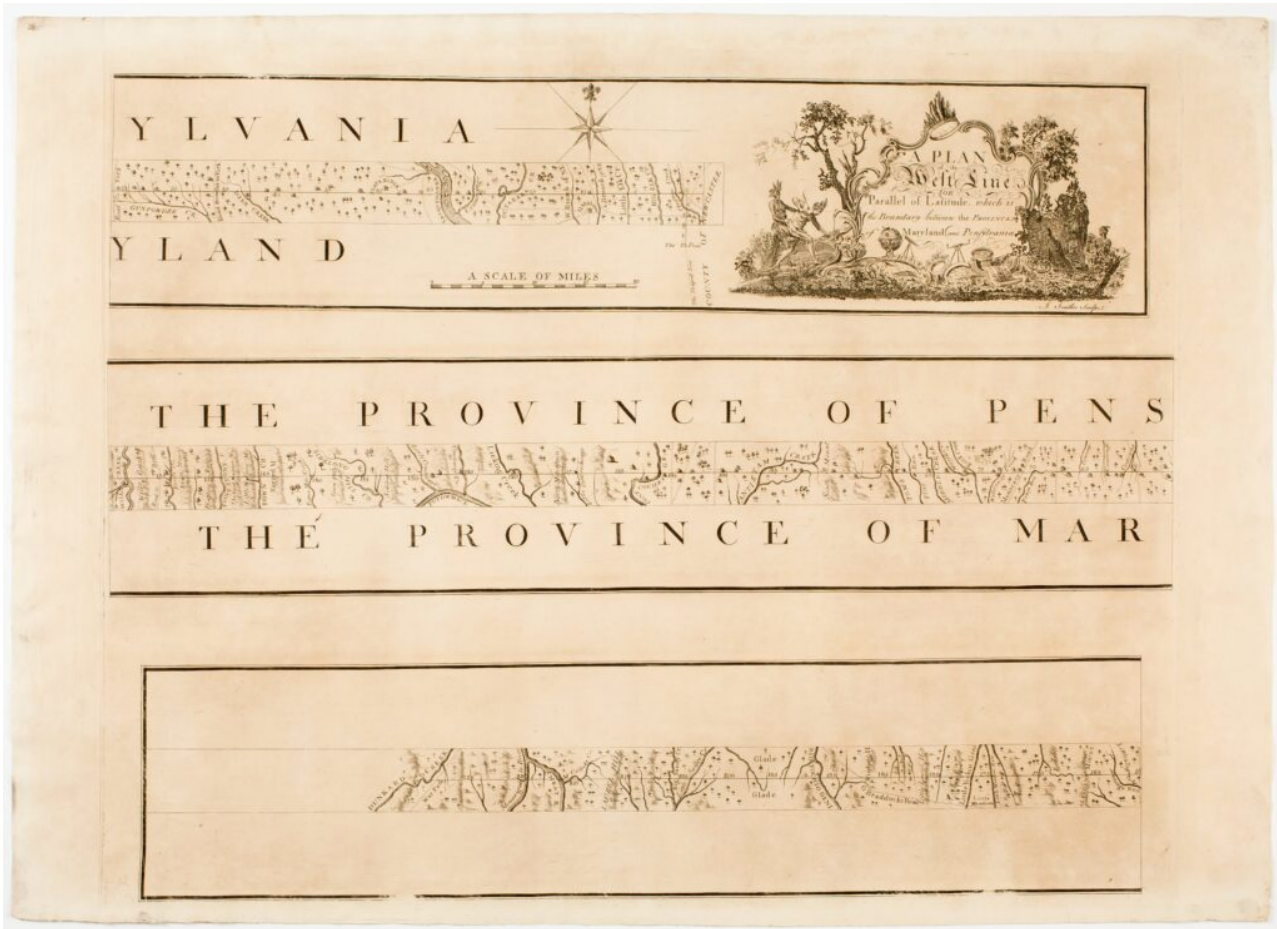


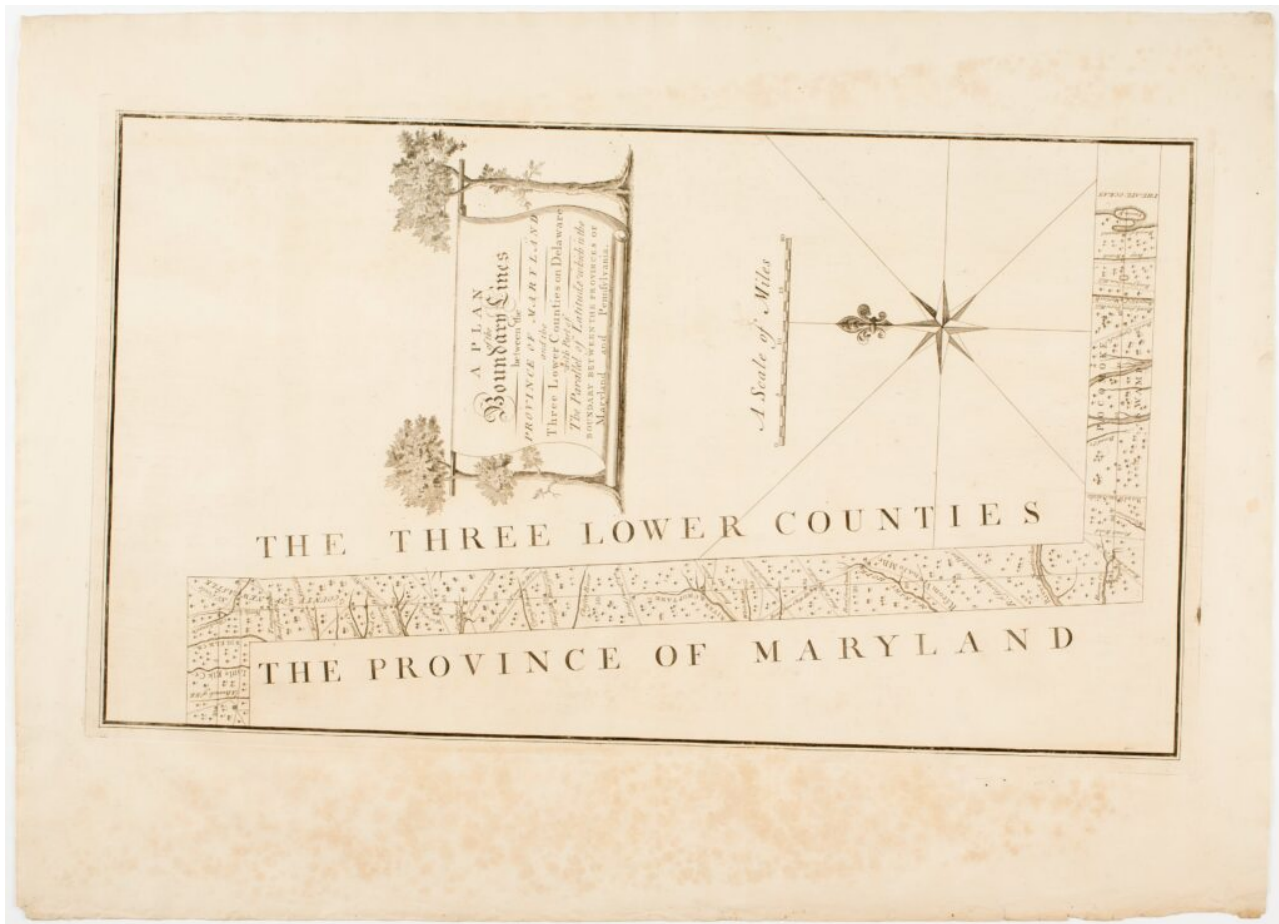
Figure 1: Edward G. Gray, *Mason-Dixon: Crucible of the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023).

Naturally, there's a bit of overlap. Pynchon and I quote some of the same documents. We include many of the same characters—including Mason and Dixon. Both our books follow the surveyors through the mid-Atlantic and upper-Chesapeake, across three hundred miles of swamplands, dense deciduous forests, and the Appalachian range. Neither Pynchon's story nor mine ends well, although they do end very differently. Pynchon's ends with Charles Mason's death in 1786. Mine ends at the turn of the twentieth century, as Americans were doing their best to forget Mason and Dixon's line.

