



CHOOSING A DIGITAL MAPPING PLATFORM FOR YOUR PROJECT

A workshop in the “Digital Humanist’s Help Desk” series

October 24, 2025

Cynthia Heider, Public Digital Scholarship Librarian

Follow along with links at: <https://bit.ly/4ofzqkR>

OVERVIEW

With many options to choose from, picking the right tool for mapping your research in the humanities can be daunting. This session will guide participants through the pros and cons of various free and paid mapping tools and platforms like Google MyMaps, ZeeMaps, Felt, MapBox Studio, Leaflet, and ArcGIS Online. Special attention will be paid to evaluating your own source material, needs, and priorities to find the best tool for you and your project.

Learning goals:

- *Identify what kind of humanities data you have (or want) to create a digital project that incorporates mapping.*
- *Evaluate your resources and constraints relevant to choosing a mapping tool.*
- *Apply this knowledge to planning to create your own projects using the most appropriate tool(s) for your needs.*

WHO AM I?

Cynthia Heider



Public Digital Scholarship Librarian

Email: heider@upenn.edu

Book a consultation:

www.library.upenn.edu/staff/cynthia-heider

What can I help with?

- Digital projects for public audiences
- Digital projects involving community partners
- Choosing the right tool or platform for your digital project
- Working with data in the humanities
- Connecting with digital project resources at and beyond UPenn

Research Data and Digital Scholarship (RDDS)

- Support across research data & digital scholarship lifecycles
- Encourage thoughtful and informed use of emerging technologies in our fields of expertise
- Aid in the creation & dissemination of traditional + cutting-edge scholarly outputs
- Provide custom workshops, in-class visits, and consultations (one-on-one or team-based).

Website: www.library.upenn.edu/RDDS

Email: LibraryRDDS@pobox.upenn.edu

Workshop calendar: bit.ly/RDDS-events

PRE- PLANNING

*What materials are you working with? What are your
ideas for your project?*

HUMANITIES RESEARCH DATA

What does data look like in the humanities?

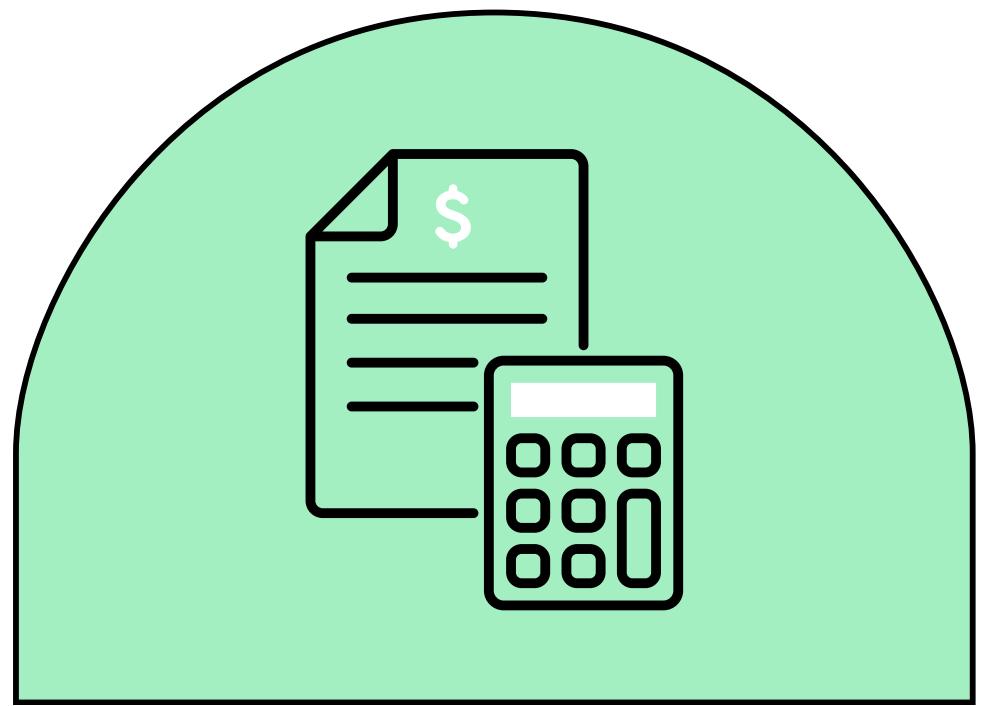
correspondence	directory
estate inventory	logbook
shipping manifest	blueprints
diary or journal	built structure
financial ledger	price list
photograph	advertisement
drawing or other work of visual art	legislation
burial, birth, or wedding record	government proceedings
newspaper	transcript
property record or deed	interview
tax list	autobiography
notebook	schematic or plan
memorandum	diagram or chart
telegram	land survey or map
speech	polling results
material culture item	census
genealogy	audio or video recording
recipe or menu	publication
film, novel, or other cultural artifact	

... and more!

