

Birmingham's Cartographic Treasure

George Stewart
Birmingham Public Library
gstewart@bham.lib.al.us

The Birmingham Public Library's cartographic collection consists of historical maps and atlases dating from the 1500s, including materials purchased by the library and from the private collections of Rucker Agee, James Woodward, and Charles Ochs. These private materials represent the lifetime collecting of their donors and

emphasize the Age of Discovery, Alabama and Native Americans, and the exploration of the Caribbean area. Combined, they provide a comprehensive picture of European exploration, white settlement of the New World, and the history of Alabama. This article is a description of one library's attempt to make its treasures more accessible.

HISTORY OF THE COLLECTION

MAPS, PRIMARILY DEALING WITH Alabama or the Birmingham area, have been added to the collection regularly since 1927. In that year, a new central library opened and a special collection of Southern History and Literature was organized.

The first large addition of maps and atlases came in 1964, when Rucker Agee gave a large portion of his private collection to the library. Mr. Agee was a founder of the Alabama Historical Association and a trustee of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, and was thoroughly familiar with the state and its development. In addition, he had a lifelong avocation of map collection and studying cartography. His mind painted with a broad brush, collecting both the most common service station map (now almost impossible to obtain) and the most beautiful examples of early modern cartography. The "showpiece" atlas of the collection is the Royal Edition of the *Atlas Maior* published in 1622 by Joan Blaeu. This 11-volume set is the crowning achievement of the great cartographical publishing house of Blaeu in Amsterdam. Sheet maps in the collection begin with the Age of Discovery. Benedetto Bordoni's 1528 *Oval Map of the World* is an example.

As plans were made for the 1964 gift, the library undertook the preparation of space to house, organize, and maintain the collection. A separate area was constructed

with its own temperature, humidity, and security provisions. Although the collection had been arranged so that Mr. Agee could find anything, there was no systematic organization whereby library staff could search or locate. Thus, the library came face to face with the problem which still evades many map collections today—how to catalog the collection and make it accessible.

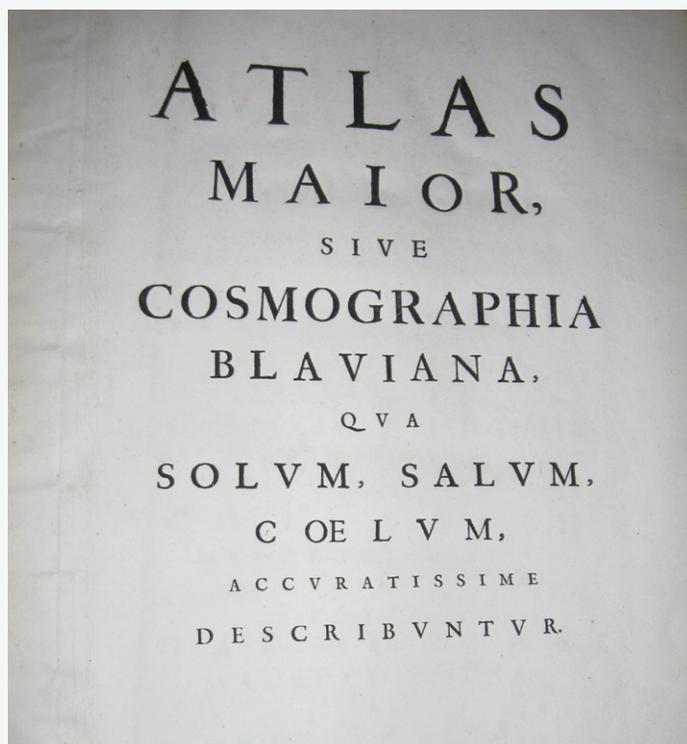


Figure 1. First title page from Blaeu's 1622 *Atlas Maior*.