Pynchon's novel and my history share another far more consequential commonality. Our books center on a region of the United States largely lost to history. Part of the reason, as I've already suggested, was the carefully plotted, well-funded, and remarkably effective campaign to erase sectional division from national memory. But even as historians have corrected the many

distortions introduced by that campaign, others remain. Because the Mason-Dixon Line is America's great divide, separating the nation's historic sections, the North and the South, the lands on either side have long been understood as separate lands. Pynchon understands, and my book explains, the opposite is the case. Precisely because of their proximity to so notorious a geo-political demarcation, the borderlands adjoining Mason and Dixon's original line were bound together. They may have been in-between lands but only very late in their history, following the passage of the 1850 federal Fugitive Slave Act, did they become divided lands.





Figures 2a and b: These 1768 strip maps, engravings of the original manuscript maps made by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, were too large for printers to fit on a single sheet. Charles Mason, *A Plan of the West Line or Parallel of Latitude* (Philadelphia: Robert Kennedy, 1768); Charles Mason, *A Plan of the Boundary Lines Between the Province of Maryland and the Three Lower Counties of Delaware* (Philadelphia: Robert Kennedy, 1768). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

How Pynchon and I arrived in the same place, I can't say. I can say our stories center on the same historical events and those events pointed us in similar directions. Let me explain.

I first read *Mason & Dixon* long before I started my own book on the Line. When it was published in the spring of 1997, I was seeking relief in art following another disappointing season on the academic job market. Historical novels offered especially well-calibrated relief—the sweet spot where pleasure reading meets research. Two books I remember most from those days are Barry Unsworth's novel of the transatlantic slave trade, *Sacred Hunger*, and John Updike's *Memories of the Ford Administration*, featuring a stunning portrait of James Buchanan, at the time one of only two contenders for the title of America's worst-ever president.

I had read Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *V* some years before. Failing to conquer *Gravity's Rainbow*, I was resolutely of the short-Pynchon camp. Michiko Kakutani's *Mason & Dixon* review in the April 29th *New York Times* might have sent me back to long-Pynchon. Although, to be honest, short or long, I was likely to attempt *Mason & Dixon*. The novel's subject matter landed squarely in my field of study.