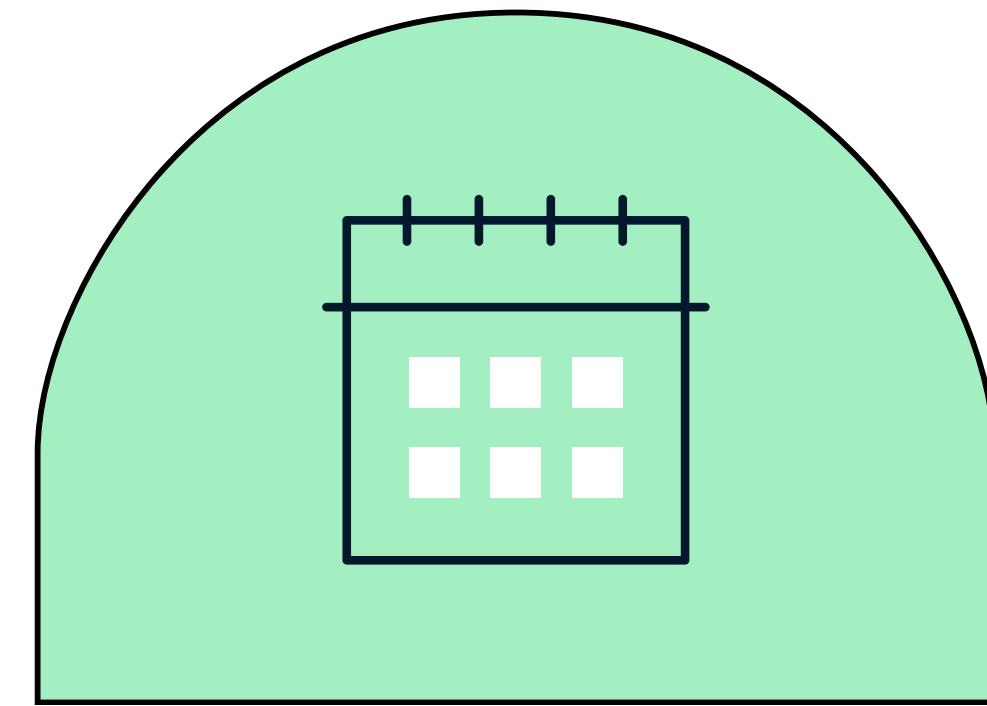
RESOURCE MAPPING

What resources and limitations do you need to keep in mind as you choose a tool?

