Cartographic Memories of Slavery and Freedom: Examining John Washington's Map and Mapping of Fredericksburg, Virginia

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ABSTRACT

In 1873, former slave John Washington (1838–1918) wrote his memoir, Memorys of the Past. This account includes a remarkable map that locates Washington’s experiences as a slave, his acts of resistance, and the route of his escape from bondage in 1862. Washington’s map is both a work of memory and a rare example of a subaltern cartographic practice. The act of mapping his experiences in Fredericksburg, Virginia, challenges the long-dominant memory of the city as the colonial home of founding fathers and the site of a Confederate victory in the Civil War. At the same time, the formal style of this cartographic representation yields clues about the efforts John Washington and other slaves took after the war to achieve the full promise of emancipation through education. Finally, since Washington’s memoir and map were published in 2007, the National Park Service and local government officials are remapping this remarkable man’s memory as they inscribe narratives of slavery, resistance, and emancipation into Fredericksburg’s memorial landscape.

Keywords: critical cartography, maps and memory, slavery, emancipation, Civil War, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Introduction

In the spring of 1862, a 24-year-old John Washington (1838–1918) was working as a barkeep and steward at the Shakespeare House, a small hotel in Fredericksburg, Virginia. An urban slave, Washington had been hired out by his owner, Catherine Taliaferro. His childhood and early adulthood was at once typical and atypical for a slave in antebellum Virginia. Washington was the son of a white man, and he, like so many others, experienced the pain of being separated from his mother and sisters at a young age. But he also learned to read and write, and, as the slave of a family that needed the income, he was often hired out to other employers. While this was a common practice, it gave John Washington a broader knowledge of the world in and around Fredericksburg than most slaves of his era.

On 18 April that year, a Confederate cavalry officer arrived at the Shakespeare and announced that the Union Army was less than 2 miles away, across the Rappahannock River.
in the small town of Falmouth. As Washington recounts in his 1873 memoir, *Memories of the Past*,

Mr. Mazene (the hotel owner) said, “if the Yankees catch me they will kill me so I can’t stay here.” In less time than it takes me to write these lines, every white man was out the house. Every man servant was out on the house top looking over the River at the Yankees for the glistening bayonets could easily be seen. (Washington 2007, 189)

After Washington had followed his boss’s orders to pay off the hotel staff and lock the doors, he walked out onto the streets of Fredericksburg and noted that

[...] every white man had run away or hid himself. Every white woman had shut themselves indoors. No one could be seen on the streets but the colored people and every one of them seemed to be in the best of humors. (Washington 2007, 190)

John Washington was one of the first to take advantage of this world turned upside down. He played the dutiful slave one last time, permitting to rejoin his owner “out in the country” before walking out of town with two companions (Washington 2007, 191). They headed toward Falmouth, their objective “being to get right opposite the union camp” (192). As they walked along the river, a party of Union soldiers in a boat called out, asking if Washington and his companions wanted to come over. Washington replied, “Yes, I want to come over” (193). A few minutes later, Washington was in the Union camp, enjoying his first night of freedom. According to John Hennessy, historian for the Fredericksburg–Spotsylvania National Military Park, John Washington’s route to freedom was followed by as many as 10,000 slaves while Union troops occupied Fredericksburg during the summer of 1862 (Hennessy 2006).

In 1873, Washington, who had found work as a house and sign painter in Washington, DC, sat down to write *Memories of the Past*. Within this memoir, he included a hand-drawn map of Fredericksburg and its environs (see Figure 1). Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this map is how thoroughly familiar it appears to a modern audience. North is at the top. The name of the river, carefully printed with hand-drawn serifs, is curved to follow the river’s shape, as are the labels of roads and railroads. A swirled fill marks the forests behind Marye’s Heights, while a stippled pattern represents the Union camp above Falmouth. Washington marked places significant in his memoir with numbers, and these features are identified by name in a legend on the right-hand side of the page. Finally, a thin line connects the Woolen Mills – #4 on the map, and the place where Washington left town – to the last and most important numbered feature on the map: “16. Where I crossed the river.”

Washington’s map is both a map of memory and a subaltern and subversive cartographic practice. As Owen Dwyer (2003, 31) has observed, maps fix certain memories to certain sites and, at the same time, lend these memories the “subtle claim to scientific authority that attend to cartographic products.” The current tourism map of Fredericksburg, for example, uses the same numbered-key approach as Washington’s map to identify sites that mark the town as the home of founding fathers and the place of a Confederate victory (see Hanna 2008). Interpretive signs at the map’s Civil War sites describe Fredericksburg as a place where soldiers and citizens suffered the ravages of a war that, for many current visitors and residents, had nothing to do with slavery (Blight 2001; Hanna and others 2004; Hanna and others 2008).