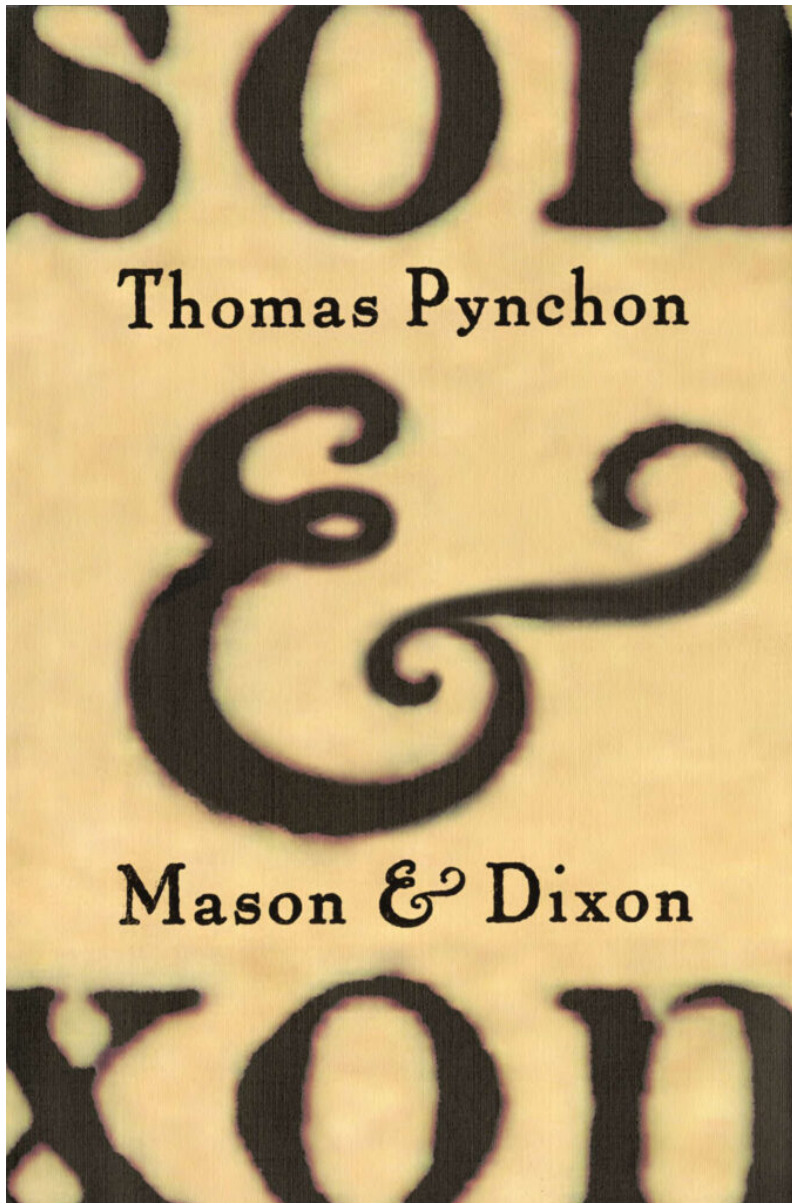


Figure 3: Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon: A Novel* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997).

After I read the book, I remember asking a foreign-born friend about *Mason & Dixon*. I figured she'd be enthusiastic since she was doing her Ph.D. in the history of early astronomical science. "I don't identify with the culture," she told me. I was appalled by the response. Exactly what culture did she not identify with? American culture? Pynchon's book takes place before there was a United States.

In retrospect, I kind of see what she meant. Pynchon is an American novelist in every sense but you wouldn't recommend him to a foreign visitor. The intimate struggles at the core of our national being don't interest him in the way they did Melville or Faulkner or Roth or Morrison. In Pynchon's America, most of us are busy buying muscle cars and steak knives while a few outliers, inclined to plumb the nation's deeper realms, face a terrifying epistemological void.

Pynchon's Mason and Dixon embody neither of these Pynchonian archetypes—they inhabit a world of producers rather than consumers. It is a starkly Newtonian world. There is light and there is dark. There are lines and there are circles. There are statements of truth and statements of abject fiction. But there is also a shadowy netherworld, not quite the dark web of Pynchon's modern America, but something altogether more creepy.

Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, *Mason & Dixon's* narrator, recalls a strange assemblage of travelers journeying in a Jesuit coach, "a Conveyance, wherein the inside is quite noticeably larger than the outside." He joined the travelers before the French and Indian War, somewhere near the meandering waters of the lower-Susquehanna and the frontier outpost of Lancaster. One of the travelers, the "jovial Gamer" Mr. Edgewise, is heard to say,

We have passed, tho' without comment, out of the zone of influence of the western mountains, and into that of the Chesapeake,—as there exists no "Maryland" beyond an Abstraction, a Frame of right lines drawn to enclose and square off the great Bay in its unimagined Fecundity, its shoreline tending to Infinite Length, ultimately unmappable,—no more, to be fair, than there exists any "Pennsylvania" but a chronicle of Frauds committed serially against the Indians dwelling there, check'd only by the Ambitions of other Colonies to north and east.

The boundary lines preceding Mason and Dixon, everybody knows, were a sham. What's to follow, despite the weighty authority of astronomical science, will be no better.

