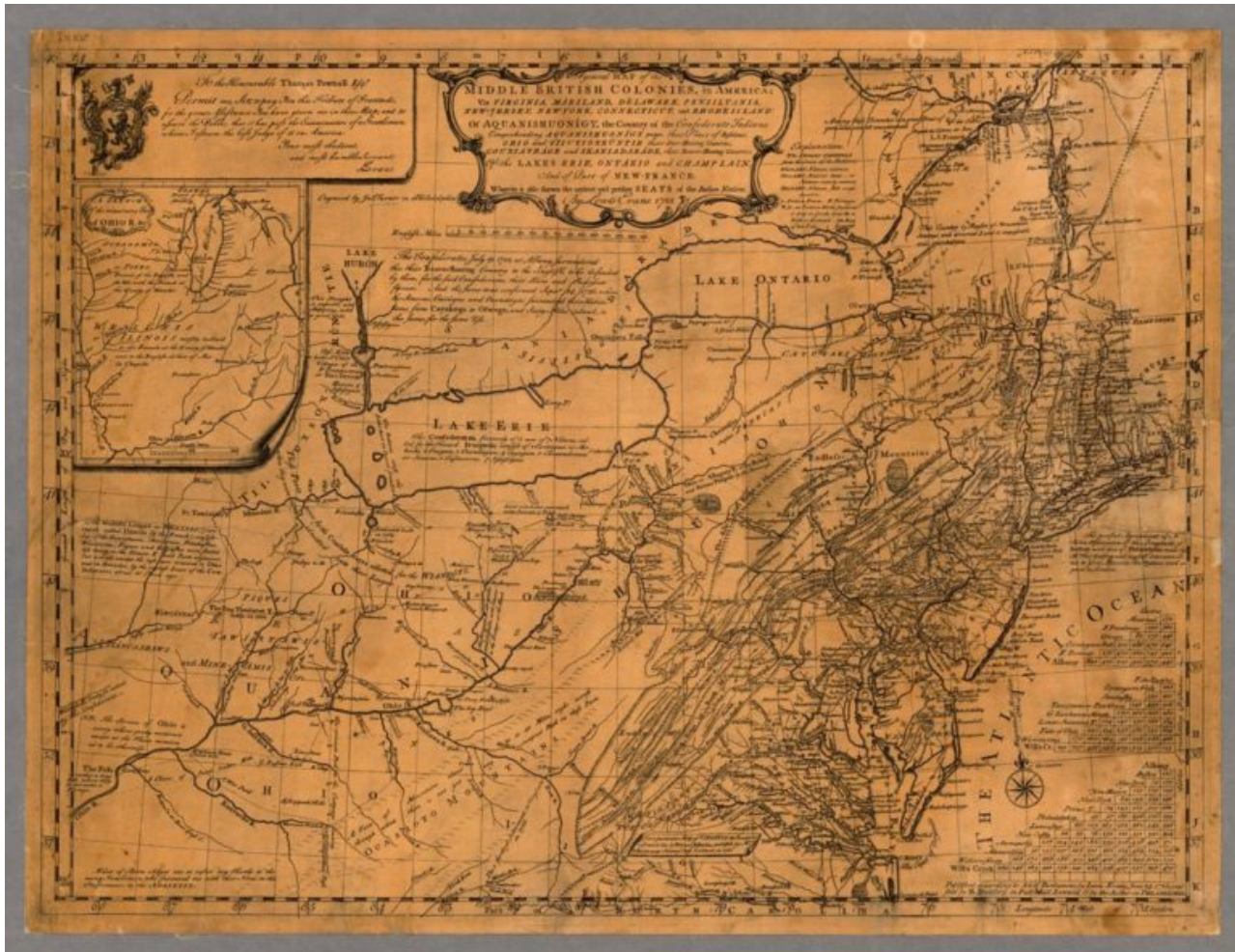


The Material Map



Lewis Evans and cartographic consumer culture, 1750-1775

Reading the Map as Object

What do maps published in the two decades leading up to the American Revolution want us to know? Judging by titles alone (*A General Map of the Middle British Colonies in America*, for example), they want us to know three things: the location of a place ("in America"), its name ("Middle British Colonies"), and its national allegiance ("British"). By using labels such as "a General Map" they also announce certain genre-specific conventions: namely, that maps depict three-dimensional physical space in a vastly reduced, two-dimensional textual format; that they use dot and line markings to produce images of an unmistakable *gestalt*; and last but not least, that because this kind of visual representation is the result of geodetic surveys and mathematical calculations, maps—even the faulty ones—represent "reality" defined by emergent scientific standards of truthfulness.