Washington’s map contradicts this collective memory. It is simultaneously a representation of the slave landscape of Fredericksburg (Ginsburg 2007) and a celebration of his emancipation. In addition, it is a map that does not fit neatly into traditional categories of cartographic literatures. As a rare if not unique representation of a former slave’s place-based memories,3 it could be understood as an expression of Washington’s personal experiences in Fredericksburg – an authentic subaltern mapping that stands in opposition to the top-down representational texts of professional cartographers, which erase such experiences (Wood 2010). Yet while working to preserve his own memories and communicate his experiences to others, Washington inscribes his experiences within the rational, two-dimensional space of white, Western cartography (Pickles 2004) and appropriates professional cartographic styles of his era. Acknowledging the hybrid nature of the map and its author permits an understanding of the map as both a representation of Washington’s remembered experiences and a performance of the Reconstruction-era educated freedman that Washington worked hard to become (Del Casino and Hanna 2005). Finally, now that Washington’s map and memoir are in the public sphere, the National Park Service’s efforts to make them both material and visible in Fredericksburg’s heritage tourism landscape serves as a reminder that maps are not fixed texts or artefacts. Changing social and cultural contexts change how the map, and the spaces it represents, is practised or performed.

**Interpreting Washington’s Map**

Two historians brought Washington’s *Memories of the Past* to the attention of academics and public history practitioners in 2007. Each published an edited edition that included his own analysis of the memoir’s meanings. The map, however, receives relatively little attention. In *John Washington’s Civil War*, Crandall Shifflet does include an appendix titled “John Washington’s Geography.” Here he explains how he first thought the map little more than a “crude drawing of the Fredericksburg area. Done in pencil with relative locations” (Shifflet 2007, 81). Upon further reflection, however, Shifflet decided that the
Figure 1. John Washington’s Map of Fredericksburg, Virginia (reprinted by arrangement with the Alice Jackson Stuart Family Trust).
points numbered on the map are “coordinates of freedom – places where [Washington’s] life intersected with events, people or moments when the thoughts of liberty touched his memory” (81). David Blight (2007) spends less time discussing the map in A Slave No More. He states that the importance of 18 April 1862 in John Washington’s life is “demonstrated by the stunning hand-drawn map of the city” and suggests that “in the detail of the map, it is as if Washington is declaring his need to never let this memory recede from his mind – nor from the consciousness of his family” (2007, 41).

Shifflet’s initial dismissal of the map as “crude” and “relative” recalls J.B. Harley’s (1990) critique of both scientific cartography and the ways in which historians tend to use maps as historical documents. Because Washington lacked access to the techniques and technologies of nineteenth-century professional cartography, the map does not appear to be an accurate mirror of reality. Therefore, Shifflet cannot use such a map to locate places mentioned in Memories of the Past. Of course, Harley (1988, 1989, 1990), Denis Wood, and John Fels (Wood and Fels 1986; Wood 1992) have convincingly argued that maps are not mirrors but deployments of social power that help create the spaces they represent. Harley’s great contribution was to assert that maps and cartography are both parts and products of social discourses. Matthew Sparke (1995, 4) refined his arguments by suggesting that examining any map requires critics to continue to go back and “look for other ways in which the map and what is supposed to lie outside of it – power relations, interpretation, the ‘real’ world, etc. – might be still more completely inter-related.” Such work acknowledges the open and intertextual nature of maps as authored; they represent, reproduce, and recall existing knowledge, social relations, and cultural conditions (Harley 1990; Del Casino and Hanna 2000; Perkins 2004).

Given that the great majority of maps currently held in Western archives were produced by cartographers working for the state or for capital, most critical analyses of historical maps and atlases focus on how these artefacts serve to help rulers or governments create and rationalize national territories (Biggs 1999; Black 2008; Crampton 2010; Wood 2010) or on how Western powers used cartography to know and control colonial possessions (Duncan and Gregory 1999; Godlewska 1995; McClintock 1995; Livingstone 1992, 1999). While the History of Cartography Project does an admirable job of documenting the cartographic traditions of non-Western societies (Harley and Woodward 1987, 1992, 1995; Woodward and Lewis 1998), examinations of historical maps produced by and for peoples marginalized within Western societies remain rare. Exceptions in the North American context include the works of Barbara Belyea (1996), G. Malcolm Lewis (1998), and J.B. Harley (1994), who have examined Native American map-making and noted the traces of Native American cartography within European maps. In addition, Sparke (1998, 468) investigates how First Nations used Western cartographic methods to “outline their sovereignty in a way the Canadian court might understand”. Finally, Penny Richards (2004) describes a “cartographic culture” among educated white women in the American South.

