Virtual Slideset: Defining Independent Central America Through Traveler's Cartographies (1821-1950)

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When the Kingdom of Guatemala declared its independence from Spain in 1821 and determined, as part of the Republic of Central America, to join the international community made up of independent nations, there were many strikes against it. First, disunity among the member-states of the new Republic quickly led to fragmentation into five countries – Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica (1838-1839). Equally important, however, were the vague and imprecise notions of the region's geography fostered by centuries of mapping that focused on ports and harbors. Publicly available maps of the region lacked accurate topographical, political, and place information for the region's interior. Where was each country located and what were its boundaries? What terrain – lakes and rivers, mountains and minerals – lay within? Where were the cities and towns, ports and roads?

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, residents of the countries of Central America as well as the men and women who visited them from outside, worked in different ways to answer these questions. In the amateur and professional, impressionistic and scientific maps they produced, it is possible to trace the changing roles that maps played for travelers, businessmen and countries and the enduring legacy that the Positivist mantra of "order and progress" had on the region. The cartographic "definition" of the region changed as residents' and travelers' knowledge and goals changed. In the early nineteenth century, diplomats like Englishman George A. Thompson and colonists like German Gustav F. von Tempsky not only wrote up their accounts, but devoted cartographic efforts to create accurate maps and itineraries of their routes in order to communicate new boundaries and inform future travelers how they might expect to arrive from the shores to the interiors of each country. By mid-century, commercial maps of basic political divisions and geography, such as that published by J. H. Colton in 1854, showed visitors how they might cross the isthmus, but travelers interested in the region's commercial possibilities, like Frenchman Félix Belly, still had to map the best canal and railroad routes for transporting goods between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in order to win funding for such projects. Around the turn of the twentieth century, travelers, scientists and tourist guides could finally rely on standardized maps for geography, and defined Central America in their own maps in a fashion more literary and schematic than geographical. American scientist William T. Brigham showed volcano groups and archaeological digs, while Pan American Airways represented the region not through country boundaries but showing only an airline itinerary linking capital cities. Over the course of a century, a region considered unknown to outsiders became so well mapped that outsiders not only did not feel impelled to produce accurate maps of the region when they wrote about it, but could assume that their readership was so familiar with political and geographic markers, that fanciful cartography would be understood.
Saturday, 9th July: Being anxious to procure a chart of the division of the Five States as newly established, I called on Valle, he being the most likely person to assist my views; in this, however, I was not a little disappointed: it is true that the demarcation had been determined by legislative enactment, but no map had yet been formed to illustrate the new arrangement. We accordingly took one of Arrowsmith's maps which I had brought with me, and pencilled out the divisions in question.

— George A. Thompson, Narrative of an Official Visit to Guatemala (London, 1829).

Maps were not terribly useful to nineteenth century travelers whose destination was Central America. Colonial Spanish maps and English and other European atlases provided neither portable maps nor maps that kept up with political changes, accurately represented geography or detailed existing transportation routes like trails, lakes, and rivers. Those with access to world atlases — such as those created by Englishmen Aaron and John Arrowsmith (1750-1823; 1790-1873) and Frenchman Adrien Hubert Brue (1786-1832) — might be both politically or geographically unreliable or out of date. So travelers rarely mentioned maps in their accounts as something they consulted to facilitate or organize their travel. In fact, they were not necessary. For, when arriving in Central America, usually on ships sailing from North American or Caribbean ports, hardy travelers had to hire muleteers and mules to carry themselves and their baggage inland from a hot and unhealthy coast to the principal cities that were their final destination.

Instead of using maps, early nineteenth-century European and American travelers reported pertinent travel details in their accounts for those who had not traveled. Some narrated their journey in such a way that the reader could reconstruct travel times from coast to interior, and learn particular routes' advantages and disadvantages. Others opted to insert itineraries in the back of the account to confirm the stages of travel, as did German Gustav von Tempsky, whose 1858 book Mitla included a 4-page itinerary that listed dates of travel, stations, designations and distance to the next stop.

Yet if maps were not necessary for travel, they seemed required to inform the armchair traveler and actual travelers sought to procure them. George Thompson, the first British diplomat to visit newly independent Central America, brought an outdated map of colonial Central America from the Arrowsmith atlas with him, and, as the diary entry cited above indicates, sat down with a Central American politician to sketch the borders of the new states over the outline of the old colony. Using Thompson's work, John Arrowsmith provided an updated map for Thompson's 1829 travel account, Narrative of an official visit to Guatemala from Mexico. The national boundaries drawn were better than those included in most atlas maps for several years.