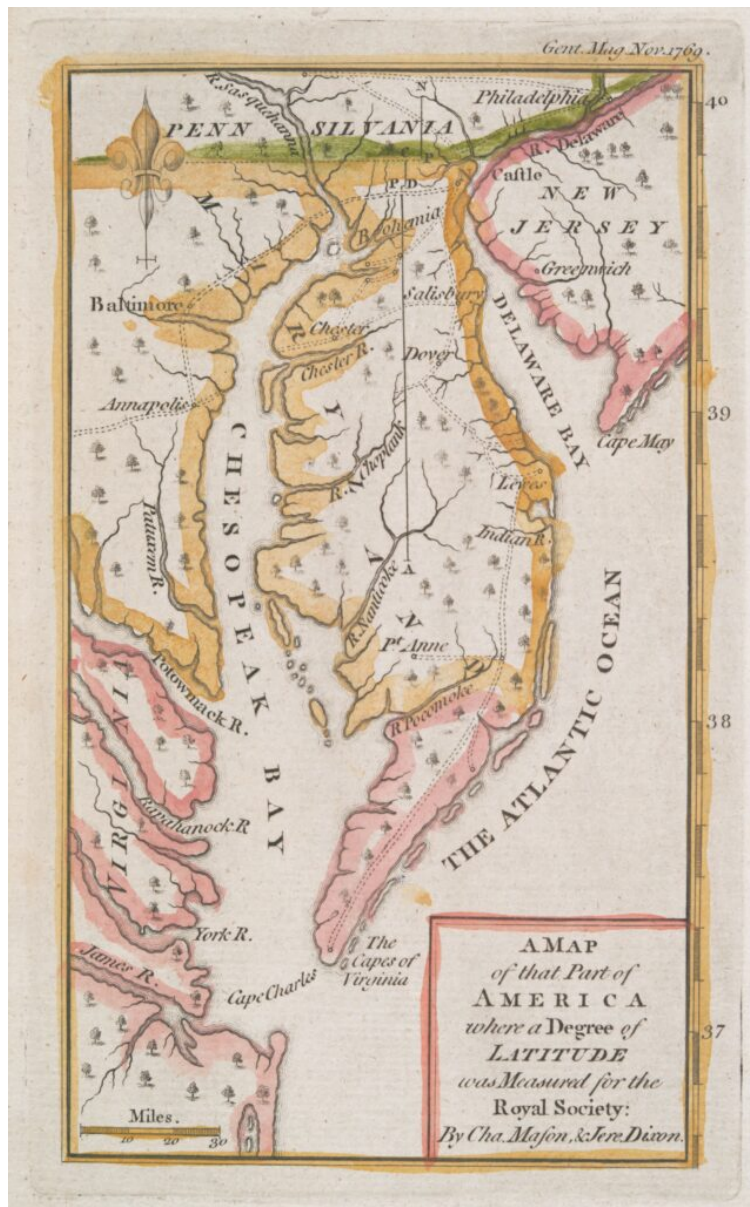


Figure 4: Jeremiah Dixon and Charles Mason, *A Map of that Part of America Where a Degree of Latitude was Measured for the Royal Society* (London: s.n., 1769). Lionel Pincus and Princess Piryal Map Division, Lawrence H. Slaughter Collection of English Maps, Charts, Globes, Books and Atlases, The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

On a glorious Sunday in September of 1765, Charles Mason took a break from surveying to visit a giant cavern near present-day Cavetown, Maryland, and not far from Antietam Creek. Locals, many of whom were Catholics, denied the customary glories of medieval architecture, used the wondrous grotto for religious services. But for Mason it provoked “a strong and melancholy reflection: that such is the abodes of the Dead: thy inevitable doom, O stranger; soon to be numbered as one of them.” The quote appears on page 497 of *Mason & Dixon*, copied verbatim from the official journal kept by Mason and Dixon, now held in the National Archives. Mason and Dixon recognized that their labors were unlikely to bring peace to the Maryland-Pennsylvania borderlands.

As Pynchon approaches the problem, it isn't just that an accurately-plotted boundary line across the infinite variation of the natural world is an impossibility. Should the astronomers' line deviate by an "Eye-lash's Diameter," it would leave a "an Unseen World, beyond Resolution, of transactions never recorded . . . where one may be lost within minutes of entering the vast unforgiving Thicket of Stalks." The Maryland grotto is not a Pynchonian portal into some reality-bending cosmic abyss. But the work of scientifically-inclined human beings might be. Mason and Dixon of the novel never bother with the usual Pynchonian quest for what is only vaguely apprehended. These reluctant Prometheans must move on, their business too serious to dwell on portents of a lunatic netherworld.

A few months after Mason and Dixon landed in America, eastern Pennsylvania witnessed some of the worst ethnic violence in American history. Local vigilantes known as the Paxton Boys slaughtered a large group of Conestoga Indians outside Lancaster. The atrocity was followed by another murderous rampage, this time against surviving Conestoga elders, women and children, hiding in Lancaster's only fortified structure, the town jail.

