

# Seeing the Landscape: Nature and History in Historical Maps and Atlases

Claire Campbell<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of History, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, United States

E-mail: cec036@bucknell.edu

The great thing about “the digital turn” is how it has made innumerable archival sources available in the classroom. Whereas I used to pore over the *Rand McNally* road atlas on family trips, now my students can delve into historical maps in exquisite detail.

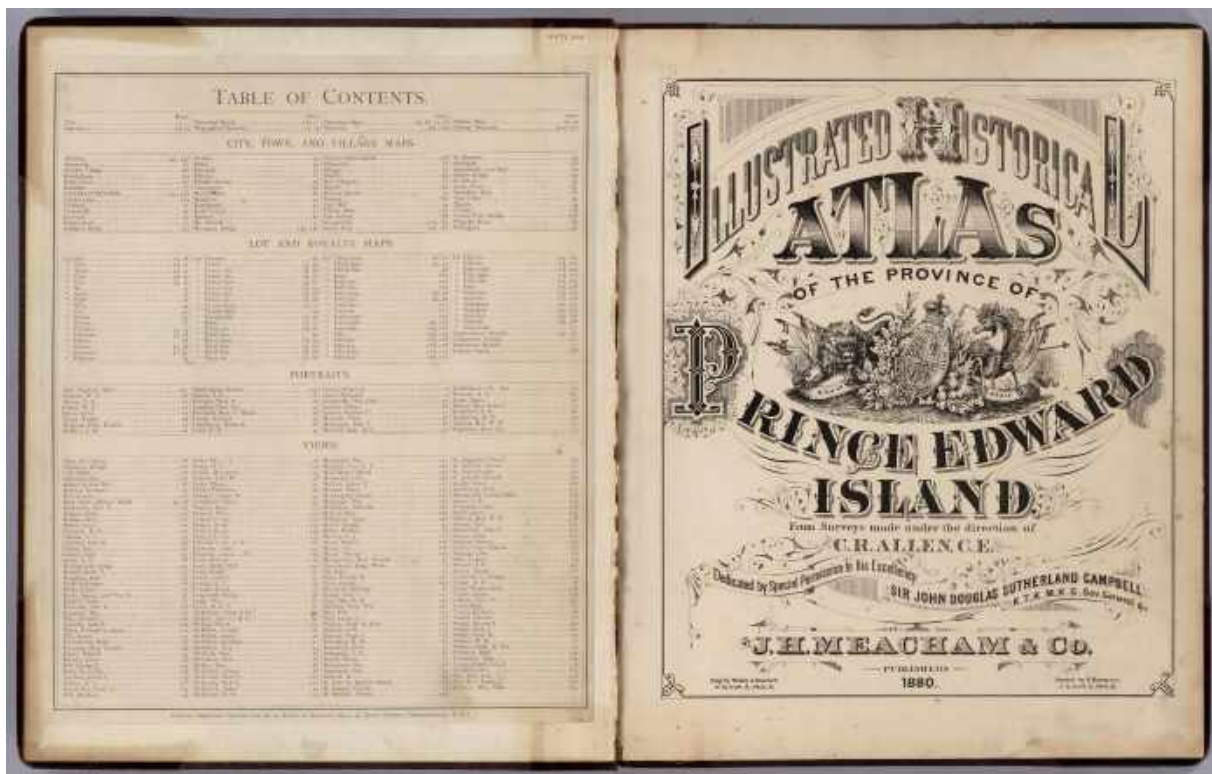


Figure 1. “Residences, P.E.I.; Victoria, Lot 29; Lennox Island.” *Illustrated Historical Atlas Of The Province Of Prince Edward Island* (J.H. Meacham & Co. 1880).

Maps help orient students to unfamiliar places, but in terms of environmental history, they show how people have understood and interacted with nature in the past. How has nature influenced the course of human history? And how has human thought, ambition, and action affected the natural world? These dynamics may be material: patterns of settlement, industry, or infrastructure. Or they may be imaginative: how science, art, and faith understood, categorized, and represented the non-human; how certain uses of nature reinforced relationships of power; how communities crafted their defining stories and symbols. In North America, nature has been used in both senses: as “natural resources” and as “natural heritage.”