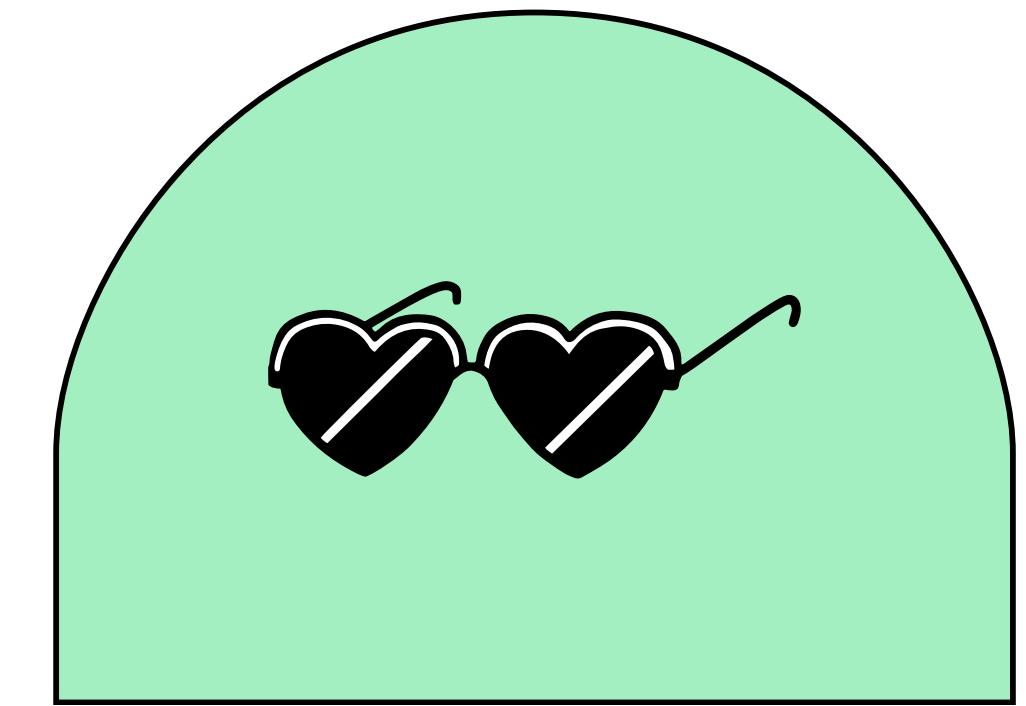
CHOOSE TWO



Inexpensive



Quick



Fancy

EXERCISE: RESOURCE MAPPING

I have more of...

I have less of...

Funding

Time

People/Labor

Training or comfort using new tech tools

Access to tools or data

Readiness of source material

NEEDS & PRIORITIES

What are your top 3 priorities?

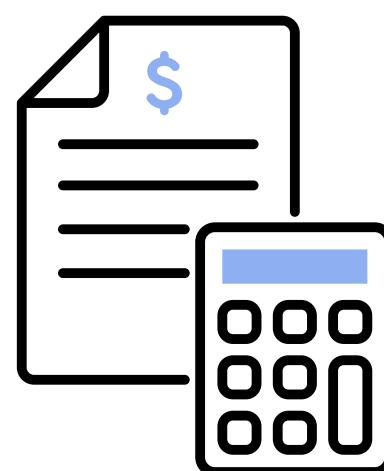
ROUND ROBIN

*What discipline are you coming from? What is
your map idea?*

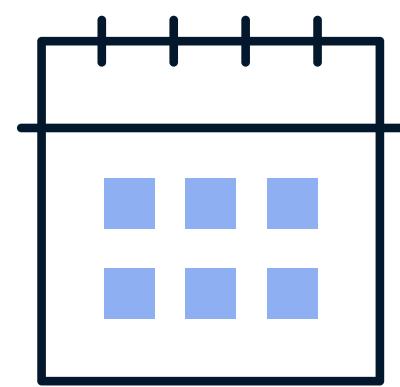
PLATFORM ROUNDUP

GOOGLE MYMAPS

Example: Boston's Black Heritage Trail



Inexpensive



Quick

google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1hGDxOjseZI6P2RGF08GC7zLyh8JraPFR&ll=42.3591296316346%2C-71.0671342&z=17

Boston's Black Heritage Tr... ...

This map was created by a user. Learn how to create your own.

Explore Boston's Black Heritage Trail (National Parks Service).
490 views
Published on November 2, 2022

SHARE

Sites (Blue=Public, Yellow=Private)

- African Meeting House
- Abiel Smith School
- Smith Court Residences
- 3 Smith Ct
- ... 10 more

Walking Path

Black Heritage Trail

Made with Google My Maps

Map data ©2024 Google Terms 200 ft

Keyboard shortcuts

GOOGLE MYMAPS

Pros

- Very easy to use
- Easily import and export data in multiple formats

Cons

- Need to sign in with a Google account - which means Google owns your data
- Not particularly flashy or aesthetic
- Limitations on what you can display

*Use this tool if
you...*

- Have limited time or budget
- Are mapping for understanding rather than presentation

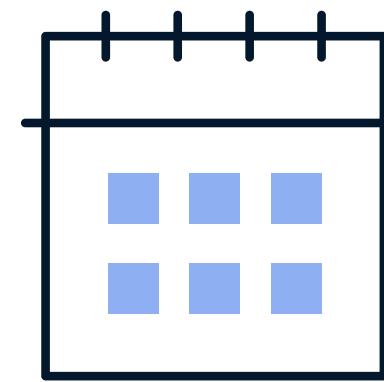
ZEEMAPS

Example: World Map of Recipes

Inexpensive



Quick



ZEEMAPS

Pros

- Crowdsourcing capability
- Easy data import
- Data privacy measures (HIPAA compliant)

