Mapping Boosterism: Cartographic Conceptions of Chicago (1844-1874)

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the “geographic orientation” that underpinned the promotion and speculation—in short: the boosterism of Chicago during the mid-nineteenth century. As the city transitioned from a primarily mercantile economy to a burgeoning manufacturing and industrial center, Chicago boosterism underwent reorientation in the way the city was described and promoted geographically. Through an analysis of nine maps of Chicago produced between 1844 and 1874 I attempt to trace the way the city was represented cartographically as this geographic reorientation took place. My claim is that cartography itself changed during this period to reflect the change in geographical conception, and conversely, this emergent cartography also reshaped and redefined boosters’ geographic conception. As Chicago industrialized, it began to be conceptualized less in reference to external markets and resources, and more as an active agent in its own growth. I describe this transition both in terms of a change from a centripetal conception of Chicago’s growth to a centrifugal one; and in terms of an extrinsic to an intrinsic conception of the city’s economy.