



EDUCATION KIT

Mapping Manifest Destiny: Chicago and the American West
A Newberry Library Exhibition Nov. 3, 2007—Feb. 16, 2008

MAPPING MANIFEST DESTINY TRANSPARENCY #1

“Gilpin’s Hydrographic Map of North America”

Gilpin, William. *Gilpin’s Hydrographic Map of North America*.

St. Louis, Missouri: Juls. Hutawa Lithr., 1848.

Newberry Library Map 6F G3301 .C2 1848 G5

EXHIBIT TEXT:

Promoter William Gilpin argued that the American West was destined to be the next center of civilization, noting that world history had progressed through a succession of empires, moving westward from Asia to America. Gilpin developed his geopolitical ideas in his *Hydrographic Map of North America*. By imposing concentric circles on the map, he marked the continent’s geographical center, in present-day Kansas, and diagrammed the landmass as a concave structure, united by an interior river system.

By pushing the Rocky Mountains west of their actual position, Gilpin enlarged the Mississippi Valley’s fertile central basin, blithely downplaying obstacles like mountains and deserts. Coloring the map with washes of green and gold, Gilpin pictured North America as a sunny, salubrious expanse filled with natural resources.

TEACHER NOTES:

- William Gilpin was hired to promote the West as editor for the *Missouri Daily Argus*.
- Gilpin designed this map to show his belief that the future of America lay in the West.
- He believed that the lure of the West’s natural resources would result in a more equal population distribution throughout the country.
- Using concentric circles, Gilpin created an area of focal interest by marking the geographic center of North America, located in present-day central Kansas. This, he felt, was where the nation’s greatest city would develop because of population distribution. Each circle is meant to represent a gradient of wealth and population that he projected would emanate from central Kansas.
- Gilpin also intentionally pushed the Rocky Mountains further west than they actually are, and omits the continent’s interior river system, in an attempt to emphasize the Mississippi Valley’s fertile basin as an area unimpeded by river ways and mountains.
- By coloring the entire map in yellows and greens, Gilpin subtly makes North America feel warm, inviting, and full of natural resources and opportunities.
- The elevation chart in the bottom left corner provides accurate information on the topography of the region. However, the location of the chart does not facilitate the ease of its use or understanding.



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DISCUSSION PROMPTS/SUGGESTED CLASS ACTIVITIES:

- Identify as many places as possible through *absolute location*, *relative location*, shape, symbol, or written identifications.
- Identify ways in which William Gilpin altered geographic truths in order to persuade people to move to the West.
- Most people see maps as “factual.” Can you think of other instances or situations where maps are manipulated to achieve some desired result?
- Would you recommend this map be used as a *wayfinding* tool for a traveler? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Gilpin chose to use concentric circles to reflect his theory of wealth and population distribution?