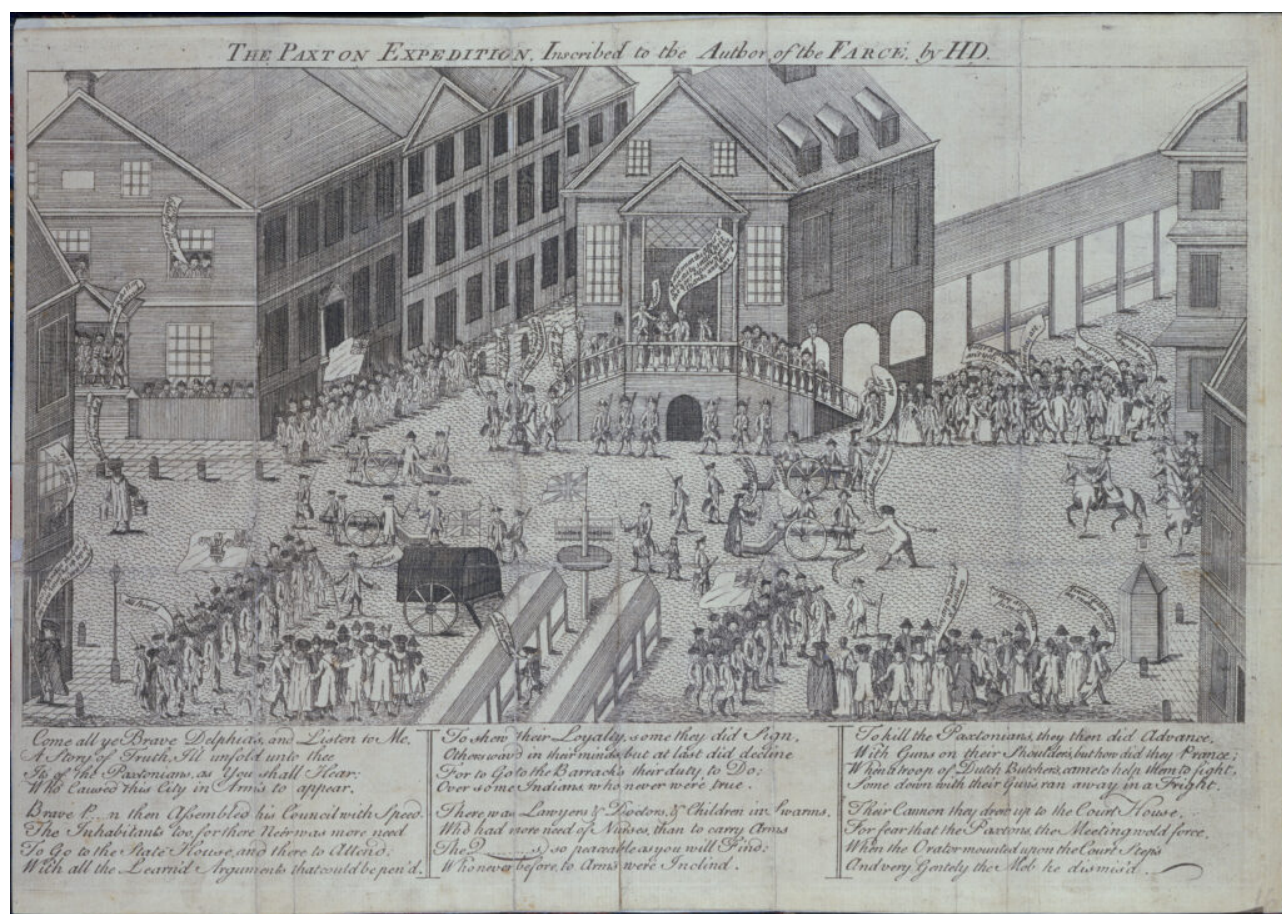


Figure 5: Preparations in Philadelphia for the Arrival of the Paxton Boys. Henry Dawkins, *The Paxton Expedition*, 1764. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henry_Dawkins_-_The_Paxton_Expdition_1764.jpg).

In Pynchon's telling, Mason and Dixon had seen other acts of white savagery—the

slave drivers of the Cape of Good Hope, where the astronomers had traveled to observe Venus's transit across the face of the sun. There had even been a fair amount of white savagery at home in England too, especially the summer of 1745 when the pretender to the throne, Bonnie Prince Charlie, led his Jacobite band in a failed bid to reclaim Britain for the Stuart line. The Pretender's fantasy ended in the Scottish Highlands, on Culloden Moor, after the army of King George II, led by his son, the Duke of Cumberland, slaughtered hundreds of Charlie's Jacobite followers. In kindly England, all that sort of savagery was now ancient history. But in the colonies, it seemed, right-thinking Protestants "are become the very Savages of their own worst Dreams."