Washington’s map qualifies as a cartographic artefact produced by such marginalized people, and Shifflet and Blight do value its personal and social aspects. They imagine its importance to Washington as a way to record his “coordinates of freedom” and to ensure that his memory of his experiences in resisting and escaping-slavery is never lost. Thought of in this way, the map becomes a non-representational “mapping” (Perkins 2004). The textual artefact representing Civil War Fredericksburg is less important than the material practice of Washington re-enacting his own life journey (Cosgrove 1998; Ingold 2001; Perkins 2004).

Using this framework for examining the map, however, ignores Washington’s effort to create a map that positions himself and his readers outside of the space he experienced as a boy and a young man. It also does not help us understand why he worked to make his map look like those drawn by military engineers or published in magazines and newspapers. Instead, it is more useful to think of maps as always textual representations and material practices. In their making and their use, maps are performed by subjects (Butler 1993; Del Casino and Hanna 2005; Della Dora 2009). Thus, Washington’s map is a mapping in that it is his haptic re-enactment of his experiences, and it is a text in that it, like his entire memoir, represents both his knowledge of the geography of Fredericksburg and his performance as a self-educated freedman struggling within a racist society to achieve the full meaning of emancipation. Like other maps, it is also always in a state of becoming (Gibson 2001; Del Casino and Hanna 2005). Now that it is back in the public eye, new subjects, including National Park Service officials, consume and produce the map for new purposes and lend it new meanings.

Finally, we must remember that Washington’s map is a work of memory – that his mapping of personal experiences takes place through memories accessed a decade after his escape. Thus, while Blight (2007) and Shifflet (2007) correctly focus on the map and memoir as personal narratives that we, today, can use as primary documents to better understand the antebellum and Civil War experiences of southern slaves, such an account leaves unexamined the effects of almost a decade of Washington’s life on his memories of that most significant day and on his ability to express those memories via memoir and map. While drawing his map, Washington was looking back at Fredericksburg through a decade marked by a Union
Thus, while Washington’s map contains personal memories, it is vital to remember that there is a complex relationship between personal memory and collective memories and among memory, popular culture, and official history (Sturken 1997). Collective memories are woven from personal memories – some of which are represented in popular culture or elevated into historic biographies. At the same time, as Maurice Halbwachs (1980) argues, personal memories are informed by an individual’s knowledge and understanding of formal histories and collective memories. As a work of memory, therefore, Washington’s map is undoubtedly influenced by his post-emancipation experiences and by newspapers, magazines, and other texts he read as a free man.

Given the open and intertextual nature of Washington’s map as simultaneously a representation and a practice, I can offer only a partial interpretation of this former slave’s memory of Fredericksburg and of what the map as performed reveals about the effects slavery, freedom, and Reconstruction had on the map-maker. Such an analysis requires a rich description of the cartographic contexts laid out by Harley (1990) and extended to theories of maps as practised or performed by Sparke (1995); Del Casino and Hanna (2005); and Della Dora (2009). Map-makers and map users must be placed in space and time; their efforts to reproduce knowledge through maps always take place in a societal context. In addition, maps are performed in the context of both experiences and other maps and texts. As intertextual practices, maps make present meanings found in other maps and documents available to the map author and, of course, to map users (Harley 1990; Del Casino and Hanna 2000; Wood 2010).

To interpret Washington’s map, therefore, I will examine the contexts within which Washington experienced Fredericksburg as a slave and the contexts within which he wrote his memoir 10 years after his escape. Washington’s Fredericksburg was very different from the Fredericksburg of his owners; his movements within and knowledge of this space reflected both the harsh limitations of slavery and the moments and places of freedom found in his transgressions of these limits. Contextualizing Washington as a cartographer requires examining how he learned to see Fredericksburg from the God’s-eye view of modern Western cartography (Mitchell 1991; Pickles 2004), to see the buildings, streets, river, and woods of his memory from a position above and outside his own experiences. Given the extraordinary efforts by white planters and their governments to maintain control of the movements and knowledge of slaves in the antebellum South (Ginsburg 2007), there is no reason to think that the average slave would have had to the ability to imagine Fredericksburg in this way. Knowing the world through the lens of Western cartographic practices requires both literacy and, at the very least, a sustained exposure to published maps – something Washington likely gained after his escape and after successfully establishing a life for himself and his family in Washington, DC.

