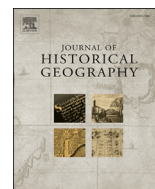




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Cartography and capitalism: George Clason and the mapping of western American development, 1903–1931



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ABSTRACT

George Clason's self-help essays on achieving financial independence became accepted household wisdom to millions of Americans between 1925 and 1950. Less well known is Clason's legacy in building the largest commercial map company west of Chicago between 1903 and 1931. In his earlier life as a Denver-based map publisher and booster of western economic development, Clason produced millions of road maps, state maps, city maps, promotional circulars and maps for mining companies, land companies, and state and local governments. This paper explores how Clason's earlier career as a cartographer and map publisher reflected the same economic principles he made nationally famous in his later essays about saving money and building capital. I suggest that Clason's maps successfully blended multiple and distinctive genres of commercial mapping, forming a powerful cartographic narrative focused on promoting development in the West that reflected his own ideology oriented around a belief in progress, high modernism, and the merits of individual effort within a largely capitalistic economic system. I examine the strategic partnerships and business relationships Clason forged with private companies and state institutions and how textual and visual material within Clason's maps communicated enduring ideas about the West's economic potential and regional character.

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Between 1925 and 1950, George Samuel Clason's self-help essays on achieving financial independence became accepted household wisdom to millions of Americans. Clason shaped and reflected a pervasive American ideology oriented around individualism, middle-class economic independence, and the virtues of private enterprise and personal financial responsibility. Most famously his 'Babylonian Fables' were published in 1926 as a small book entitled *The Richest Man in Babylon*. They were a series of stories aimed at encouraging ordinary Americans to save money, own property, and build personal wealth.¹ As Clason notes in his Foreword, 'our prosperity as a nation depends upon the personal financial prosperity of each of us as individuals.'² The rest of the book is a collection of parables set in the ancient city of Babylon that highlights the wisdom of careful spending, saving money, and slowly accumulating personal wealth over time. Clason's stories of entrepreneurial wealth building were often handed out as promotional booklets by banks and savings and loan companies. By his death in 1957, more than four million copies of Clason's homespun

wisdom had been printed and distributed.³ Indeed, *The Richest Man in Babylon* remains in print today and has been translated into many languages, including Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Chinese.

Less well known is Clason's legacy in building the largest commercial map company west of Chicago between 1903 and 1931. In his earlier life as a map publisher and as a booster of western settlement and economic development, Clason produced millions of road maps, state maps, city maps, promotional circulars and maps for mining companies, land companies, energy companies, and state and local governments. This paper explores how Clason's earlier career as a cartographer and map publisher reflected the same economic principles and broader ideology that he made internationally famous in his later homilies about saving money and building capital. Reflecting arguments made by Brian Harley, Martin Brückner, James Scott, and others, I suggest that Clason's maps were not neutral depictions of western settlement and geography in the early twentieth century, but rather persuasive cartographic narratives designed to 1) build Clason's own financial

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¹ G. Clason, *The Richest Man in Babylon*, New York, 1988, first published 1926.

² Clason, *Richest Man*, vii.

³ *The Denver Post*, 21 August 1952.



Fig. 1. Central City, Colorado. Bird's-eye view of Central City area, Gilpin County Chamber of Commerce, *Topographical Map of Gilpin County*, Denver, 1906, author's collection.

wealth, 2) promote economic development focused on natural resources, especially in Colorado and the West, and 3) reflect Clason's own ideology oriented around a belief in progress and the merits of individual effort within a largely capitalist economic system in which the central role of local, state, and national governments was to foster private enterprise. Indeed, Clason's publications, both as a map publisher and as a writer, produced a powerful image of the West that characterized a particular economic and political point of view in the United States in the early and mid-twentieth century.⁴ Further, Clason's wide range of commercial mapping ventures (suburban real estate, mining, farming, road maps, tourism promotion, etc.) allowed him to creatively blend these distinct genres in new ways.

Ultimately, Clason's cartography, embodied in the types of maps he published, the language used on the maps, and the visual and symbolic rhetoric he employed in their design and composition, reflected the same compelling and typically unquestioned world view he later marketed to millions of readers as he encouraged them to save money and build personal wealth. This biographical assessment of Clason's life and work, and what his own story reveals, parallels the research of other historical geographers who have productively examined broader ideas and themes through the lens of particular individuals and the key roles they often play in shaping past geographies.⁵

There is a rich and growing literature on cultural interpretations of maps and the reading of maps as texts. I have been particularly

influenced by Brian Harley, Christian Jacob, and Anthony Arrigo who each explore how maps can be read critically as cultural texts.⁶ The work of Martin Brückner and Susan Schulten is also useful in suggesting how Clason's maps reflect broader ideas about American economic development and political expansion.⁷ In addition, James Scott's assessment of the 'High Modernist state' emphasizes the formative role maps played in the evolution of the country's larger visual culture and how that culture helped reproduce and reflect the growing role of state power.⁸ In particular—and of direct relevance to the period in which Clason published his maps—was their growing use in popular consumer culture (for example, their mass reproduction in print media, school books, magazines, road maps, atlases, etc.). We need to see Clason's cartographic practices as integral parts of a larger national mapping project that embodied ideas of nationalism, the country's inevitable political and demographic expansion, and economic growth built around capital investment and access to abundant natural resources.

Clason's maps also served diverse promotional purposes. Griffin and Del Casino and Hanna, for example, note that distinctive tourist-oriented maps developed their own characteristic look and have shaped place identity in particular ways.⁹ I suggest their argument can be extended to similar mapping conventions in

⁴ Regional context is offered in M. Malone and R. Etulain, *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History*, Lincoln, 1989, 11–86. The broader narrative on modernity is summarized in J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, 1998, 87–102.

⁵ Parallel biographical approaches are exemplified by W. Wyckoff, *The Developer's Frontier: The Making of the Western New York Landscape*, New Haven, 1988; B. Gumprecht, Transforming the prairie: early tree planting in an Oklahoma town, *Historical Geography* 29 (2001) 112–34; D. Alderman, Channing Cope and the making of a miracle vine, *Geographical Review* 94 (2004) 157–77; C. Brannstrom, John Shary, Charles Pease, and contested irrigation landscapes in early-twentieth-century South Texas, *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 234–46.

⁶ J. Harley, Maps, knowledge, and power, in D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (Eds), *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments*, Cambridge, 1988, 277–312; J. Harley, Deconstructing the map, *Cartographica* 26, 2 (1989) 1–20; C. Jacob, Toward a cultural history of cartography, *Imago Mundi* 48:1 (1996) 191–198; A. Arrigo, *Imaging Hoover Dam: The Making of a National Icon*, Reno, 2014. For an excellent overview of recent research on the historical geography of maps and cartography, see Karl Offen, *Historical geography I: vital traditions*, *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2012) 527–30.

⁷ M. Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity*, Chapel Hill, 2006; S. Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880–1950*, Chicago, 2001; S. Schulten, *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America*, Chicago, 2012.

⁸ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 87–102.

⁹ See V. Del Casino and S. Hanna, Representations and identities in tourism map spaces, *Progress in Human Geography* 24, 1 (2000) 23–46 and D. Griffin, *Mapping Wonderlands: Illustrated Cartography of Arizona, 1912–1962*, Tucson, 2013.

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