Cons

- Free up to a point
- Export not possible
- Limited functionality

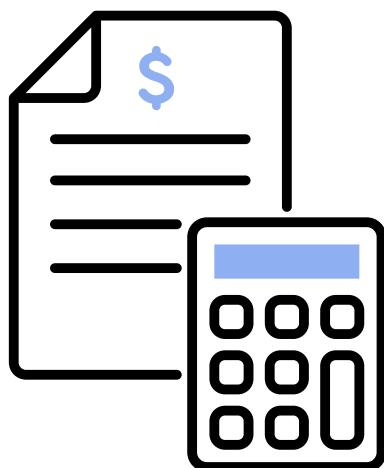
*Use this tool if
you...*

- Have limited time or budget and want an alternative to Google products
- Need data privacy
- Would like to crowdsource

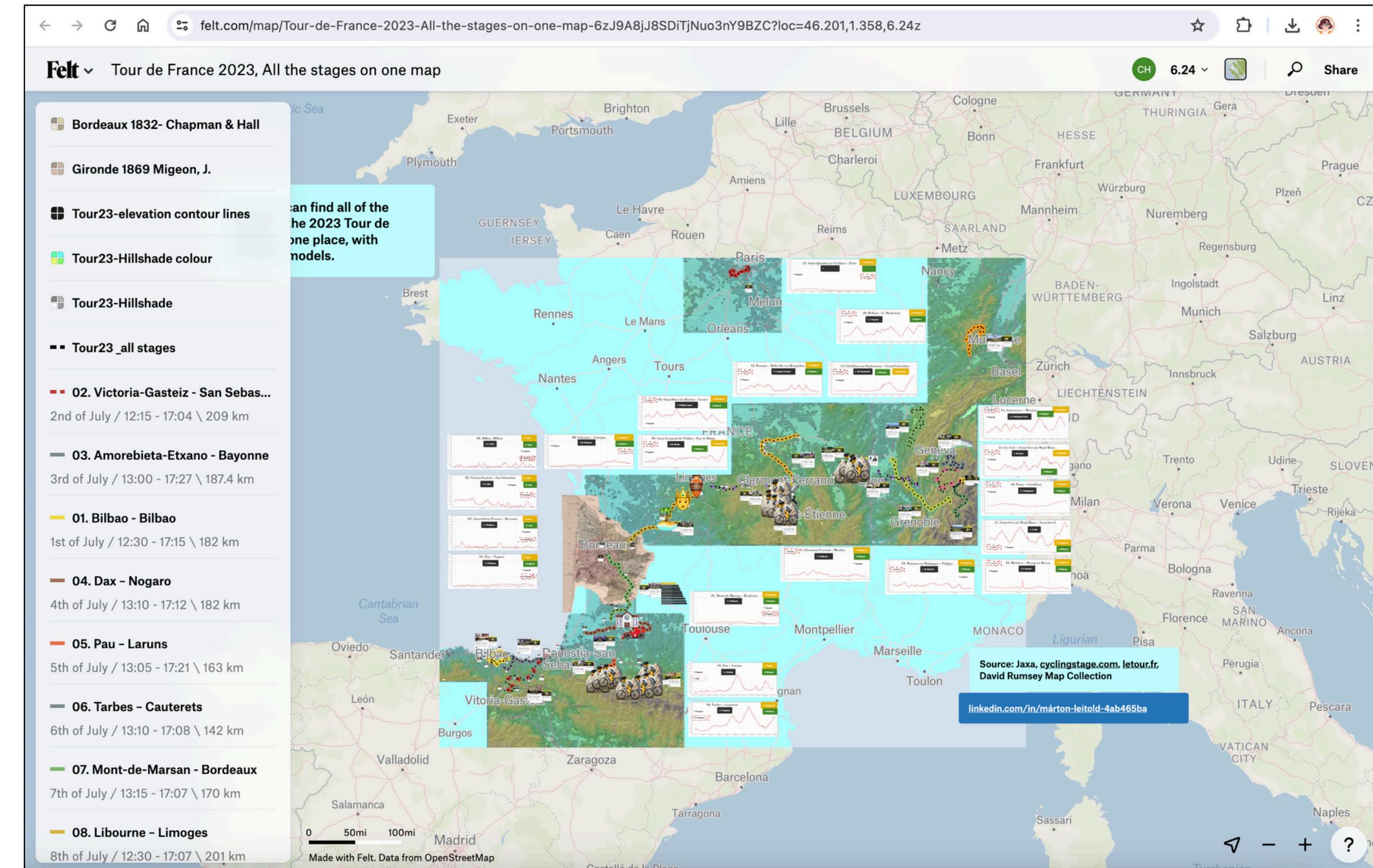
FELT

Example: Tour de France 2023

*Inexpensive
(for some)*



Fancy



FELT

Pros

- Aesthetic and interactive
- Allows for multiple data sources and types