John Washington’s Fredericksburg

In her article “Freedom and the Slave Landscape,” Rebecca Ginsburg (2007, 36) notes that controlling the movement of enslaved people “was an almost obsessive priority” of slave holders and of the local and state governments that enforced the peculiar institution. Controlling movement meant controlling space through systems of surveillance that included passes, patrols, and runaway posters. It also required limiting slaves’ knowledge, which explains why Southern states made it illegal to teach slaves to read and write. Finally, of course, violent punishment was constantly and visibly used to enforce this control. Ginsburg calls the space resulting from these efforts the “planter landscape” (38). During the eighteenth century, “great planters” planned this landscape to give them the ability to move freely, to make poor whites and slaves aware of the ordering of Southern society, and, most relevantly here, to allow elites to see yet not be seen (Upton 1985). In addition, the planter landscape was designed to ensure the continued productivity of slave labour.

Urban areas presented a challenge to this control (Brown and Webb 2007, 127). Southern cities and towns were home both to free black populations and to urban slaves. Many of the latter were hired out by plantation owners to work in factories, warehouses, and hotels. Because the categories of slave and free did not map so cleanly onto racial categories in urban areas, the efforts of whites to maintain surveillance and to restrict the knowledge and movements of slaves were more difficult. In an attempt to address this difficulty, many Southern states passed laws designed to encourage free black emigration. Examples include higher taxes on black property owners, more restrictions on manumission, and denial of suffrage (Brown and Webb 2007, 127).

The efforts of white elites to control space through surveillance and violence never achieved total success. As spaces of resistance, slaves created systems of “paths, places, and rhythms” that provided alternatives to and refuges from the spaces controlled by planters and other whites (Ginsburg 2007, 37). Part of this “slave landscape” consisted of the slave quarters and gardens maintained through everyday practices by slaves during their “own” time – as opposed to the time spend labouring for their masters (Upton 1985; Ginsburg 2007). But the landscape was also a secret network of sites that slaves could use to perform rituals, to hide stolen goods or themselves, or in
their attempts to escape (Ginsburg 2007). It was opportunistic and marginal in nature, focused on the places where and times when white surveillance was absent. Finally, the slave landscape was interpretable through a set of markers largely decipherable only to blacks (Ginsburg 2007; Isaac 1982). In many cases, slaves using this landscape to escape were caught only when reported by another slave or a free black (Ginsburg 2007).

As Ginsburg (2007, 37) notes, the “composition of slave landscapes on any given plantation or in any town was unique to the conditions at that site.” Like Upton before her, Ginsburg focuses on plantations, but certain elements of the slave landscape can be extended to urban areas. Just as woods, swamps, and creeks provided trails and hiding places for plantation slaves (37), similar areas near towns would have served urban slaves in much the same way. In addition, many urban slaves did not live or work within clear sight of their owners and thus had opportunities to mingle with free blacks. Such quasi-freedom (Brown and Webb 2007) meant the urban slave landscape was more expansive and open than that of the plantation.

In his memoir, John Washington describes the systems his owner, Catherine Talioferro, and white society more generally used to control his movements. While his mother and siblings lived in a house a few blocks away, the 10-year-old John “was kept at the house of the ‘Old Mistress,’ all day” (Washington 2007, 170). His tasks included running errands, cleaning, and waiting at table. When Mrs Talioferro had no specific tasks for the boy, he was “ordered to sit down on a footstool, in her room for hours at a time when other children … would be out at play” (170). As John grew older, he chafed at his owner’s rule prohibiting him from crossing the “limits of the lot.” He also describes how any movement after sundown required “a permission” that contained a very specific time by which he had to return (181).

Church was just another space of surveillance and control for the young John Washington. Prior to 1855, whites, freed blacks, and slaves attended the same Baptist church. During morning services, John had to sit in one of the side galleries reserved for slaves, “where the old Lady could see me” (Washington 2007, 170). In addition, Mrs Talioferro made John go to Sunday afternoon church meetings held for “Colored people” and was ordered to repeat the text of the lesson to her as proof of attendance. John also notes that Sunday school, consisting of the rote memorization of Bible verses, was the only education lawfully available to him.

While Washington never describes being beaten as a slave, he certainly understood that there could be harsh punishments for disobeying his owner’s rules. His grandmother, Molly, misbehaved in such a way that her owner paid a punishment house $1.34 to have her whipped (Blight 2007, 19). Sarah Tucker, John’s mother, tried to escape when she was three years old; while there is no record of punishment, her owner placed a notice in a Fredericksburg newspaper offering a $20 reward for her return (21). Washington never mentions these events in his memoir, but it is hard to believe he was not aware of the incidents and the repercussions. He was also aware of the constant threat of separation from home and family. He describes seeing slaves “marched off to be Sold south away from that was near and dear to them” and notes that those left behind expected to be sent away next (Washington 2007, 169).

John himself experienced that emotional violence when his mother and siblings were hired out to a farm in Staunton, Virginia, in 1850. In the most poignant passage of his memoir, he describes how his mother came to his room the night before she left and how “her tears mingled with mine amid kisses and heart-felt sorrow” (172).

