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Etched in Blood

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With due respect to automobile global positioning systems, nothing is so informative as a large, detailed printed map. Maps don't just show us how to get from point A to point B; they provide a geographical context that no mere set of driving directions can equal.

Historic maps are the most compelling of all, because they preserve graphic images of the land before our own time. Before there was computer imagery, let alone photolithography, printed maps, many beautifully designed, were drawn by hand from detailed surveys, after which the drawing had to be reversed and then carefully traced on the lithograph stone or engraving plate so that it printed in the correct direction. These maps represent a tremendous artistic and scientific effort.

A wonderful selection of historic maps forms the heart of "Torn in Two," an exhibition marking the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, at New York's Grolier Club, that venerable haven for bibliophiles. Featuring more than 30 period maps, along with prints, photographs, political cartoons, letters and other artifacts, the show—curated by scholar Ronald Grim and first mounted in 2011 by the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library—proves how evocatively these documents fill in the bare facts of history.

An initial grouping of materials vividly establishes the underlying economic conflict between the agrarian South and the industrial North that led to war. Among the displays are two original photographs of a plantation, showing slaves picking and sorting cotton against a rural background. Without slave labor, the South's economy seemed untenable. In contrast, a large wood-engraving published in 1854 shows a "Bird's-Eye View of New York City" in which Manhattan island sprawls northward from the Battery, fringed with wharves and piers. The Hudson and East rivers teem with ocean-going paddle-steamers and sailing ships, as well as ferry boats between New York and the independent city of Brooklyn. At a time long before skyscrapers, the island was carpeted with buildings—of which the steeped churches were by far the tallest—a mercantile cityscape plumed with the coal smoke of industry.

Likewise, maps emphasize differences between Northern and Southern interests. James T. Lloyd's 1862 "Map of the Lower Mississippi River from St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico" details the sugar and cotton plantations, cities, towns and landings along North America's longest river. Printed on five hand-colored lithograph sheets, the 200-inch-by-12-inch vertical map is

dramatically hung full-length at one end of the gallery and reveals Southern agriculture's reliance on waterways.

Displayed nearby, a hand-colored lithograph "Rail Road Map of the United States Showing the Depots and Stations," published in 1859, documents why the South was so dependent on water transport: While a dense rail network linked hundreds of Northern towns from Maine and New York to Illinois, Southern railways were relatively sparse. Back then, ours was not a nation of roads but of *railroads*, and the Civil War was the first war in which railroads played a strategic role.

Accurate maps were essentials of warfare, delineating not only railways but cities, forests and topography. Military commanders depended on maps to locate the enemy, to move troops and matériel where they were needed, and to determine the relative positions of advantageous terrain for attack or retreat. Maps allowed civilians far from the seat of war to follow the course of action. In addition, maps and related documents were influential as propaganda.

Exemplifying this is one of the nation's first statistical maps, "Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States Compiled from the Census of 1860." Published in Washington in 1861, it documents the percentage of slaves by county and so profoundly influenced Abraham Lincoln that it was prominently included in Francis Bicknell Carpenter's painting "First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln." An ornamental cartouche states that the map was "sold for the benefit of the Sick and Wounded Soldiers of the U.S. Army." Those soldiers, commanded by Gen. George McClellan, had already been repeatedly vanquished or outfoxed by Confederate troops.

Anticipating today's interactive programming, a "War Telegram Marking Map" of 1862 came with its own colored pencils to enable citizens at home to chart the progress of Union (red) and Rebel (blue) forces. It was published in Boston by Louis Prang, a lithographer whose colorful art prints and Christmas cards rivaled in popularity the works of Currier and Ives.

And this leads to the lively Currier & Ives cartoon from which the exhibition takes its name. Published in 1864, when Lincoln was running for re-election against the insubordinate McClellan (whom he had relieved of command in 1862), it depicts Lincoln, declaring "no peace without abolition," and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, declaring "no peace without separation," in a tug-of-war with a map of the U.S. As the map tears in two, McClellan grabs the shoulders of both leaders to prevent the rent from widening, declaring "the Union must be preserved. . . ." As a presidential candidate, McClellan wanted to continue the war and restore the Union, but not abolish slavery. Although not noted in the exhibition, the cartoon's actual title, "The True Issue, or 'That's What's the Matter,'" refers with irony to Stephen Foster's antirebel song, "That's What's the Matter," written two years earlier.

Throughout this exhibition—which boasts a very fine catalog—these maps, letters and political cartoons emphasize the persuasive power of the printed image and the public's obligation to interpret imagery critically. Moreover, they illustrate the ruptured condition of the U.S. at the time, when Lincoln presided over half the nation only, and when there was a real danger that the "house divided" might never again be joined.

Mr. Scherer writes about music and the fine arts for the Journal.

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Collection Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library

'The True Issue, or "That's What's the Matter,"' by Currier & Ives

Torn in Two: The 150th Anniversary of the Civil War

The Grolier Club

Through April 28