© by the author(s). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

In the late 1960s, Sara Elizabeth Mason retired as head of the library's catalog department. She agreed to continue, on a part-time basis, to organize the cartographic material. Her work resulted in a collection that was organized by subject and, as time passed, with a card catalog. In 1973, the library published her very thorough listing and union list: *A List of Nineteenth Century Maps of the State of Alabama*. The chronological limitations of such a listing excluded any maps published before 1819, the year of Alabama's statehood, or the comprehensive maps of the southeast, in which present day Alabama is presented as a portion of Louisiana, Georgia, etc. But there are such maps in the collection: Geronimo Chaves' 1591 *La Florida* illustrates the geographical knowledge and cartographic skills of that period, while Henri Chatelain's 1719 *Carte contenant le royaume du Mexique et la Floride* shows considerable detail of the region that would become the state of Alabama a century later.

The second major private collection was received from James Woodward. Mr. Woodward was president of a local iron company and had written a comprehensive guide to Alabama's early blast furnaces and iron industry. In addition to industrial history, Woodward was interested in Alabama history and Native Americans. His

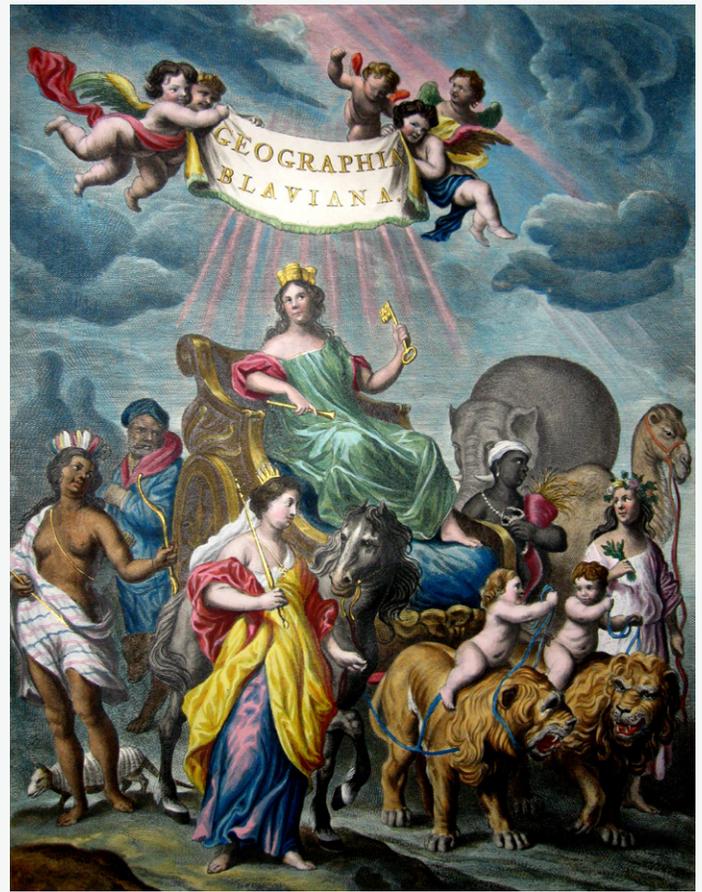


Figure 2. Illustration from Atlas Maior.