This example comes from a class called “Mapping History: Nature, Place, and Power.” It’s a class that counts as History, Geography, and Environmental Studies. The artifact is a page from the *Illustrated Historical Atlas Of The Province Of Prince Edward Island*, published by J.H. Meacham & Company, a Philadelphia publishing house, in 1880. There’s a *lot* to work with here; indeed, I didn’t realize just how much until my students started asking questions. Here are some historical issues this map raises.

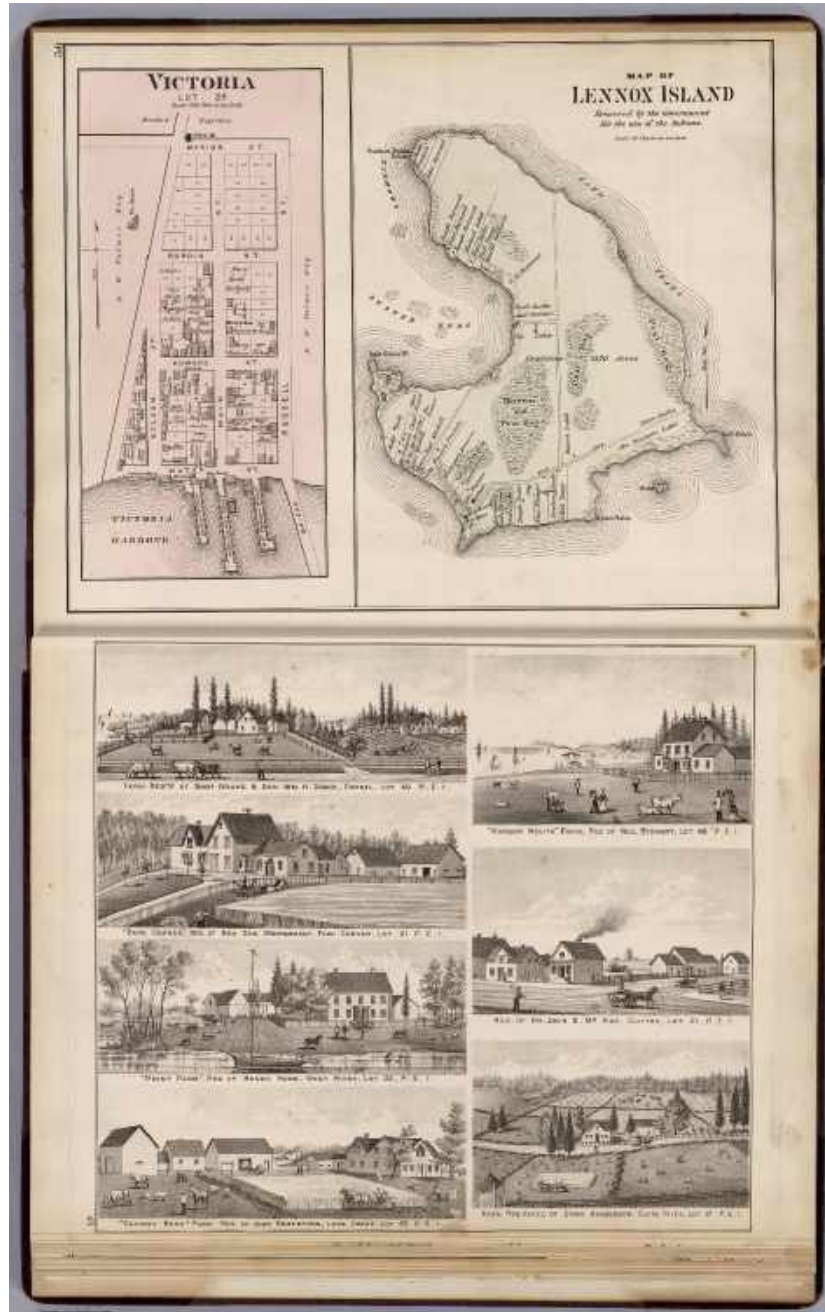


Figure 2. “Residences, P.E.I.; Victoria, Lot 29; Lennox Island.” *Illustrated Historical Atlas Of The Province Of Prince Edward Island* (J.H. Meacham & Co., 1880).