If we go by map advertisements, however, the question "What do maps want us to know?" changes quite a bit. Considering the following example published on August 14, 1755, in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, we'd have to say what maps (and their makers) really want us to know is that they are multiform and highly saleable objects.

Just published, A General MAP of the MIDDLE BRITISH COLONIES, in AMERICA: Viz. Virginia, Mariland, Delaware, Pensilvania, New-Jersey, New-York, Connecticut, the Country of the Confederate Indians, &c. by LEWIS EVANS.

N. B. This Map includes all the Country depending on the *English* and *French* Passages to *Ohio*, *Niagara*, *Oswego*, and *Crown-Point*. With the colour'd ones will be given a pamphlet of four large sheets and a half, containing An Analysis of the Map; and descriptions of the Face of the Country, the Boundaries of the Confederate Indians, and the maritime and inland navigation of the several Rivers and Lakes contained therein.

The price of the plain maps, on printing paper, is One Piece of Eight. And of the colour'd ones, on superfine writing paper, and pamphlet, Two Pieces of Eight.

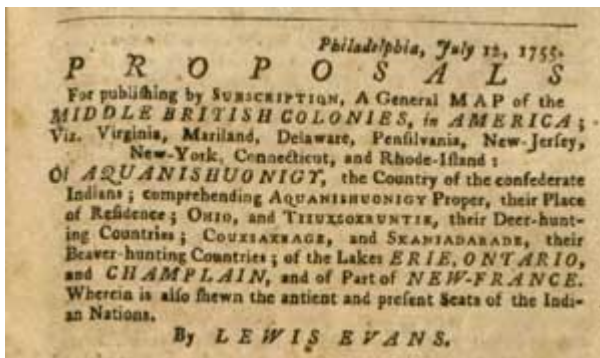
To be sold in *Philadelphia*, by the AUTHOR in Arch street; In New-York at the Printing-Office in Beaver street; at New Haven by Mr. JAMES PARKER; And in Cohanzy by Mr. EBENEZER MILLER, junior.

With advertisements like this, the cartographer Lewis Evans (c. 1700-1756) made history in North America for reasons that were as cartographic as they were uncartographic. *A General Map of the Middle British Colonies* was one of the first American-made maps to receive fast approval from critics as different as Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Johnson. Appearing just in time to serve those following the events of the French and Indian War, the popular map was quickly pirated on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, one measure of the map's success was its staying power: it became a staple reference text consulted by map makers, travelers, authors, and politicians before, during, and after the Revolution.



Lewis Evans, *A General Map of the Middle British Colonies*, engraved by James Turner (1755). From Lewis Evans, B. Franklin, and D. Hall, *Geographical, historical, political, philosophical and mechanical essays* (Philadelphia, 1755). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. [Click to enlarge.](#)

Yet, just as the map's primary appeal was driven by content (information was locally collected prompting many positive comments about cartographic accuracy), its attractiveness can also be explained by its material form. As indicated by the advertisement, Evans sold his map plain or colored, in single, loose sheets or folded and bound into a companion pamphlet entitled *Geographical, Historical, Political, Philosophical, and Mechanical Essays* (1755). According to other ads in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Evans diversified the map's material form even further, offering it on different paper grades and on "silk."



Advertisement for Evans's proposal of his map. *Pennsylvania Gazette* (July 17, 1755). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In addition to shaping the map's physical form, material versatility influenced its internal content. On the face of it, *A General Map of the Middle British Colonies* depicts a media struggle in which words, numbers, and images vie for the map reader's attention. Cartographic signs and symbols dominate the space provided by the map's "imperial"-sized paper format of 49 x 64 centimeters. Mixed into areas not covered by curved river lines and stippled mountain marks

are selected, non-cartographic inserts. Lengthy verbal narratives are shown in imitation of the two dominant modes of written transmission: they imitate manuscript (indicated by cursive fonts) and print (variably sized typography). Other modes of textual transmission, such as pictures and numbers, are included in the margins. Reading clockwise, the map balances a heraldic image (upper left corner) and a baroque frame design (title cartouche, center top) against professional symbols like the compass rose (lower right) and a densely packed statistical table (far lower right).