Insofar as Mason and Dixon of *Mason & Dixon* are consumed by dark mystery, it is this—the savagery of their colonial brethren. As the Englishmen experience it, the American berserk requires no deep descent into some paranoiac's dark realm. It's right there, all along the Line.

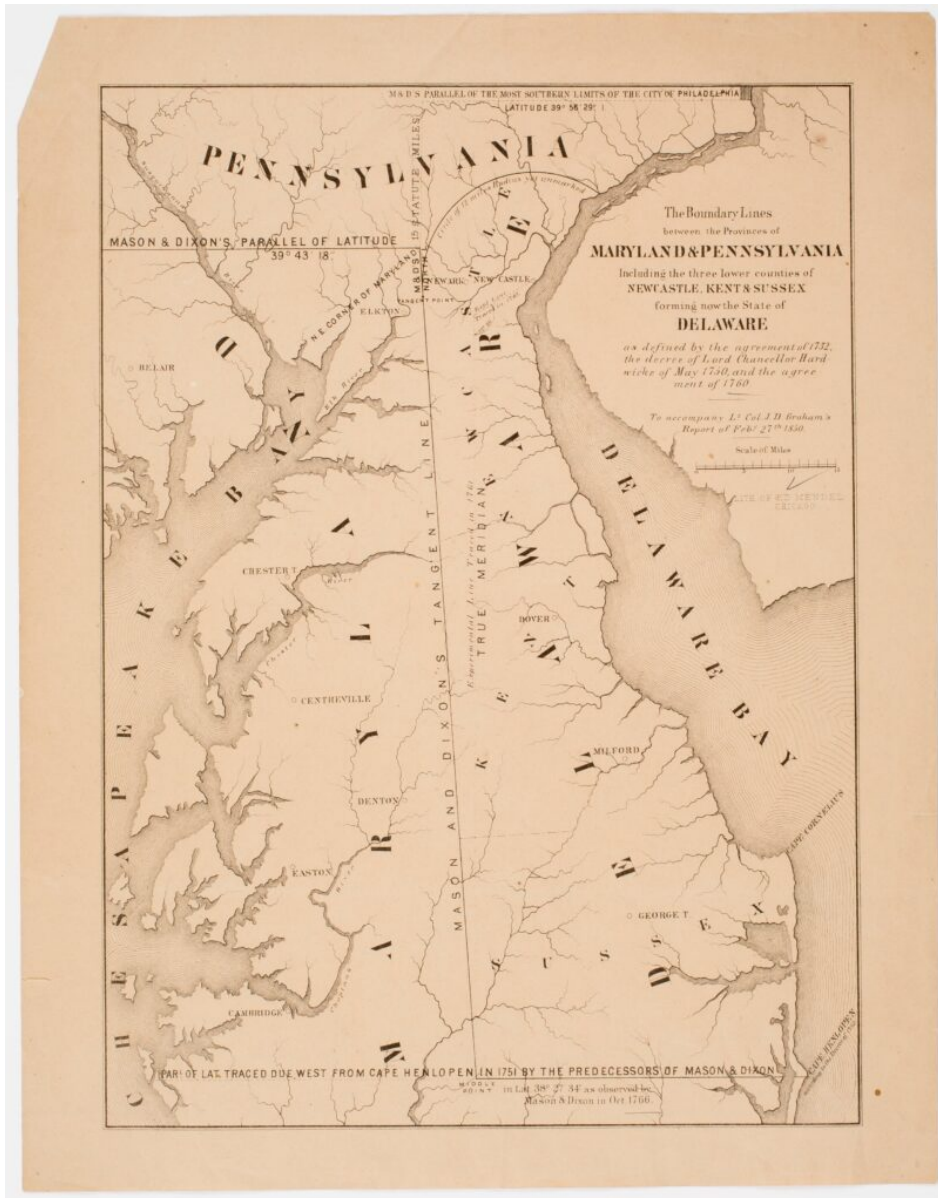


Figure 6: Map showing the eastern sections of Mason & Dixon's Line, published in 1862. *The Boundary Lines Between the Provinces of Maryland & Pennsylvania* (Chicago: s.n., 1862). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