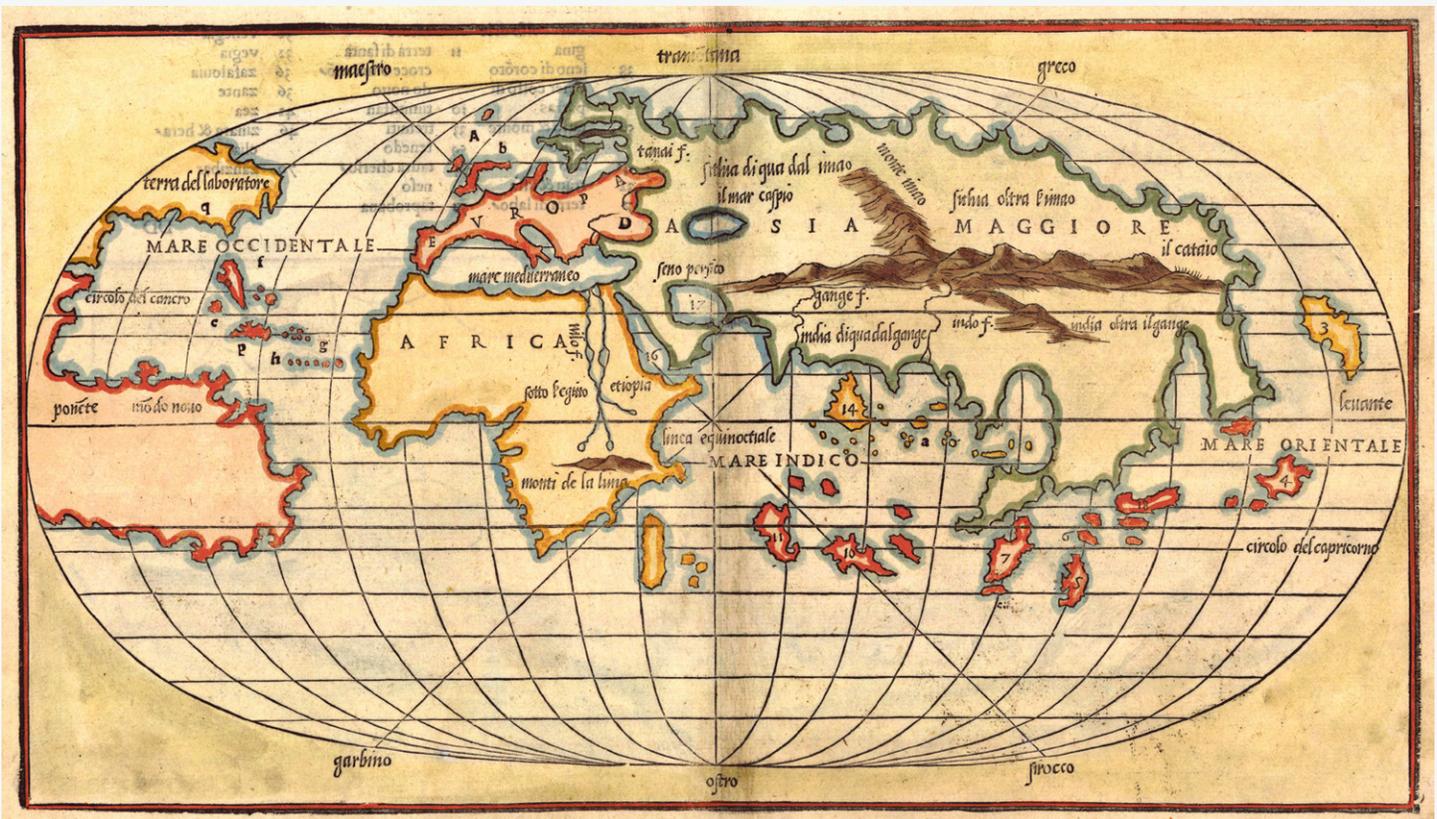


Figure 3. Benedetto Bordone's 1528 [Oval Map of the World].



Figure 4. Geronimo Chaves's 1591 La Florida.



Figure 5. Henri Chatelain's 1719 Carte contenant le royaume du Mexique et la Floride.

collecting included many important maps of the state and region as Native American lands were taken and the people removed. David Burr's 1838 *Map illustrating the plan of the defenses of the Western Frontier* presents a picture of how the US was planning its western growth. The location of Native American tribes, forts, and trails is provided for the area from the Mississippi Valley to the, then, western border.

The third major component of the collection was provided by Dr. Charles Ochs. He was a career navy officer whose travels had taken him to many lands and had introduced him to many of the questions of sea travel and navigation. In particular, Dr. Ochs was interested in the exploration and settlement of the Caribbean area which washes the shores of Alabama and other southeastern states. His maps provide vivid pictures of what Europeans knew, and did not know, as well as what they wanted to share with others.

