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Accessing Historical Topographic Maps Has Never Been Easier

TopoView highlights one of the USGS's most important and useful products, the [topographic map](#). In 1879, the USGS began to map the Nation's topography. This mapping was done at different levels of detail, in order to support various land use and other purposes. As the years passed, the USGS produced new map versions of each area. The most current maps are available from [The National Map](#). TopoView shows the many and varied older maps of each area, and so is useful for historical purposes—for example, the names of some natural and cultural features have changed over time, and the 'old' names can be found on these historical topographic maps.

This interface was created by the [National Geologic Map Database project](#) (NGMDB), in support of topographic mapping program managed by the [National Geospatial Program](#) (NGP). Geologic mapping and topographic mapping at the USGS have a long tradition together (see [18RR report](#)). The NGMDB project is proud to assist the



In cooperation with
The National Map



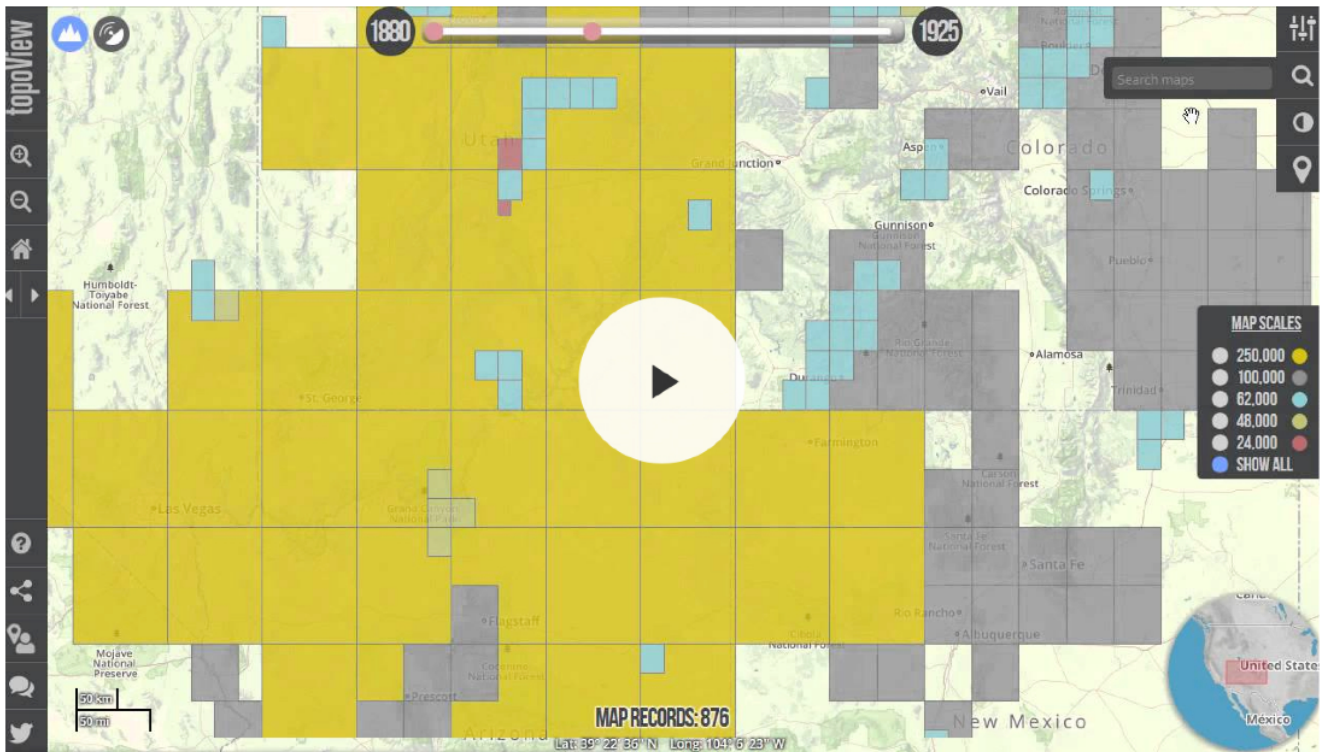
A screenshot of [topoView](#)'s homepage, public domain.
USGS 2015.