First, the commerce of cartography: maps as publications, and different *genres* of maps. County and local atlases proliferated in the late nineteenth century, thanks in part to the new technology of lithography, as a popular way of showcasing a community's growth and prosperity. They were frequently by subscription; you paid to have your property or family profiled as a model of success (as the examples here). So it raises questions about the economics of publishing, and who pays to create and consume geographical information.

Second, the demarcation or packaging of space as property, and the privileging of private property. The sketches of well-to-do farms – identified by their (male) owner – are the clearest example, but the detail of the village of Victoria also identifies lots by owner, like fire insurance maps of the same era. If you wanted to delve into the origins of this kind of land division, you could preface the Meacham Atlas with Samuel Holland's 1765 *A plan of the island of St. John*, which gridded the entire island into lots with place names that engraved late-eighteenth century British society onto a small Atlantic island.

Third, the striking contrast in the lands allocated to settlers and those “reserved” for the Mi'kmaq. This map says a great deal about the displacement of indigenous peoples onto marginal lands; here they were pushed, quite literally, off the main island to Lennox Island, most of which is marked as peat bog. At the same time, the map shows how Indian policy attempted to impose Euro-Canadian concepts of property onto reserve lands. The Catholic Church – another troubling marker of colonialism – enjoys the segment of shoreline most convenient to the main island.

Fourth, the concept of improvement, which held agricultural settlement as the centerpiece of national development from the late eighteenth century onward. According to this way of thinking, wild nature was considered useless, even “waste land,” until “improved” into ordered, productive, profitable space by the application of technology and labour. Each of the farms featured here is a model of what would have been considered progressive farming and social respectability. A contemporary parallel was the bird's eye map, the popular urban counterpart to the county atlas. These featured the most impressive and influential buildings – from churches to factories to the homes of the well-to-do – as evidence of the town's thriving economic and moral health.

Fifth, look closely at the farms featured in this atlas. Each one shows a different combination of *types* of agriculture: pasturage for sheep and cattle; grain fields; woodlots; coastline. There is significant diversity and local sufficiency here. The small-scale, mixed farm may be something we need to revive for sustainable agriculture. It's also a good reminder of the wealth of coastal habitat; note that the lots on Lennox Island front the shore, which would have allowed for seasonal harvesting of marine resources, and the “oyster beds” marked to the west.

Lastly, if this reminds you of the bucolic quality of Alec King's farm in *Road to Avonlea*, well, it should. The Hon. Donald Montgomery was L.M. Montgomery's grandfather, and the house at Park Corner was the inspiration for “Ingleside” in the *Anne of Green Gables* series. Now a provincial historic site, the house also represents the changing relationship between the Island and Canada in the later nineteenth century. Donald Montgomery represented the Island in the Legislative Assembly until Confederation in 1873, and twenty years thereafter in the federal Senate. Across the road, the farm of Lucy Maud's aunt and uncle (Annie and John Campbell) served as the model for “Silver Birch” in *Pat of Silver Bush*. Montgomery considered this as “one of the finest farm properties on P.E. Island. Two hundred acres of fertile soil, acres of fine woodland, shore rights, pond rights of mud and fishing, water on every field of the farm, a splendid orchard and a large beautiful house” (4 August 1918).

Literature, history, and environment all connect here.

## Bibliography

“Residences, P.E.I.; Victoria, Lot 29; Lennox Island.” *Illustrated Historical Atlas Of The Province Of Prince Edward Island*. J.H. Meacham & Co., 1880.

## Further Reading

Hornsby, Stephen. *Surveyors of Empire: Samuel Holland, J.F.W. Des Barres, and the Making of the Atlantic Neptune*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.

“Island Imagined,” Robertson Library, University of Prince Edward Island [www.islandimagined.ca](http://www.islandimagined.ca)  
Rumsey, David. Map Collection, [www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com).

*The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery, Vol. II: 1910-1921*. Edited by Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston.  
Oxford University Press, 1987.

*Time and a Place: An Environmental History of Prince Edward Island*. Edited by Edward MacDonald, Joshua  
MacFadyen, and Irené Novaczek. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016.

*The Greater Gulf: Essays on the Environmental History of the Gulf of St. Lawrence*. Edited by Claire Campbell,  
Edward MacDonald and Brian Payne. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019.