Thompson and Tempsky, like other early nineteenth century travelers' cartographies (and accounts) strove to provide new and accurate information not available in traditional sources — accurate representation of political boundaries or usable information about interior geography and travel routes. The information was intended to inform governments wishing to establish diplomatic relations. Their reports and maps also provided intelligence for businesses that saw economic opportunity in Central America.

**Economics: Travel and Trade, 1850s-1860s (Images 3 and 4)**

"I have consecrated 10 years of my life and 20,000 leagues of voyages & explorations to solve the problem the American isthmus has posed since Fernando Cortés."

— Félix Belly, A travers l'Amerique Centrale Le Nicaragua et le canal inter-oceanique, Paris, 1867 (trans.)

Thompson's map did more than improve readers' knowledge of the national boundaries of Central America. It foreshadowed that future commercial interests in the region would lie in the isthmus as an ideal location for a canal to link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in an inset map of a route recommended by the mayor of Granada (Nicaragua). This possible link rapidly attracted North American and European visitors in the 1840s and 1850s.

With new interest in Central America as a region of transit and commerce, maps produced after the 1850s focused on terrain, elevations in anticipation of railroad and canal paths, and fixing the location of inhabited places. By the late 1850s, most Central American countries had produced detailed national maps to encourage foreign investment that emphasized geography ripe for canals, railroads and telegraphs. Externally produced map production increased as well, representing Central America as the easiest route for North Americans en route to and from the California Gold Rush, as the logical place to put an inter-oceanic canal and as the likely location of important mineral deposits to exploit. The thousands of Gold Rush travelers who, beginning in 1848, moved between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States by means of Central America created
a market for transit information that U. S. mapmakers rushed to fill. One example is J.H. Colton’s 1854 *Map of the United States...Showing the Railroads, Canals & Stage Roads* that also included an inset with the "Route of Travel between Chagres and Panamá," a 50 mile overland route through Panamá. This route competed with a more complex route mixing steam, mule and foot across Nicaragua.

Those transiting Central America in the 1850s thus might hope to locate maps created for them that would be useful in plotting a voyage across the isthmus, a marked difference from the cartographic void experienced by those who had come before. However, businessmen still had to create their own maps to sell their railway and canal dreams to others. In his 1867 travel and commercial account, *À travers l’Amérique Centrale Le Nicaragua et le canal interocéanique* French entrepreneur Félix Belly (1816-1886) demonstrated how his time and travels would "solve the problem." He presented two maps underlining foreign interest in Central America as a transit point: one, a map showing no topographical detail that pinpointed possible and existing trans-isthmian routes by rail, steam and canal; and a second, proposing a canal through Nicaragua, that detailed the mountainous terrain and emphasized the existing network of lakes and canals that promised to make a Nicaraguan canal a relatively simple project. Belly’s dream of building a canal did not come true, although his cartography (and false claims to represent the French emperor) helped him convince the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan governments to grant him the rights to build a canal through their countries. In other words, the second generation of travelers to independent Central America was equally intent as the first in improving cartographic awareness of the region, but their goal was to impress investors, colonists and governments with the region’s promise as a transit point or commercial depot, not to fix its political boundaries.

**Individual Interests: Science and Trails (Images 5, 6, and 7)**

"Without surveys and without a proper census of the Indian tribes no scientific description of the country can be given."
— William T. Brigham, *Guatemala: the Land of the Quetzal* (1887)

What type of maps could late nineteenth and early twentieth century travel accounts contribute? By the 1880s, atlas-producing firms such as Rand McNally were well-established, and government interest in mapping communication, topography and geography had produced additional reliable maps, and travelers expected to possess or have access to their geographically and politically accurate atlases and folding maps, and, of course, to be able to read them. So, instead of seeking to make the most geographically accurate or economically informative maps, travelers interested in science, adventure and whimsy moved from presenting informational geographies to preparing specialized ones.