The topography of envy

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg

Last week, enthusiastic praise of the new US Geological Survey historic topographic maps viewer [topoView](#) has made the rounds of the Internet. The response to this new service has been so overwhelming that, as of today, the servers are down for maintenance because of the excess in requests. But, technical glitches and excessive enthusiasm notwithstanding, this is a great service, that offers access—for free and through an incredibly user-friendly map-based interface—to an incredible vault of high-quality cartographic resources in a variety of (actually usable) formats.

It is definitely a great asset for anybody interested in historical cartography, landscape transformation, and, more in general, nature in place, space, and time. Being the map geek I am, I almost drooled over my keyboard. But, then, as happens way too often when it comes to sources available to the “armchair historian,” the full realization dawned on me: as neat as it is to have a look at a map of Madison in 1880, it isn't much useful when your geographical specialization is western Europe.



Video © 2015 USGS, on YouTube.

Roy Rosenzweig’s digital world of scarcity and abundance often looks rather like a desert when you are an environmental historian of, say, Italy. Just to stay focused on maps, as far as I know nothing comparable to the new USGS viewer is available for any major European country. The Italian Istituto Geografico Militare only offers access to historic maps through a very clunky interface based on drop-down menus [an updated version can be found here]. And when you at last reach them, they are not geo-referenced, low quality images. To have, possibly, actually usable images you’d have to send an email and inquire about the sale’s arrangements. And the catalogue doesn’t even include a whole set of topographic maps. A few years ago I also participated in a group reflecting about the possibility to crowdsource the digitization of the Italian topographic series of 1936, which stalled because of our inability to figure out all the related copyright issues.

A historian of France, Germany, or Austria would apparently encounter similar difficulties in getting hold of decent topographic maps. The German Bundesamt für Kartographie und Geodäsie only offers reprints of selected maps. The private Landkartenarchiv project doesn’t give users the possibility to download the maps, which makes it less useful for actual research. The Historical Maps of the Habsburg Empire, while it has to be commended for its wonderful interface and the possibility to view the maps in 3D on Google Earth, also doesn’t offer users the possibility to download and reuse the maps. On the site of the French Institut Géographique National I, frankly, got lost: I was able to see that historical maps should be available

for free for the purpose of research and teaching, but I still wonder how to get hold of them. My best bet is that you'd have to order a CD.

Obviously the wonderful [David Rumsey Map Collection](#) offers some solace to the global map geek or the historian interested in landscape transformation, but it is far from a complete archive of global topographies.

The envy for the wonderful work done by the USGS should however not remain a mere feeling of discontent, but rather become a motivation to act: there is much to be done to improve the availability of topographic maps outside the US. As I already suggested to do for [libraries, archives, and museums](#) we should pressure our national cartographic agencies to follow the example of the USGS and make their historical data freely available for research and study. Or, we can go back to the study table, clarify all copyright issues, and crowdsource the topography of our past.

Links:

<https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview/>

<http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/maps.htm>

<https://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/links/pdf/introduction/0.6b.pdf>

<http://www.igmi.org/ancient/>

https://www.igmi.org/en/carte-antiche#c3=now-past&c3=now-0&b_start=0

http://wiki.gfoss.it/index.php/IGM_1936

<http://www.bkg.bund.de/>

<https://www.landkartenarchiv.de/>

<http://www.mapire.eu/>

<http://professionnels.ign.fr/>

<http://www.davidrumsey.com/>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200517021419/http://environmentalhumanities.org/2013/10/23/open-access-and-the-environmental-humanities/>

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

<http://www.antspiderbee.net/2015/05/12/the-topography-of-envy/>

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