CATALOGING

THESE VARIOUS COMPONENTS combine to provide a comprehensive picture of how modern cartography developed, how the world was presented, and how the New World was settled by Europeans. Since many of the maps had been added after Mason's cataloging, it was decided to inventory and re-catalog the entire collection. That process was begun in 2008 and continues today. The overall project involves several components: inventory, assessment of condition, appropriate conservation and cleaning, encapsulation, digitization, cataloging, and classification.

The inventory database includes: cartographer, title, date, OCLC number if available, size, collection (Agee, etc.), whether digitized (if yes, the image location is included), whether encapsulated, notes regarding condition and information from the existing catalog. A temporary digital image was made with a hand-held camera. Finally, a temporary location code was added to enable staff to find individual maps before they were cataloged. No effort was made to group maps by subject or date at this stage.

After inventory, several decisions were made. All cataloging would be done through OCLC and full records would be prepared for each entry. The collection would be organized using the LC classification system. No map would be cataloged until any necessary (and possible) conservation was undertaken, encapsulation was completed, and a high quality digital image was available.

Conservation and encapsulation are done in-house by a part-time conservator. It might be worthwhile (and perhaps encouraging) to mention that this entire process has been conducted by part-time personnel. The desirability of making the map collection more accessible has long been recognized, but the cataloging tasks for Birmingham's central library, its many branches, and the many municipal libraries that are system members means that maps are never a top priority. Many libraries may find themselves in the position of waiting until the ideal time arrives to catalog their map collections. Such times seldom materialize.

Many of the maps had been digitized previously for various exhibits and projects. How to digitize the remainder proved to be a daunting piece of the puzzle. Staff considered buying scanning equipment. However, the cost of the equipment capable of producing consistently high quality images and accommodating large material was beyond the

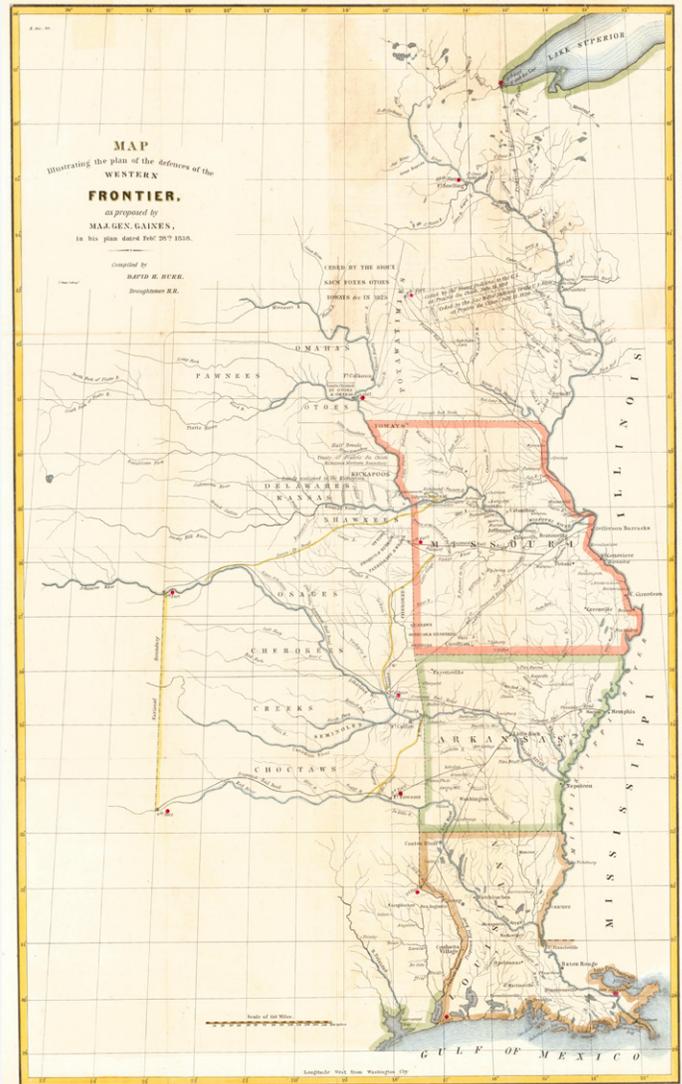


Figure 6. David Burr's 1838 Map illustrating the plan of the defenses of the Western Frontier.