The tensions underlying these different modes of mediation get resolved in a second visual narrative. The Evans map creates a *trompe l'oeil* effect that suggests the map is less a means of communication than a material object. The dedicatory prose and the inset map in the upper right corner are drawn to look as if they were loose papers stuck inside the map's frame (or here, grid). The note's graphic imitation of rolled-up paper corners creates the illusion of material wear and tear. It thus establishes a visual imperative for the expected usefulness of the map. The Evans map presents itself here optically as a medium that is about the materiality of cartography, in this case about the fact that the map's specific cartographic knowledge is contingent upon the materiality of paper and the range of paper uses: the map's overall image combines attributes of a scribbler's note pad and an engraver's drafting table; at the same time, it hints at other materials associated, for example, with a *carte de visite*, a painter's stretched canvas, or the cluttered surface of a reading desk.



The Armory in Independence Hall. Photo courtesy of the author.

A General Map of the British Middle Colonies, then, has as much to do with the production of geographic knowledge as with the production of print commodities. In examining Evans's advertisements in relation to his map's design we discover that the special emphasis on single-sheet paper objects corresponds with the growing consumption of large-sized printed products ranging from poster-like broadsides to picture prints to "hanging" paper. Single-sheet broadsides and prints (or "[wood]cuts") easily outsold maps. But a closer look at printing advertisements shows that, during the same year Evans published *A General*

Map, Philadelphians witnessed something of a local cartographic boom. During the 1740s, ads posted by bookstores, print shops, and general stores used the word “map” in about three ads per year. After 1750, the average number per year doubled and even tripled, showing two distinct peaks in cartographic advertising: twenty-two ads were published in 1754-1755 (the year Evans published his map) and twenty-five ads, in 1760-1761.

In the greater scheme of colonial advertising these numbers are relatively small but not insignificant when compared to the number of ads selling household goods. On the one hand, maps could be found listed with luxury items. Hence, the following ad from a 1750 edition of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*: “neat japann’d tea tables and corner cupboards, newest fashion’d silver snuf boxes, fine christal and garnet sleeve buttons set in silver and gold, best Hill’s silver watches, maps of Canaan, England, London and Pensylvania, fine long whale bone, etc.” On the other hand, maps were also offered with more mundane household objects. From a 1754 *Pennsylvania Gazette*: “Irish linen and Lancaster sheeting; variety of maps and fishing tackle, English RED CLOVER SEED, with sundry other goods, too tedious to mention.”

More frequently maps were advertised along with stationary paper, books, and pictorial prints. This pattern of advertizing was not specific to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Between 1750 and 1775 colonial newspapers generally located maps with goods that in turn were associated with literacy and refinement, in particular with interior decoration and visual culture. It was the unspoken assumption of ads like the one excerpted above that if a map is for sale it is also available for inspection. Yet, as David Bosse has shown, the various commercial venues that sold maps—such as stationers, book sellers, and general storekeepers—rarely displayed more than one map, if they displayed maps at all. A similar lack of map displays can be found in official administrative buildings. Existing inventories show that only a couple of colonial assembly halls—those in Boston and Philadelphia—displayed large maps. In short, though “map galleries” were familiar in Europe’s cultural capitals, there were none in the colonies.



John Mitchell, A Map of the British and French Dominions in North America,

engraved by Thomas Kitchin (London, 1755). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

However, the story of colonial map displays changes significantly when we look at interior spaces of public and private buildings reserved for the rites of conviviality and sociability.



Map handkerchief. "An Accurate Map of the Present Seat of War" (1776). Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum and Library. [Click to enlarge.](#)

Patrons of taverns and coffee houses would have seen frequent map displays; in one instance, a dozen maps were hanging on the walls of a York County tavern in Virginia. But these numbers pale when compared to those in colonial homes. In 1743, the house of the Salem merchant, Samuel Browne, displayed twenty-nine maps in the "lower entry room" and another sixteen in the "Chamber entry." These numbers are exceptional. Yet, they indicate certain patterns surrounding the exhibition of maps. For example, the Philadelphia register of wills shows that while maps were not owned as frequently as, say, a "looking glass" or "pictures," they tended to be listed with fair regularity and when recorded tended to come in multiples. "John Fox's Will" simply lists "5 Mapps" (*Register of Wills Philadelphia*, November 20, 1749). The "Inventory of the Moneys Goods & Chattels Late the Estate of Richard Brockdeu" is more specific: "In Back Parlor: Looking Glass 3-15-0/ Ten Glas'd Pictures 3-0-0/ Two Maps Fram'd 0-15-0" (July 21, 1756). And so is the "Inventory of the Goods and Chattels later the Estate of Judith Benezet . . . Widow," which records "10 Looking Glasses including Sconces and 1 weather Glass 18-19-0/ a parcel of Pictures, Maps and painted canvas 4-15-0" (1765). If we analyze wills and registers in terms of socio-economic status, the pattern continues to be roughly the same though involving fewer maps as the assessed household value declines. Indeed, while we almost expect to find maps in upper class households, it may come as a surprise to discover that wills listing map objects show a fairly even distribution among households of high and low value.

