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Political Consequences of Spatial Organization

Contrasting Patterns in Two Nineteenth-Century Small Cities

The unique feature of geographic information systems (GIS) and other forms of historical data visualization is the capacity to hold and display large amounts of data associated with spatial reference points. This software can display all data for a given point, a single variable for all points, or, most important, any combination of variables across all reference points. In doing so, these systems bring to the screen instantly and cheaply a display of information once visible only in paper form, drawn slowly and expensively, first by cartographers and then by vector plotters. This project deploys GIS to help us understand the intersection of social and political life in nineteenth-century Alexandria, Virginia, and Newport, Kentucky—medium-sized cities with populations under 20,000. Commercial Alexandria, with a race-based labor system, and industrial Newport, with an immigrant labor system, present an analytically useful mix of commonalities and differences.

This article reports on the use of geographic information systems (GIS) in the exploration of three facets of urban life in two contrasting small cities in nineteenth-century America: the organization of space, the nature of communities and contexts that developed in these two cities, and the effects of these aspects of spatial patterning on the political lives of their citizens. Each facet is nested within the other—working downward from citywide differ-

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