- Annotatable maps (add pins, drawings, polygons, text, photos, docs, and video)

Cons

- Very limited free tier; most features are paid (if you are an instructor, you can get verified for a free higher tier account)
- Takes a little practice to get the hang of it

*Use this tool if
you...*

- Are an educator and can get premium features for free
- Have some time and want to learn more about GIS

MAPBOX STUDIO

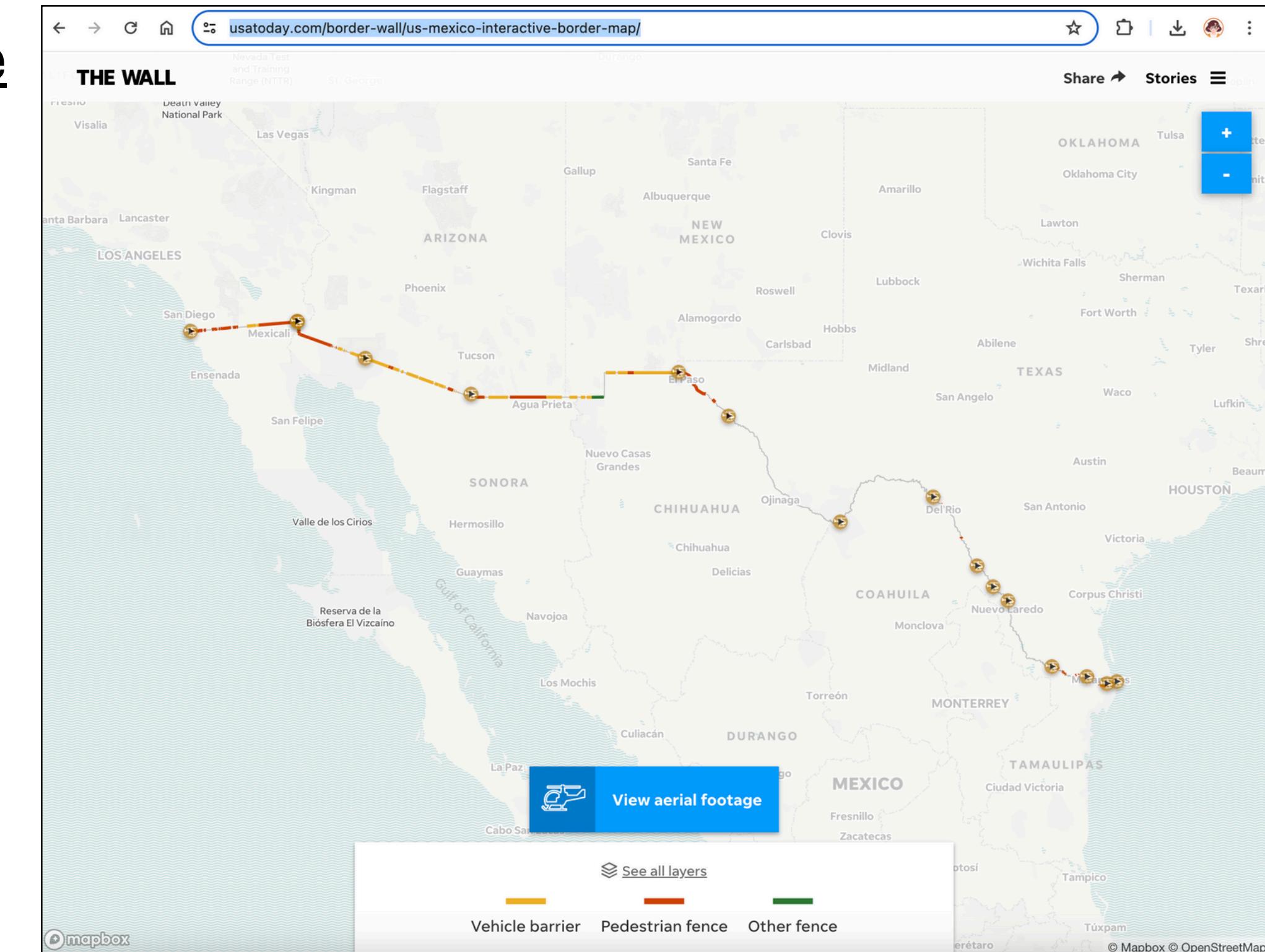
Example: USA Today “The Wall” interactive map