In contrast to the anger and sadness expressed in his description of these systems of control, Washington takes great delight in detailing the moments and spaces he took to escape this control. On Sundays, for example, he stood at the church door until “the minister would announce his text then commit it to memory. So I would tell [Mrs Talioferro] when I went home” (Washington 2007, 170). He would then escape down to the river to swim or into the woods to play. One Sunday after his mother had been sent away, he crossed the Rappahannock with some other boys to swim at Coalters Fishing Shore. When one of the boys saw the “Overseer” approaching, John and others hid themselves in bushes containing “vines of [poison] oaks” (176). He lied to both his owner and the doctor about the nature of the resulting rash and was sent by train to Staunton, where his mother could help him recuperate. Washington remembers the two-month-long reunion fondly.

Washington devotes several pages to a description of the rail trip back to Fredericksburg. He includes the towns where he changed trains, the views of mountains, and even the names of the engines. While he takes great pains to explain how a white man was always with him to prevent his escape, clearly the trip constituted an adventure to the teenage boy. This and a subsequent trip to Richmond in 1860 gave Washington a wider view of the world around Fredericksburg than would have been available to most slaves.

In 1855, the Baptist church consecrated a new building for its white congregation and sold the original site on the river to the black congregation. Washington remembers this new African Baptist church, despite the legally required presence of a white minister, as a space of freedom and resistance for Fredericksburg’s slave and free black population. Washington’s memoir celebrates the fairs and revivals organized by this church and details how, after years of lying to escape the church services mandated by his owner, he was baptized in the Rappahannock River. Washington’s ability to attend the officially sanctioned fairs at Easter and Christmas reflects the white establish-
ment’s interest in the spiritual salvation of blacks. At these fairs slaves and free blacks could socialize, and as a young man Washington used these opportunities to court a free black woman named Annie Gordon. They married in January 1862, only a few months before his escape (Blight 2007).

In Southern cities and in the upper South, it was not rare for owners to supplement their incomes by hiring their slaves out to plantations, factories, or other businesses (Blight 2007). Mrs Talioferro sent John’s mother and family away for just that reason and, as John grew older, she sent him to work for various employers. In 1860, while in his early twenties, Washington worked for the Alexander and Gibbs tobacco factory in Fredericksburg. He and other hired slaves were required to twist between 66 and 100 pounds of tobacco per day. If the slaves managed to surpass that minimum, they were paid “our own money, not our masters” and could earn “$3 or 4 Extra in a week” (Washington 2007, 184; original emphasis). He remembers the factory as clean and warm and describes how the slaves sang as they worked. To Washington, “this year in the Factory was to me more like ‘Freedoom,’ then any I had known since I was a very small boy” (185).

Perhaps the most ambiguous space in Washington’s narrative is the home of his owner, Mrs Talioferro. As the wife of a bank manager, she lived in the spacious apartment above the bank itself. Living with his owner’s family, Washington certainly felt confined and watched over; yet this was also the space where he began to learn to read and write. His mother had taught him the alphabet before she was sent away, but he achieved literacy, seemingly during stolen moments on the property, after Mrs Talioferro hired her out to Staunton. When sent to clean Mrs Talioferro’s son’s room during the 1850s, Washington would read, “but imperfectly,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine (Washington 2007, 173). An uncle helped him write a letter to his mother, and later the Reverend William Walker, who became the pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, DC, helped improve Washington’s writing (Blight 2007) – despite the fact that, to quote Washington himself, “it positively was forbidden by law to teach a Negro to write” (Washington 2007, 173).

As Shiflet (2007) notes, Washington included on his map the sites where he experienced moments of freedom during his life as a slave. In addition to the Shakespeare House and the other points of reference he uses to document his route of escape, Washington makes the river and woods prominent. Perhaps “Coulter’s Bridge” is so named to help readers find the shore where he encountered poison oak. He also takes care to draw and number the tobacco factory. Finally, Washington includes the railroad and terminal. Just as significant, however, are the absences. The Farmer’s Bank building, where he lived as child with his owner, is not on the map, nor are any other buildings where he or his family lived as slaves; also missing are the sites where slaves were bought and sold. Washington thus maps the urban slave landscape – the “paths, places, and rhythms” he and others created as “a refuge to the landscape systems of planters and other whites” (Ginsburg 2007, 37).