budget. Investigation made it clear that such equipment was not “point and shoot.” Each document needed to be individually evaluated and its digitization tailored to fit the prospective use and its key features. Intricate maps with fine detail require a higher resolution at the expense of color depth. Documents with fine color detail and hued shading (e.g. topographical maps) are often better served with higher color depth and less resolution. Trained staff would be required. Consideration was given to contracting with a private agency, but that was also beyond the budget.

The solution came from the University of Alabama's Cartographic Research Laboratory. Its supervisor, Craig Remington, agreed to scan the maps in batches. The maps are taken to the lab in Tuscaloosa; the maps and files of

the digital images are returned to the library. Copies of the images are also added to the lab's excellent web site alabamamaps.ua.edu.

The opportunity to finally catalog the collection was tempered by the realization that no one involved knew

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE COLLECTION

IT IS WONDERFUL for a local collection to hold classic works of cartography, or to own a title whose only other "locatable" copy is at the Library of Congress or the New York Public Library. But it is meaningful that they also hold unique or very specialized items of local significance. This section highlights some items of regional interest in the Birmingham Public Library's collection.

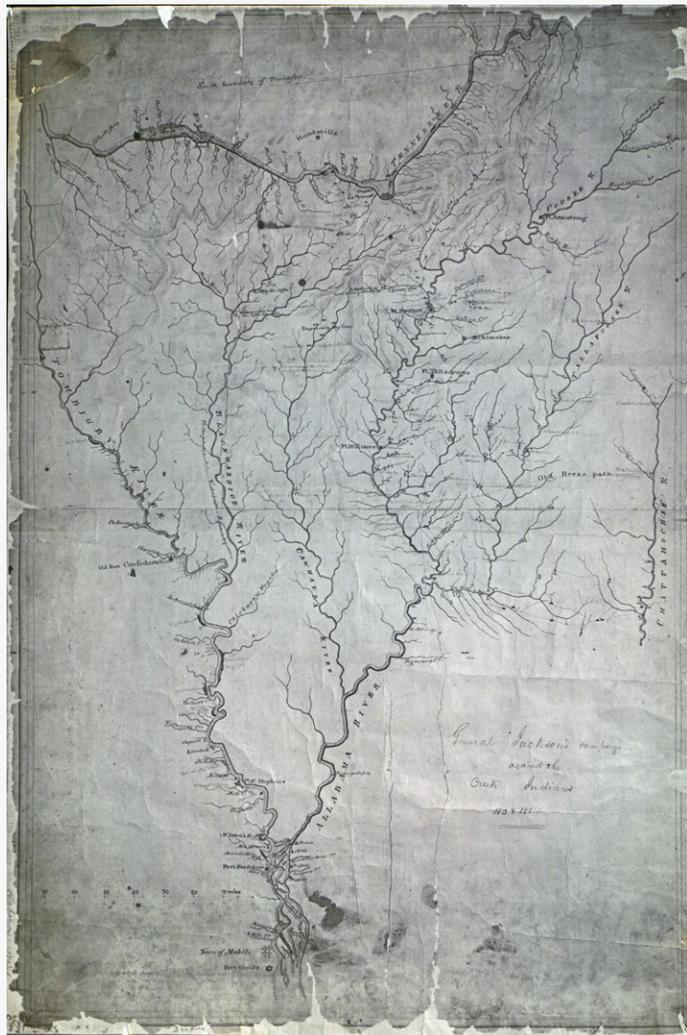


Figure 7. The War Department's General Jackson's campaign against the Creek Indians, 1813 & 1814.

the intricacies of that task. Funded by a grant from LYRASIS, Paige Andrew, Map Cataloging Librarian at The Pennsylvania State University, came and provided two days training for staff from several local libraries.

