

The “Father of American Geography” Registers Early Copyright Claim, Sues Under New Federal Law

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On May 12, 1789, Jedidiah Morse petitioned Congress for the exclusive right to publish *The American Geography, or a View of the Present Situation of the United States of America*. He was eager to secure a copyright for his work because his first book, *Geography Made Easy*, had sold beyond his “most sanguine expectations.” Congress was then convened in New York City in its very first session following ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Members set aside Morse’s petition, along with those of a handful of other authors, choosing instead to pass the nation’s first copyright law in its second session. On May 31, 1790, President George Washington signed the law, which protected books, maps, and charts for 14 years with the privilege of renewal for another 14 years.



PHOTO BY DAVID RICE

The American Geography included fold-out maps.

A native of Woodstock, Connecticut, Morse graduated from Yale College in 1783. While pursuing graduate study in theology at Yale afterward, he taught at a girls school to support himself. When he discovered that his students lacked a good geography textbook, he quickly compiled *Geography Made Easy*, published in 1784. Morse wrote to his father in 1785 about its surprising success. Between 300 and 400 copies had sold within three weeks, he reported, and his publishers could not keep up with demand.

Pleased, Morse determined to prepare a geography for a broader U.S. audience. “[A]s the Geography of [the United States] has hitherto been very incomplete, as well as inaccurate, I am disposed to avail myself of every possible advantage in order to remove these inconveniences,” Morse wrote to his father. To inform his work, he drew on published maps, pamphlets, magazine articles, and other works, and he solicited information from citizens through letters and questionnaires. On a trip in 1786 from Connecticut to Georgia, he collected geographical data firsthand.

Morse published *The American Geography* in 1789, the same year he became minister of the First Congregational Church of Charlestown, Massachusetts. On July 10, 1790, Morse took advantage of the newly enacted federal copyright law and registered the book along with an updated edition of *Geography Made Easy*. A single entry in the Massachusetts district court ledger records both registrations. In 1793, Morse published *The American Universal Geography*, registering it in Massachusetts on June 10 of that year. He subsequently published numerous updated editions of these and other geographies.

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Pages from *Geography Made Easy* (left) and *The American Geography* (below).



Readers responded with enthusiasm to Morse's approach. "For the first time in western print history, Morse imposes a new world order by starting with the description of the United States and the Americas before delineating Europe, Africa, and Asia," Martin Brückner writes in "Lessons in Geography," published in the *American Quarterly* in 1999. "Politicians, educators, and parents selected with overwhelming regularity Jedidiah Morse's school geographies."

The popularity of Morse's geographies led to his being called the "father of American geography," and royalties from book sales made him wealthy. Between 1789 and 1794, he earned about \$15,000 from his books, writes Richard Moss in *The Life of Jedidiah Morse*. By 1794, his income as an author was about five times higher than his salary as a minister.

The value of Morse's copyrights was no doubt on his mind when he filed the first reported federal copyright case. Rev. William Winterbotham published a four-volume geography in 1795 that borrowed liberally from Morse's work. He did so while serving time in London's Newgate Prison for seditious statements he made in sermons. At the time, U.S. authors had no recourse against copyright violations occurring outside the United States. But when

Winterbotham's geography was reprinted in New York, Morse secured legal representation from Alexander Hamilton, the well-known statesman, and jurist James Kent.

"You will confer a favour upon me by permitting me to render you the little service which may be in my power on the present occasion [and] without compensation. Be assured it will give real pleasure [and] let that be my recompense," Hamilton wrote to Morse on January 4, 1796, in agreeing to take Morse's case.

In *Jedidiah Morse v. John Reid*, decided in April 1798, the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of New York ordered Reid, a New York City bookseller, to "desist and refrain from the further reprinting and publishing" of Winterbotham's geography. In addition, the court required Reid to pay Morse \$262.50.

Sadly, adverse circumstances at the end of Morse's life left him with little when he died in June 1826. His three sons, including the famous inventor Samuel F. B. Morse, received \$50 each. Having already paid for Samuel to study in England, Jedidiah left his other two sons, Richard and Sidney, the copyrights to his books. His wife, Elizabeth, received the remainder of the estate aside from small bequests to other family members. ©