Yet Washington’s map does not represent his experiences and memories in the way most slaves are believed to make sense of their surroundings. According to Ginsburg (2007) and Upton (1985), slaves tended to relate all points to their own location rather than regarding them as components of a system. They comprehended their landscape as a memorized sequence of movements and related that mental map to others through secret marks and conversations (see also Lynch 1960). In style, if not content, John Washington’s map corresponds more closely to what Ginsburg refers to as the “planter landscape” than to the slave landscape. This proves that by 1873, Washington was able to imagine his escape route, the tobacco factory, the Shakespeare House, and other points of his narrative “in reference to coordinates and points that lie outside” his own direct experiences and to position himself “as viewing that grid from on high” (Ginsburg 2007, 38; see also Pickles 2004). In other words, Washington appropriated the perspective of his former masters; he represented the subaltern slave landscape he experienced and remembered using the tools of his oppressors.

Becoming a Map Author

To understand how Washington attained this cartographic imagination, it is important to explore his experiences both before and after his escape and to consider what cartographic resources may have been available to him. Between his escape in 1862 and 1873, when he wrote his memoir, Washington witnessed monumental changes. While Reconstruction did not lead to the full citizenship that the newly emancipated sought, educational and economic opportunities for men like Washington expanded greatly. Washington entered this turbulent period as one of a small minority of former slaves who had already learned to read and write. This ability was critical to his ability to map his memories, since literacy is a precondition to Western cartographic practice. He may have had some exposure to maps by the time he escaped. Geographic literacy was central in the education of white Americans, and, given the importance of national and state maps to the development of this literacy, there is no reason to doubt that Mrs Talioferro and her family owned and used maps (Brückner 2006; Bosse 2007). Washington’s memoir may even provide more direct evidence. As mentioned previously, he notes that, as a child, he read copies of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine found in his owner’s son’s room. A search of this magazine between 1850 and 1860 yields eight published maps accompanying explorers’
accounts, biographies, and historical narratives.² Whether Washington paid as much attention to these as to the other illustrations can never be known, but their existence does suggest that he saw examples of formal cartographic practice before his escape.

As was true for many other contrabands, Washington’s escape put him in the hands of the Union army. From April to August 1862, he served as a cook and an aide and travelled with the army between Fredericksburg and the Shenandoah Valley (Blight 2007). When added to his train journeys, this experience made Washington exceptionally well travelled for a former slave. While serving in the army, he had the opportunity to turn the tables on his old masters. In May 1862, he helped identify the prominent rebels of Fredericksburg. In Washington’s words, he “was preceeded directly to the Post Office,” where a Captain directed him “to point out each place and to name each person required” (Washington 2007, 197). This unclear passage makes it difficult to determine whether Washington walked around town with Union officers, identifying these rebels, or whether he worked with a map or other document while at the Post Office. Either way, he gained experience as part of a system of surveillance designed to capture and control the city’s Confederates.

Washington’s memoir ends with his obtaining work in Washington, DC, in September 1862. Working from census and church records, Blight (2007) notes that Washington succeeded in bringing both his family and his wife’s into Washington and that he found work as a common labourer, a waiter, and eventually a house and sign painter. John and his wife, Annie, also raised five sons – the eldest of whom was 11 when Washington wrote his memoir. All this took place in the midst of incredible growth and change in the city. The black population rose from 14,316 in 1860 to 38,663 in 1867 as thousands of escaped slaves arrived in the city (Blight 2007; Green 1967). Washington would have experienced the rapid changes in blacks’ legal status as well. Under the sway of a Congress controlled by radical Republicans, the District of Columbia experienced emancipation and black suffrage before the rest of the country. There is little doubt that Washington voted in the 1867 election that returned black office holders for the first time in the city’s history (Blight 2007). Washington also took part in the tremendous efforts to provide both the necessities of life and education to newly freed slaves. Northern aid societies, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and black Washingtonians founded churches, schools, the Freedmen’s Bank, and other institutions in their efforts to build and improve black communities (Green 1967; Peirce 1971; Blight 2007).

The Washingtons and a few hundred other refugees from Fredericksburg founded the Shiloh Baptist Church on L Street in 1863. John was always active in the church, serving as a clerk and as the superintendent of Sunday schools (Blight 2007, 94). Prior to writing his memoir, he was also involved in the Baptist Sunday School Union, an organization that established a normal school, created a library, and founded a literary journal (95). Between these efforts and the education of his sons, Washington must have had access to a wide variety of teaching materials.

Northern benevolent organizations such as the American Missionary Society and the American Freedmen’s Union Commission, with the financial help of the Freedmen’s Bureau, founded day schools for children, night schools for adults, industrial schools for women, and Sunday schools offering “the rudiments of education and Christianity” (Peirce 1971, 75). Lower-level instruction at these schools focused on the alphabet and basic reading, while more advanced students learned geography and arithmetic (Rabinowitz 1978, 158). If Washington was involved in founding a school and library that included instruction in geography, it is likely that he had access to at least some maps and may have received some instruction in their use.