Much of Alabama was settled on lands previously occupied by Native Americans. A key part of that relocation process was Andrew Jackson's destruction of their military power. The War Department's *General Jackson's campaign against the Creek Indians, 1813 & 1814* covers the overall campaign, while John Reid's *The Battle of the Horse Shoe, 27th March 1814* details a major event in that effort.

To encourage white settlement, land was given to many groups. One of the most unique was a group of French immigrants who wanted to establish an agricultural community to grow grapes and olives, the "Vine and Olive Colony." The General Land Office's manuscript *Map of four townships in Marengo County, Alabama: granted to the french [sic] immigrants by act of Congress 3rd March 1817* is the only known map of that gift. John La Tourette's 1833 *Map of the Creek territory in Alabama from the United States surveys: shewing [sic] each section & fractional section* details the lands taken in the Creek's final removal.

Settlement of the newly available land enabled Alabama to move rapidly from being a part of the Mississippi Territory, to its own Alabama Territory, and finally to statehood in

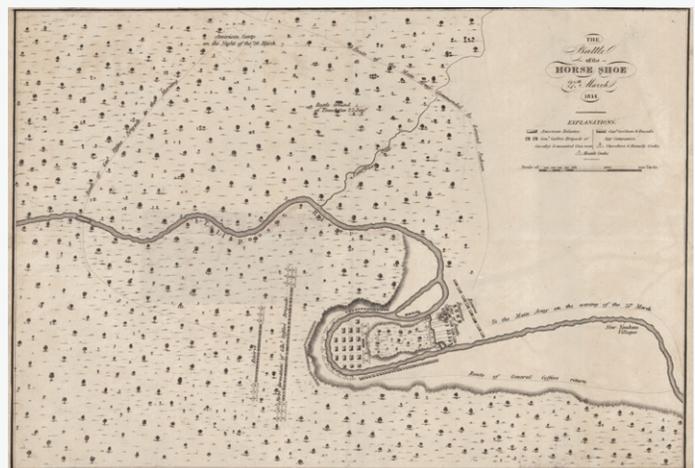


Figure 8. John Reid's *The Battle of the Horse Shoe, 27th March 1814*.

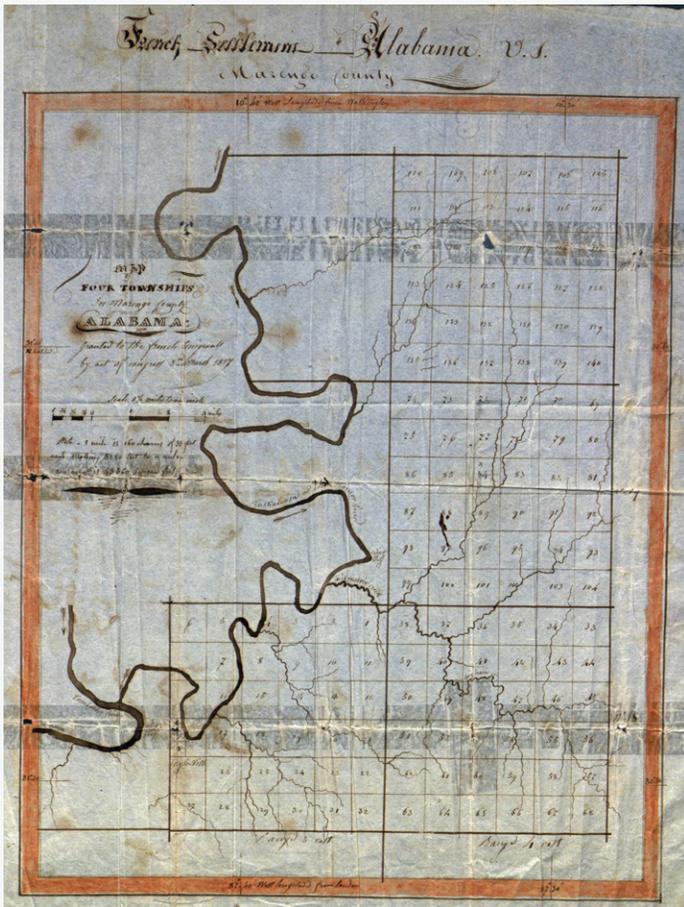


Figure 9. General Land Office's Map of four townships in Marengo County, Alabama: granted to the french [sic] immigrants by act of Congress 3rd March 1817.