Inexpensive



Fancy



MAPBOX STUDIO

Pros

- Easily import and export data in multiple formats
- Lots of customization options - many use a simple interface
- Great tutorials and product support for learning the platform

Cons

- Free up to a point
- Combining multiple data sources and types can be challenging and may require data cleanup/normalization beforehand
- Learning curve

*Use this tool if
you...*

- Need to use multiple formats of data
- Have some time to learn the ins and outs of the platform

LEAFLET

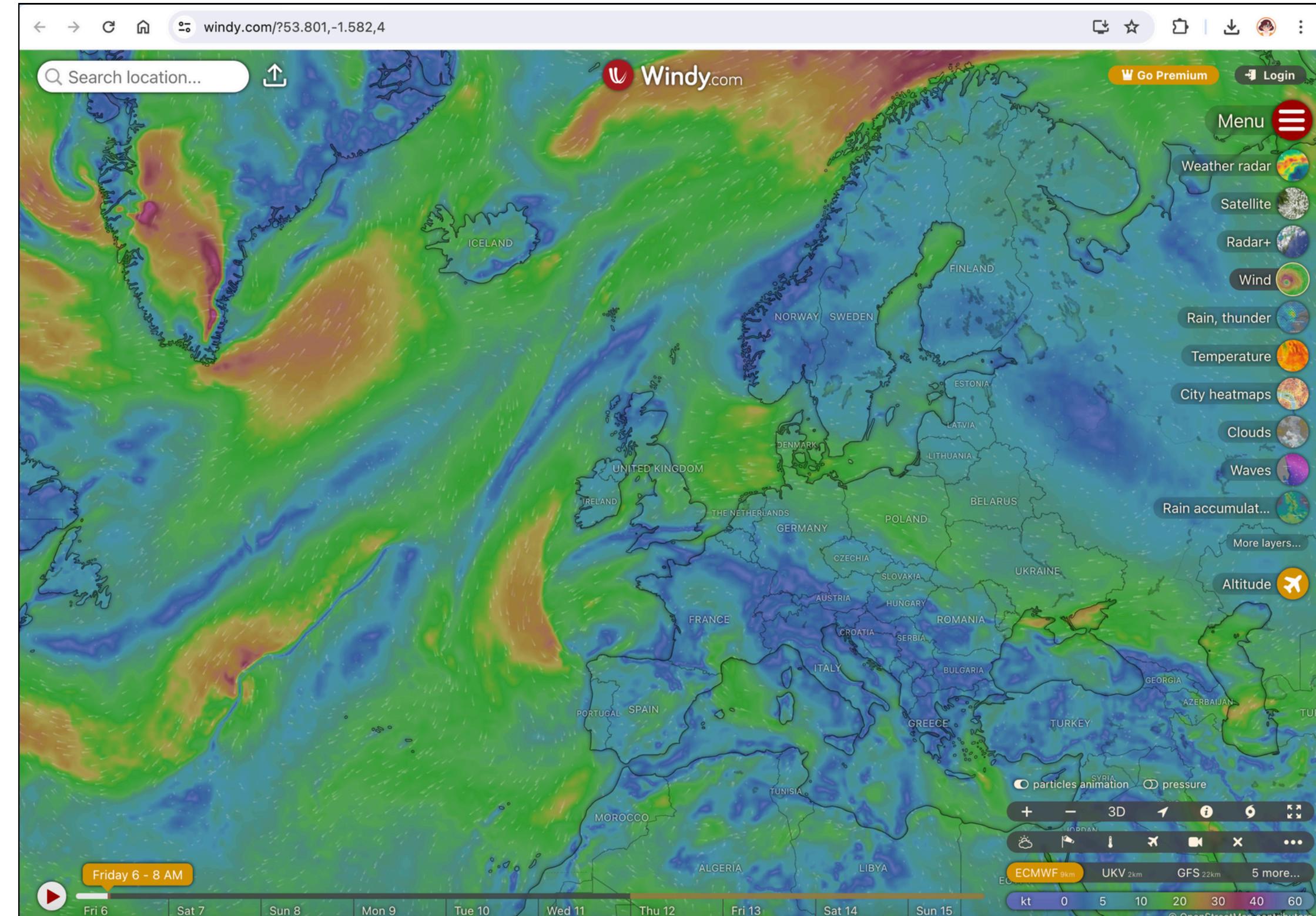
Example: “Windy”