Early in their American journey, Pynchon's Mason and Dixon overhear the most alarming public-house chatter: "The true War here is between the city and the back Inhabitants." The latter never know where to direct their fury—marauding Indians or indifferent provincial authorities. Much like the neo-liberals of nineties Washington D.C., the grandees of Pennsylvania's imperial capital at Philadelphia are too consumed by a noxious combination of commercialism and internationalism to be troubled by the seething white people of the not-so-distant frontier. The ensuing frontier rage constituted a clear danger, not only for the native peoples near the line, but for any perceived alien. "The worst sort of Celtick Degenerates," as Pynchon's Mason calls the Scots-Irish Paxton boys, are unlikely to discriminate between foreign-born astronomers and the true sources of their resentment. "Mason and Dixon look at each other bleakly. 'Well, if I'd known 'twould be like *this* in America.'"

Best to retreat to the safety of the astronomers' temporary observatory at John Harlan's farm, near the forks of the Brandywine. You can visit the site today, marked by the famed Star Gazers' Stone, the original benchmark from which Mason and Dixon began plotting the Line.



Figure 7: Original Mason-Dixon Crown Stone, showing the Penn Family Crest, Marydel, Maryland. Photo by author.

A year after the Paxton massacres, Pynchon sends Mason and Dixon to Lancaster (Mason recorded such a visit in the astronomers' official journal), "where was perpetrated last Winter the Horrid and inhuman murder of 26 Indians, Men, Women and Children." A guide, happy disaster profiteer, warns the two sightseers to mind their belongings. There's nothing sacred even in Lancaster, land of the Pennsylvania Dutch and their solemn rites. The tourists keep coming, "some bring Sketching-Books, some Easels, others their Specimen Bags, but all converge thro' the same queer Magnetism." Bodies attract, dead ones no less than living. Such laws are the stuff of science, the creed that guides these English astronomical hirelings.

Mason and Dixon concluded their American survey in the fall of 1767, 31 miles short of its planned endpoint. Iroquois guides, appointed to escort the Englishmen and their party through some of the most contested lands in the world, determined that Dunkard Creek, north of present-day Morgantown, West Virginia, would be the end of the line. As the astronomers made the 232-mile journey back to Harlan's farm, they checked the several hundred boundary markers they'd placed along the way. A few remain, weathered and chipped remnants of the work of Mason, Dixon, and their surveying party.



Figure 8: Stone placed in 1883, marking the farthest western point of Mason and Dixon's Survey, reached on the 9th of October, 1767. Photo by author.

After completing a detailed map of their line, in September of 1768, Mason and Dixon returned to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England. Dixon would eventually return to the northern English countryside of his birth, finishing his days surveying the lands of the lords of Durham. Mason migrated to America, but died shortly after arriving and now lies buried in Philadelphia's Christ Church burial ground.

Pynchon doesn't much bother with Mason and Dixon's American legacy. Because the phrase "Mason-Dixon" remains so deeply embedded in national memory, few of his readers will doubt that the astronomer's efforts to end one boundary dispute prepared the way for another, not between English lords tussling over land title and tax revenue, but between partisans fighting over the fate of America's great shame, the institution of chattel slavery. It's no coincidence that countless underground railroad stations, John Brown's raid at Harper's

Ferry, and the Civil War battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg are not far from Mason and Dixon's line. The Englishmen may have had some sense of the clinical derangement all around them, but with no United States, Mason and Dixon could never have anticipated their role in the great American cataclysm.

Further Reading

Edward G. Gray, [*Mason-Dixon: Crucible of the Nation*](#) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2023).

Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Picador, 2004).

Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1992)

John Updike, *Memories of the Ford Administration* (New York: Knopf, 1992)

This article originally appeared in January 2024.

Edward G. Gray was the author of [*Mason-Dixon: Crucible of the Nation*](#) (Harvard University Press, 2023) and Professor of History at Florida State University. He wished to thank Peter C. Mancall for his many incisive comments on an earlier draft of this essay.