1819. The favorable climate and rich soil brought large plantations and slavery. Michael Tuomey, professor of geology at the University of Alabama in the 1840s, had attempted to lead Alabama's economy away from slavery-based agriculture. In 1849, he produced the first survey of the state's mineral wealth. His map *Geological map of Alabama* showed exactly where the state's natural riches were located. The efforts of Tuomey and others were rejected, as were similar efforts in other southern states.

After the Civil War, Birmingham was established as an iron and steel making district. The city and adjacent communities were created because of the natural locations of raw materials, as shown on Tuomey's map, and the placement of railroads. The Elyton Land Company, which created and owned the new city, planned it with railroad lines as its "compass points." *Map of the City of Birmingham, Alabama and the Adjacent Property*, drawn by William P. Barker in the early 1870s, shows great detail of the city's planning around the "railroad reservation," but is very



Figure 10. John La Tourette's 1833 Map of the Creek territory in Alabama from the United States surveys: shewing [sic] each section & fractional section.

dark. Herman Schoel's 1888 *Map of the City of Birmingham and Suburbs* shows how much the city had grown in about fifteen years. All this development was recorded and publicized on maps. *Birmingham-Bessemer, Ala. Map showing tracks and facilities of various railroads within Birmingham-Bessemer terminal area / November 5, 1935* is a treasure trove for local historians. Although the image is too large to reproduce here, it can be seen on the library's catalog. The map names, and locates, virtually every company, mine, community, and rail connection in the industrial area of Jefferson County. Much of this information is now lost in suburbia. Similarly, early neighborhood plats and plans provide valuable information. Birmingham's civil rights history is also presented. A large zoning map, dated July 13, 1926, shows the city's established system of segregated schools. *Birmingham's Civil Rights Churches* locates all of



Figure 11. Michael Tuomey's Geological map of Alabama.

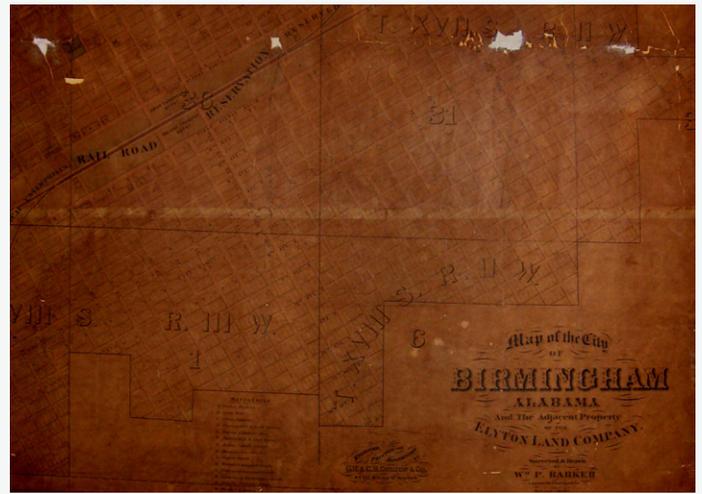


Figure 12. William P. Barker's Map of the City of Birmingham, Alabama and the Adjacent Property.

the churches involved in the efforts to end segregation in the early 1960s.

The Birmingham Public Library's project to make its treasures more accessible is a work in progress. A great deal has been learned about how, and how not, to do the various steps. Hopefully, this article will encourage other institutions to pursue partnerships to make their holdings, particularly regarding local history, more accessible.



Figure 13. Herman Schoel's 1888 Map of the City of Birmingham and Suburbs.