The Map as Decorative Object

Evidence gleaned from wills and inventories demonstrates how from the midcentury onwards maps were absorbed into colonial homes less for geographic information, than as decorative objects. The most visible maps were wall displays, exhibited in domestic quarters earmarked for both sociable entertainment and solitary retreat. The wills of Philadelphians indicate that maps could be found in front, middle, and back parlors, in downstairs and upstairs hallways, studies, and even bedrooms. The *Virginia Gazette* documents the most likely distribution of maps inside the domestic space in ads like this one: “a very large Map (being Five Feet long, and Four Feet broad on Two Sheets of Elephant Paper), it’s not only Useful, but Ornamental, for Gentleman’s Halls, Parlours, or Staircases” (September 9-16, 1737).



Cartographic needlework. “Westtown Globe” (1818). Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum and Library.

In these spaces, wooden frames, glass panes, and hanging mechanisms such as rollers effectively turned maps of different sizes and qualities into “informal” wall maps (only the well-to-do could afford “formal” wall maps, which included multiple sheets and special decorative border designs). Once a map became a wall-hanging, it entered the material world of wall furniture. In that world, wall maps competed with other conspicuously sized paper objects, ranging from picture prints to wall paper. They also competed with textiles and fabrics, such as window curtains and “painted canvas,” especially if the wall map was a transfer print on linen or silk. When taken together, a wall map’s frame and pictorial quality elicited dialogues with images and materials provided by the visual arts, including genre paintings and portraits.



Detail of the “Inventory of the Effects of Thomas Forster, Jan 4 1768.” (Microfilm Register of Wills, Philadelphia, Reel 1768, No. 139). Owned by Winterthur Museum and Library; image by the author.

The decorative integration of maps did not stop with vertical walls. According to ads published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* between 1750 and 1775, map displays occupied many of the horizontal spaces of colonial interiors. Fold-out book maps and folio atlases were consulted on tables and book stands where they served educational as well as decorative functions. Spaces such as the study and library required special shelves for storing the rolled sheets of large maps. Turning to colonial parlors and other spaces housing the rituals of sociability, we find that “geographical playing cards” brought miniaturized maps to the gaming table, not to mention to the card player’s chests. A different proximity between maps, map users, and social behavior was established in parlors where young women created needlework maps for future wall displays. In 1773 Philadelphians witnessed the arrival of a new textile fashion in the form of “map handkerchiefs.” By then an ad catering to those interested in parlor room décor had proffered “a most curious SCREEN, adorned with a Map of the Globe, Orbs, the Countries of Europe, &c.” The ad that is missing in this survey of cartographic ware is one advertizing the British-made Meissen figurine called the “Map Seller” (produced between about 1745 and 1769).



Dining Room in the Governor's Palace at Williamsburg. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

What does this all mean? The quick and easy answer is that maps were one of the prized "baubles" of British America. If we consider the increase of map ads after 1750, the widespread display of maps in public and private spaces, not to mention the maps' repackaging from magazine insert to over-mantel decoration to dress fashion, it becomes all too apparent that maps were not only commodified objects but objects that actively participated in America's first consumer revolution. In this context, the Evans ad and the map itself become examples of savvy product placement and the integration of cartography into the world of consumer goods. At the same time, Evans's over-determined effort to depict the map in relation to other media suggests a carto-material culture that is not only subject to colonial market forces but that turns upon a widespread understanding of maps as decorative objects. Pairing this with the maps' general presence in domestic settings, we catch a glimpse of how colonial attitudes towards cartography were informed as much by the codes of refinement as by a desire for a material experience of maps. All things considered, the Evans map now becomes an example of a sensuous understanding of cartography in which maps become prized objects vital to the experience of early American material life.

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