



The True Geography of Our Country: Jefferson's Cartographic Vision

By Joel Kovarsky

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Joel Kovarsky

A philosopher, architect, astronomer, and polymath, Thomas Jefferson lived at a time when geography was considered the "mother of all sciences." Although he published only a single printed map, Jefferson was also regarded as a geographer, owing to his interest in and use of geographic and cartographic materials during his many careers—attorney, farmer, sometime surveyor, and regional and national politician—and in his twilight years at Monticello. For roughly twenty-five years he was involved in almost all elements of the urban planning of Washington, D.C., and his surveying skills were reflected in his architectural drawings, including those of the iconic grounds of the University of Virginia. He understood maps not only as valuable for planning but as essential for future land claims and development, exploration and navigation, and continental commercial enterprise.

In *The True Geography of Our Country: Jefferson's Cartographic Vision*, Joel Kovarsky charts the importance of geography and maps as foundational for Jefferson's lifelong pursuits. Although the world had already seen the Age of Exploration and the great sea voyages of Captain James Cook, Jefferson lived in a time when geography was of primary importance, prefiguring the rapid specializations of the mid- to late-nineteenth-century world. In this illustrated exploration of Jefferson's passion for geography—including his role in planning the route followed and regions explored by Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery, as well as other expeditions into the vast expanse of the Louisiana Purchase—Kovarsky reveals how geographical knowledge was essential to the manifold interests of the Sage of Monticello.

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Editorial Review

Review

Joel Kovarsky offers the reflections of a passionate map expert on an important and neglected dimension of Jefferson's life and work. The book is a guided tour of the maps and geographic ideas that meant something to Jefferson over the course of his life, one that opens a new window into his broader vision for early America.

(S. Max Edelson, University of Virginia)

Kovarsky has succeeded admirably in presenting a comprehensive review of Jefferson's geographic and cartographic associations, whether they resulted in the production of a geographic text, published or manuscript maps, or a concept/idea that produced a practical/tangible product. His research is thorough and solid, and he offers new facets and perspectives on Jefferson's geographical contributions in a well-written thematic presentation.

(Ronald E. Grim, Curator of Maps, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library)

Kovarsky's book shows that understanding Jefferson requires an appreciation for his immersion in geographic concepts and questions. The author's own deep knowledge of the maps of the era enriches the story.

(William C. Wooldridge *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*)

I laud Mr. Kovarsky for his wonderful work and research in tackling a previously unaddressed cartographic topic. I recommend this book without reservation to individuals, organizations and institutions in enhancing their cartographic or geographic reference library and to Washington Map Society members as a valuable and insightful read.

(Douglas R. Lyon *The Portolan*)

Using Jefferson's substantial contributions to the early mapping of the USA throughout his long productive life as the focus of study, this book provides a useful and thorough examination and review of the thinking and methods behind the creation of early maps in the USA, rather than merely a description of those maps.

"[A] useful introduction for those seeking a brief review of the landscape of Jeffersonian geography.

(*Historical Geography*)

The book is well written and lets Jefferson speak for himself through his writings, which allows the reader to 'get inside his mind'. I can confidently recommend this book as an intriguing look at Thomas Jefferson's view of geography and cartography.

(Judith Tyner *Geographical Review*)

Kovarsky reminds us of the wide-ranging ways to employ and also display geographic knowledge, beyond map creation, in the early American republic and he has created a useful reference for Jefferson's interests and their underlying connections to geography and the physical world.

(Jordan Fansler *H-Net Reviews*)

About the Author

Joel S. Kovarsky is the owner of The Prime Meridian: Antique Maps and Books.

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From reader reviews:

Gilbert Johnson:

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