

Geodæsia: Land and Memory

Geodæsia: the art of surveying and measuring land

A Master's Thesis Exhibit

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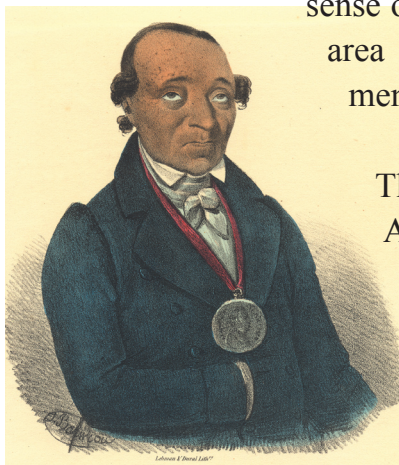
IMAGE OF LAND

Ohio in 1787 was part of the new Northwest Territory acquired from England in the Treaty of Paris of 1783. Its heavily wooded land and dispersed prairies made transportation to the territory difficult and only available by river or trails carved through the wilderness. Despite these wild qualities, Americans wanted land in Ohio for many reasons. Land sales provided the new government with a cash flow to relieve its Revolutionary War debts. For veterans of the war, the land in the Territory became their compensation. For other men, land was an opportunity for fame and fortune. John Cleves Symmes - Revolutionary war veteran, member of the Continental Congress, and New Jersey Supreme Court judge - petitioned Congress for one million acres in the southwestern Ohio Territory in what came to be called the Symmes Purchase. Owning and selling so much land would, he hoped, earn him a fortune and build up his reputation in elite Eastern circles. For most men, land in the territory was a fresh start – an opportunity for personal freedom. It meant a chance to live their lives free from actual slavery and free from debts and taxes. It was, in the case of squatters, also seen as free for the taking – both from the government and Native Americans.



John Cleves Symmes, c. 1793

Typical maps of the time reflect this belief in opportunity. Maps reflect their makers' beliefs, communicating bodies of knowledge, setting boundaries, or indicating ownership of land. Because of their relationship to the makers' beliefs, maps portray the makers' sense of reality. In the case of the Northwest Territory, maps of the area showed the region's potential for settlement by leaving out mention of other inhabitants.

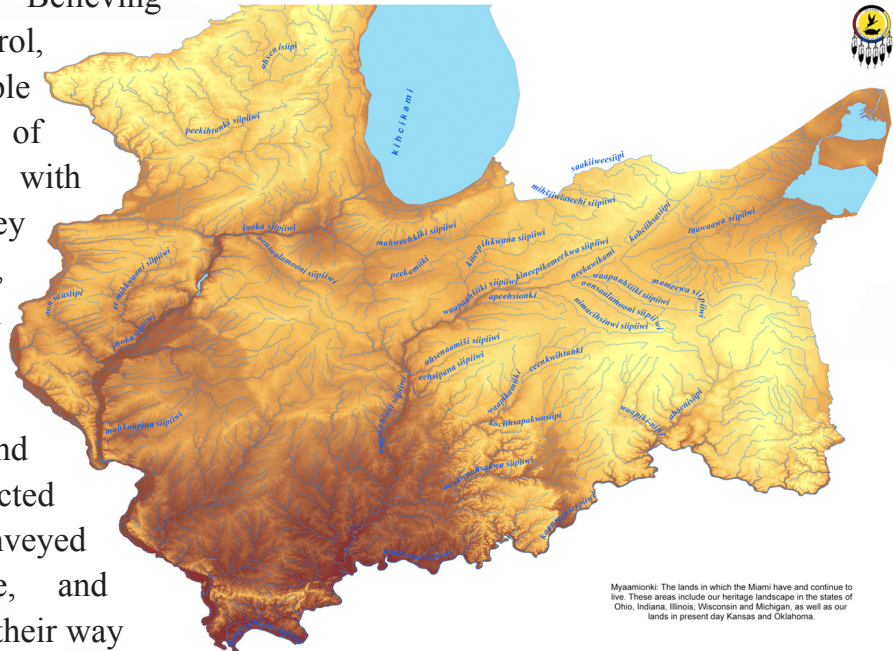


Miami leader Jean Baptiste Richardville

The Ohio country already had inhabitants though. Native Americans such as the Miami, Shawnee, Potawatomie, and Delaware shared the land in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Boundaries were fluid. To them, land was important for life and owning land meant something different. Using the land signified its ownership. Land was where people lived – not quantifiable or easily owned and sold.