In addition to having the ability to imagine and use cartographic space, Washington employed cartographic symbols and lettering styles that strongly suggest that he referred to published maps while writing his memoir. On his map, the areas identified as woods, the Union camp, and the City of Fredericksburg are marked by different graphic symbols. In fact, the grid of streets denoting the city recalls similar patterns found on maps published in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. Railroads are symbolized by double lines crossed with a series of short dashes, while the river and the canal are carefully filled with a light shading. The lettering and the map’s caption, however, provide the strongest clues that Washington worked hard to make his map look like those published in popular magazines and newspapers. Unlike the more cursive style found in the rest of the memoir, a few lines of which can be seen at the top of Figure 1, the river, road, and other labels on the map are carefully printed. Washington also took the time to add serifs to many of the letters and to use letter weight and size to differentiate between more and less important features. In addition, he positioned the map’s caption, “Vicinity of Fredericksburg Va,” outside the map’s perfectly straight neatline.

Exactly which maps Washington may have seen while working with schools, helping his sons with their schoolwork, or simply reading for pleasure can only be a matter of conjecture. Published maps, while not as ubiquitous as today, were in wide circulation during the 1860s and 1870s, by which time white literate Americans had proved a profitable market for published maps for more than a century (Bosse 2007). In addition, reading and drawing maps had been an important part of white elite and middle-class education since the colonial era, especially in the North (Brückner 2006). Since many of the benevolent societies and churches founding libraries and teaching geography to freedmen received considerable aid
from New Englanders, it seems likely that maps and geography textbooks would have been available (Rabinowitz 1978).

During the Civil War, major Northern newspapers such as the New York Herald printed maps to accompany their coverage of battles and campaigns. In addition, as the war ended, publishers such as A. Hoen and Company in Baltimore, Maryland, printed maps of major battles. If Washington was still fond of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, perhaps he read with interest the accounts of campaigns and battles that Harper’s began publishing immediately after the war. For example, a map of eastern Virginia “from Fredericksburg to Richmond” first appeared in an 1862 issue and was republished in 1866 as part of Harper’s Pictorial History of the War of Rebellion (see Figure 2). The symbol denoting the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad on this map is exactly the same as the railroad symbol Washington employed, and many of the water features are labelled using a serif font not unlike Washington’s.

Blight (2007, 15) suggests that Washington used “maps and other sources to prompt his memory and craft his story,” but the manner in which he used such maps is unknown. While the Harper’s map discussed above would have helped Washington to design his map, its scale is too small to have helped him locate the numbered features found on his map. It is conceivable that Washington simply drew his map from memory, but it is also possible that he was able to copy what we now refer to as “base map” features, such as the river, railroads, and streets, from printed maps of Fredericksburg. By 1873, several such maps had been published; for example, a lithographic print titled “Map of the Battlefield of Fredericksburg” was published in 1866 as part of the federal government’s effort to create an official record of the Civil War (see Figure 3). While this map shows the area from Fredericksburg to Falmouth at a similar scale to Washington’s, its orientation would have required John to reorient the river and the two towns so that north would be at the top of the page. Another detailed lithograph of the battle was published in 1867 by the New York Lithographing, Engraving, and Printing Company (see Figure 4); this map is oriented with north at the top of the page and includes the mill buildings and railroad terminal found on Washington’s map. It is worth noting that both these maps use the serif lettering style that Washington worked to imitate.

Regardless of how Washington obtained the basic geographic features for his map, he still had to locate the important landmarks from his memory on this cartographic space. According to Blight (2007), Washington never returned to Fredericksburg after 1862. Therefore, plotting the Shakespeare House, the tobacco factory, the mills, and the point “where I crossed the river” required transforming memories of his experiences in the rich three-dimensional space of his childhood into points on a grid identified through numbered key. His distance in time and space from Fredericksburg, along with his constant efforts to improve himself, allowed Washington to position himself outside his own experiences. As a result, he produced a map that would meet his own expectations as an educated freedman and, thus, a map that would help his imagined audience visualize his enslavement, his resistance to slavery, and his emancipation as experienced in this place.

Conclusions

As Blight (2007, 98) argues, by 1873 “the new day for which all the John Washingtons yearned was very much in jeopardy as the white South regained control of their society . . . and crushed the rights of blacks by intimidation, murder, and disfranchisement.” While the situation in Washington, DC, was not as dire when Washington wrote his memoir, the political, educational, and economic opportunities for the city’s black population were on the wane. White newspapers attacked elected black leaders, and by the next year Congress ended the district’s home rule because of the high levels of debt incurred by the territorial government. As a result, the district’s black population no longer had local elections in which to vote. Furthermore, while the existence of black schools was a giant leap forward, their lack of funding relative to white schools ensured their inferiority. Attempts to integrate the district’s schools largely ended in 1869 (Green 1967).