Inexpensive



Fancy



LEAFLET

Pros

- Free and open source
- Very customizable

Cons

- Requires some knowledge of HTML, CSS, and JS
- Need your own web server to host maps, site, and data

*Use this tool if
you...*

- Have some experience building websites or the budget to hire someone who does
- Want complete control over the data and design of your map

ARCGIS ONLINE

Example: Morningside Heights Historic District Explorer



*Inexpensive
(for some)*



Fancy

nyclpc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer3d/index.html?id=abd5f6ae90f049bd9359681c9ac1402d

Morningside Heights Historic District Explorer

This 3D web map allows users to learn more about the Morningside Heights Historic District, which the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated on February 21, 2017.

Click on any building in the district to activate a popup window with a **building history**, a **designation photo** and a historic **New York City tax photo**. Within the 3D environment users can pan, zoom, and rotate around the Morningside Heights neighborhood and focus on specific areas of interest within the historic district. The boundary of the historic district is represented by a purple line. For map instructions and an overall history of the district users can click on the information icon on the bottom left corner of the screen.

Period of Construction

Older	Pre-1900	1900 - 1909	1910 - 1919	1920 - 1929	Post-1929	Newer

The buildings within the historic district have been assigned a color according to the period of their construction. The color range below illustrates the color assigned to each period ranging from the late nineteenth century to the twentieth century.

OK

NYC OpenData, State of New Jersey, Esri, HERE, Garmin, GeoTechnologies, Inc., USGS, EPA | Source: Airbus, USGS, NGA, NASA, CGIAR, NLS, OS, NMA, Geodatasyrelsen, GSA, GSI and the GIS User Community

Powered by Esri

ARCGIS ONLINE

Pros

- Aesthetic
- Lots of support for learning and creating (online and through the Penn Libraries)
- Robust capabilities

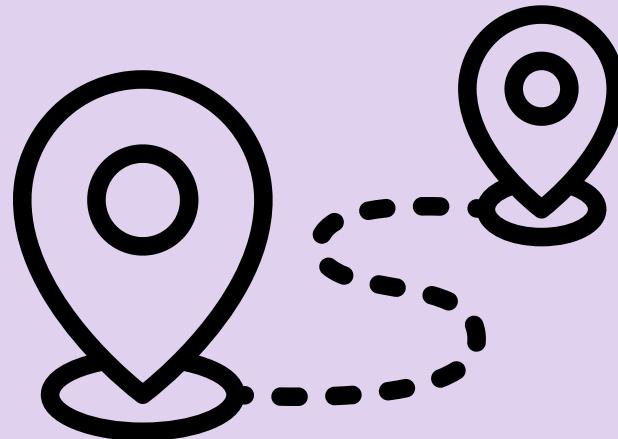
Cons

- Requires an expensive subscription, like the one offered by Penn
- Learning curve can be steep depending on complexity of features you want to use

*Use this tool if
you...*

- You want something that looks really good
- You have a lot of time or a budget
- You want to jump into the deep end of GIS and mapping

MORE RESOURCES



Penn resources

[GIS & Mapping Resources Research Guide](#)

[Schedule a consultation](#)

Email support or create an Esri/ArcGIS account:

LibraryGIS@pobox.upenn.edu

[Penn GIS Day event \(November 19\)](#)

General resources

[“Beyond Esri” resource guide](#)

[Spatial Humanities Workshop by Lincoln Mullen](#)

[Other GIS Day 2025 events and resources](#)

QUESTIONS
 &
COMMENTS