USE OF LAND

Ideas about land were put into practice by the ways in which people used land in the Northwest Territory. Believing that to use was to control, Myaamia (Miami) people hunted in the forests of Ohio, sharing the land with neighboring tribes. They also traded and farmed, growing white corn in the fertile valleys and traveling on navigable rivers. Place names and stories about land connected people to the land, conveyed community knowledge, and taught Myaamia people their way of life.



Myaamionki: The lands in which the Miami have and continue to live. These areas include our heritage landscape in the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan, as well as our lands in present day Kansas and Oklahoma.

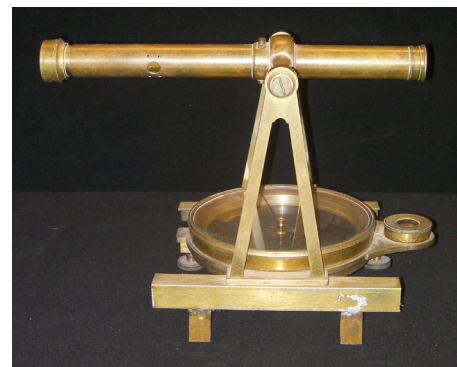
Historical Landscapes of the Miami, 1650-1850.

Surveyors brought to life the settlers' notion of land as personal possession. Their work allowed land to be property, wealth, and expanding states by measuring the land



*George Washington as
Young Surveyor*

and giving it form on paper as legal property. Using specialized tools, surveyors took the measurement of the land and drew maps for the creation of boundaries and borders. This line of work provided opportunities for travel, exploration, and individual livelihoods, while also making possible the location of towns, farmsteads, roads, and canals.



*Surveyor's Transit,
c. 19th Century*

MEMORY OF LAND

With so many diverse conceptions and uses of land, naturally there are memories of the land structured according to these ideas and uses, layered among one another. Memories of Native Americans such as the Myaamia and settlers like John Cleves Symmes present the first two layers of memory of land from which we construct our own modern notions of land.



*2009/2010
Miami Tribal Students*

Slowly but surely, the settlers' ideas of land clashed with those of the Myaamia and other Native American peoples. After signing thirteen treaties over a period of seventy years, the Myaamia lost their homeland and were forced to relocate to Indian Territory in the West. Although they were sent away, their stories, place names, and memory in the region live on. Reminders of their presence exist in the many Miami place names given by the Shawnee, Ojibwa,

and Ottawa to denote the homes of the Miami.



Symmes Hall, 2010

Symmes' name remains familiar through the place names bearing his name in southwestern Ohio. He is also associated with the university he intended to build in his purchase. When he lost some of the land originally claimed in his purchase and no substitute presented itself, the proposed university was located in the specially created Oxford Township of Butler County and incorporated by the Ohio state legislature in 1809. Miami University took its name from the Miami rivers and the Miami people of the area. Because the university and town of Oxford had to be built from scratch, classes did not begin until 1824. The prior views of land as shared space for communal use and land as personal opportunity were the primary building stones of a vision of quality education and advancement.

Today at Miami University, memories of former conceptions and experiences of land are living recollections encountered through people, buildings, place names, and the landscape itself. From Myaamia Tribal students, to Symmes Hall, to



*Elliot & Stoddard Halls,
c.1854-1860*

Elliot and Stoddard Halls, we see the memories of actions and interactions, ideas and beliefs of diverse communities of people who shaped the land and provided it with a depth to make it what surrounds us now.

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This exhibit was curated by Kalie Wetovick
M.A. Candidate, Department of History
Graduate Assistant, Walter Havighurst Special Collections

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