There is no way to know whether such events motivated Washington to write his memoir or whether, as Blight argues, Washington wrote his memoir because he was aware that mainstream American culture was “increasingly forgetful of the deepest causes and consequences of the Civil War” (Blight 2007, 99). As Blight notes, Washington was not commissioned to write this memoir, and there is no evidence that any publisher or editor altered his text (3). Therefore, it is impossible to know whether Washington created this work only to preserve his memories for his family or whether he hoped it would reach a larger audience. Regardless of motivation, however, his performance as author and cartographer stands as an example of what freed slaves could accomplish in what remained a racist nation. The mere existence of map and memoir also reflects Washington’s abiding belief in education as the path his sons and other blacks should follow to improve their status in society.

It is in this context that John Washington’s cartography should be understood. While we do not know whether he imagined that his memoir would be widely read, he adopted a voice and appropriated styles from other texts that seem geared to appeal to an audience broader than his own family (Blight 2007). Certainly, his map seems intended to help readers unfamiliar with the town to
imagine his Fredericksburg. For this reason, Washington likely considered it important to craft a map that conformed to his readers’ understanding of the world, that met the expectations of educated people, and that marked Washington himself as an accomplished freedman. Such a map had to look like other printed maps – perhaps those he had seen in Harper’s or in other sources. To meet such standards, Washington crafted a map, as both practice and text, that positioned both the author and his readers above and outside of Fredericksburg – his childhood

Figure 2. Portion of “A topographical map of EASTERN VIRGINIA,” Harpers New Monthly Magazine, 27 December 1862 (courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection).
home, the place of his enslavement and of his resistance to and ultimate escape from slavery.

John Washington’s memoir was not published until 2007. In the intervening 134 years, it was passed from his son Benjamin to his granddaughter Evelyn. She gave it to her friend, Alice Jackson Stuart, and it was the latter’s son who brought it to the attention of David Blight (see Blight 2007). Somewhere along that journey, a microfilm copy was made and given to the Library of Congress.\(^4\) Despite this, Washington’s map and memoir remained out of the public eye. While there is evidence that local historians in Fredericksburg knew about it as early as 1984, the narrative, and the experiences of the city’s enslaved population, remained absent from the collective memory represented and reproduced in Fredericksburg’s memorial landscape (Hanna 2008).

Since its publication in 2007, however, Washington’s map and the experiences of slavery, resistance, and emancipation it represents are open to new subjects performing the map within new contexts. The National Park Service has created a podcast tour of Fredericksburg, based on Washington’s memoir,\(^5\) that invites visitors to stand in the places where Washington stood and to imagine the landscape Washington experienced. In addition, Washington’s dignified portrait now hangs in the bank building where he lived as a slave, providing evidence of the changed cultural context within which his memories are now understood. Most notably, the same portrait appeared on the front page of the Free-Lance Star, Fredericksburg’s newspaper of record, on 20 June 2010. The accompanying story describes the dedication of wayside exhibits to mark the sixteenth and last point on Washington’s map – the point simply described as “where I crossed the river.” In addition to commemorating Washington’s own escape, the exhibits describe “the mass migration of escaping slaves and their families from Fredericksburg and nearby counties” during the summer of 1862 (Schemmer 2010, 1). Over 130 years after its creation, the map Washington made is being put into new practice by a new set of map users. The result is a memorial landscape that, just like John Washington’s map, will help us to imagine the harsh realities of slavery and the efforts of slaves to secure their own emancipation during the Civil War.

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Notes

1. The map’s rarity cannot be overstated. Of the millions of historic maps in both traditional and digital archives, very few represent the spaces of those on the margins from the perspective of the marginalized. Furthermore, of the millions of African-American slaves who lived in North America between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, only about 200 wrote about their experiences (Blight 2007); John Washington may be the only one who included a map.

2. This search was conducted with the help of Ms Erin Gunzelman in May and June 2009. The full text of Harper's New Monthly Magazine is available through Cornell University Library's Making of America collection (http://digital.library.cornell.edu/h/harp/index.html).

3. Issues of Harper's New Monthly Magazine dating from 1862 through 1873 included many Civil War battle and campaign accounts, all containing both drawings and maps. While Fredericksburg appears on several smaller-scale maps, such as the one reproduced as Figure 2, none of these articles contains a map at a scale comparable to Washington’s. (Search conducted in July 2010 using Cornell University Library’s Making of America collection, http://digital.library.cornell.edu/h/harp/index.html.)


References