Select and personally relevant data took the place of specific political and geographical information. Some personal cartography reflected ongoing scientific investigation of Central America’s past and present. Scientists who wrote about their expeditions and adventures prepared—or had prepared—maps of volcanoes, ancient ruins, or Indian linguistic groups based on experience or reading, like Yale botany professor William T. Brigham (1841-1926) did for his 1887 work, *Guatemala: the Land of the Quetzal*. Brigham, like others, included an accurate topographical map in his book, but highlighted the route traveled by drawing a thick red line to show the itinerary, a popular approach of the period. By the early twentieth century, national geography could even be excised in favor of including only dots to represent towns visited by visitors to Costa Rica like Spanish journalists José Segarra and Joaquín Juliá. For late 19th century travelers, their maps covered not just real territory but the particular adventure and experience of the traveler: the scientist’s analysis or the literary man’s route.

**Commercial Interests: Business and Pleasure (Image 8)**
"Only now that there is an air service, is it possible for my kind to have a glimpse of lands hitherto distant many weeks' journey and that, in some cases, under most trying circumstances, which only the real scientist, explorer or engineer will endure."

By the early twentieth century, maps finally became the possession, rather than creation, of the traveler. No longer did visitors to the region arrive a few times a year by boat at one or two ports, hire mules and guides, and follow a route to a destination that would allow them to conduct business or diplomacy. The leisure traveler, or tourist, now arrived daily or weekly by plane, boat, train and road. Marie Beale, representing the traveler of the new century, did not spend the time or gather the knowledge of the scientists, explorers and engineers who had come before. Like others of "my kind," she eschewed human guides for paper ones and consumed maps prepared by those most interested in tourism: local tourist agencies, airlines, and gas companies. For the traveler of the twentieth century, it had become inconceivable, if not impossible, to imagine a mapless trip.

The automobile and its infrastructure provided the first demand for a new kind of mapping, one that defined Central America as a series of scenic villages, linked in specific circuits for a tourist's pleasure. Local tourism boards began to produce road guides, such as J. Alberto Rubio's 1933 *Guía Ilustrada de Turismo en Guatemala*. The booklet, sponsored by the Club Turista de Guatemala (Tourist Club of Guatemala) plotted out several touristic road trips that departed from and returned to capital Guatemala City, and included maps drawn by the author of principal cities and towns along the way. Instead of emphasizing difficult terrain that earlier travelers had meticulously surveyed, these maps in clear, black lines showed only main roads, key government offices, and touristic attractions like parks, churches and theaters on a plain white background. Road plans such as Rubio's were rapidly followed by the arrival in Central America in the 1940s of standardized national road maps, sponsored by international oil companies like Esso. These maps, which catered to the individual tourist interested in driving to, as well as in, Central America, mixed fact with fiction. The general geography and road systems were accurate, but vignettes wishfully located big, bright American-style gas stations run by uniformed European men in a well-paved countryside of volcanos, sugar-cane fields and houses of red tile rooves. Perhaps such vignettes were not meant to represent reality, and were understood to be idealistic images by those who used the maps. However, they presented a fictional view of the travel services visitors might expect to find.

Clearly, Central America, whose interior spaces remained to be cartographically represented at the turn of the nineteenth century, had been fully defined by the middle of the twentieth. If travelers, scientists and diplomats of the late nineteenth century had made their own maps, determined to share knowledge with their readers, the tourists of the twentieth relied on the maps of others to get to, and around, the "the land of the quetzal," rightly convinced that the information was not just generally available, but generally known. The men and women racing through cities, villages, ruins, and forests by rail, car and plane did not need to map the sites they visited: the task had already been accomplished.

**List of Images**

2. George Thompson, "Chart to Accompany Thompson's Official Visit to Guatemala," in *Narrative of an Official Visit to Guatemala from Mexico* (London, 1829). Newberry Library call number: G963.87
Bibliography


Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., *Central America: A Nation Divided* (Oxford, 1999) has a useful general bibliography, as well as a separate detailing of 19th and 20th century travel accounts.

In Spanish


On-Line Exhibits

"The Illustrating Traveler: Adventure And Illustration In North America And The Caribbean 1760-1895," Beinecke Library, Yale University, http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/illus.htm

Travel Accounts


Image 2. George Thompson, “Chart to Accompany Thompson's Official Visit to Guatemala, in Narrative of an Official Visit to Guatemala from Mexico” (London, 1829). Newberry Library call number: G963.87