

The short life of John H. Eddy, an American "geographer"

by Walter W. Ristow

Dr Ristow was Chief of the Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, until his retirement in 1978. Although now nearing his 86th birthday he is still an active writer on American maps and their makers

IN MY BOOK, *American Maps and Mapmakers*,¹ I sought to identify general and local maps of the United States published during the nineteenth century, and to provide some biographical data about their compilers. The latter often proved to be a difficult task, particularly for obscure cartographers whose output was limited to a few maps. One such mapmaker was John H. Eddy (1784-1817).

On page 103 in the above-cited volume, I noted that "John H. Eddy, who listed himself as 'Geographer' on his maps, published ones of New York State in 1811 and 1818. Both maps were engraved by Tanner Vallance, Kearny & Company of Philadelphia, and printed by Samuel Maverick in New York City. Apart from the information available on the maps, little biographical record has been found...for Eddy."

In February 1992 I received a letter from David M. Rumsey of San Francisco with reference to this lack of bibliographical data. He

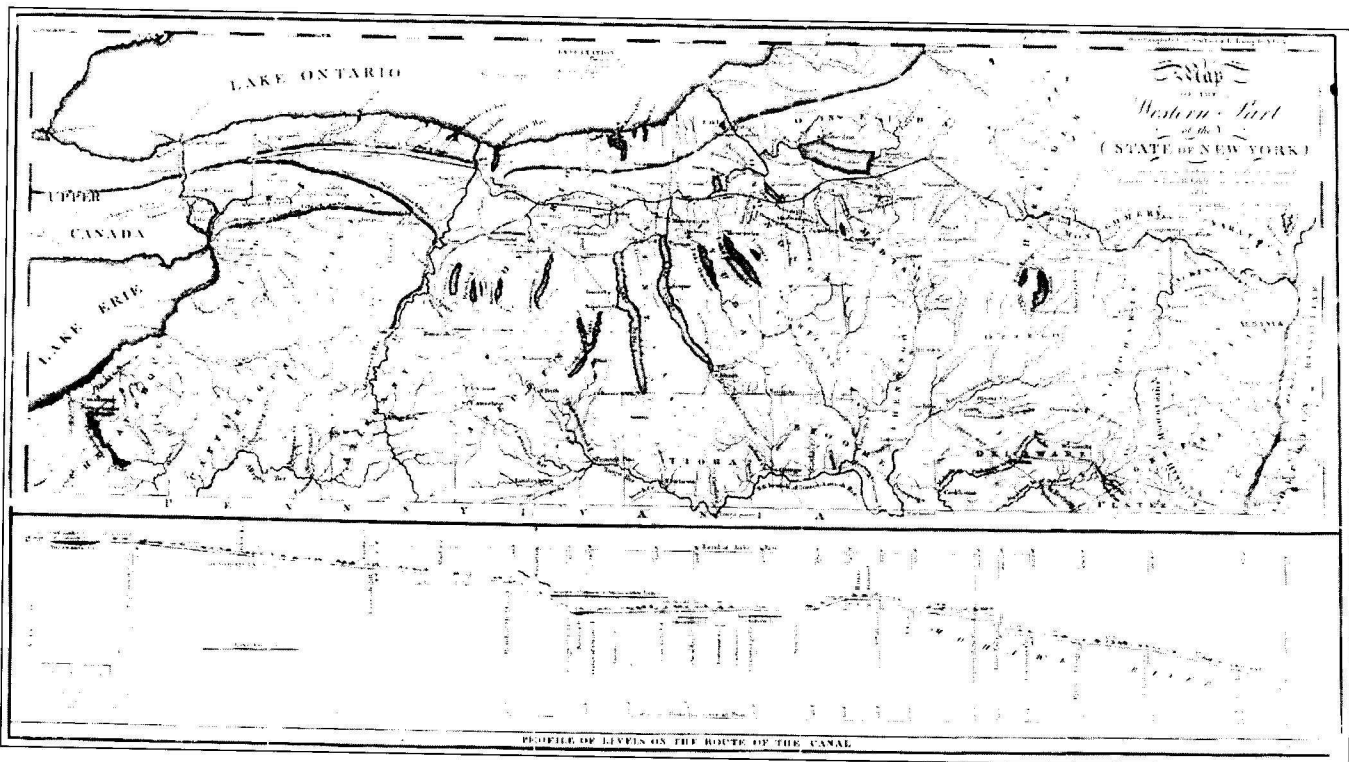
enclosed reproductions of several pages from the May 1818 issue of *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review* which was published in New York City. That issue of the journal carried a "Biographical Sketch of the late Geographer John H. Eddy," signed only with the letter W.

The biographical sketch indicates that Eddy was born in New York City in 1784, the eldest son of Thomas Eddy. At an early age he engaged in general studies, which were interrupted in his thirteenth year by a serious and protracted attack of scarlet fever. This debilitating disease left him with a total hearing loss. Despite this Eddy pursued his studies independently mastering Latin, French, algebra, and mathematics. He also devoted a considerable amount of time to general reading.

However, the intensive studies adversely affected his health and he was forced, for a time, to turn to outdoor activities like botany and mineralogy. He also read widely in prose and poetry and even produced a small manuscript volume of original poems.

All the above scholarly endeavours were, however, secondary to his favourite study of geography. To advance his knowledge in this field Eddy carried on an extensive correspondence with distinguished scholars in England and France, as well as within the United States.

This 1811 "Map of the Western Part of the State of New York" was John Eddy's first cartographic publication. It was engraved and printed by Peter Maverick of New York City. (By courtesy of the Library of Congress)





Shortly before his death in December 1817, Eddy completed compilation of a large map of New York State. This was published posthumously in 1818 by James Eastburn and Company of New York City. The title cartouche and the northern part of the map are shown in this detail. (By courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Before he reached the age of twenty-six the young geographer had embarked on a cartographic career. What may be his earliest compilation is a "Map of the Western Part of the State of New-York Showing the route of a proposed Canal from Lake Erie to Hudson's River," which was requested by the Canal Commissioners and published in 1811. Beneath the 7 1/2 x 10 1/2 inch (19 x 26 cms) map there is a "Profile of levels of the Route of the Canal." The engraver and printer was Peter Maverick of New York City. A copy of this map is in the collections of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

Three years later, in 1814, Eddy published a circular map of the region thirty miles around New York City. At the request of Governor De Witt Clinton, who also served as President of the Board of Canal Commissioners, Eddy compiled a map showing communications between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean, by means of Lake Erie and Hudson River. This map embraced the Northwest Territory, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, the western part of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and western New York State. About the same time he compiled a map of the Niagara River with a profile of the country from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. None of the above three

maps is in the collections of the Library of Congress.

In the Geography and Map Division's collections is a copy of Eddy's large map of New York State. Eddy completed work on this map shortly before his death in December 1817. It was published posthumously in 1818 by James Eastburn and Company of New York City. The *Monthly Review* biographical sketch states that the New York map "may be pronounced his best executed work: as to style, accuracy, and scientific arrangement, [and] it may be safely said to exceed all other maps hitherto published in America. It cost him nearly four years of unremitted labour: his materials were original, he collected them with uncommon care, and incurred great expense in obtaining distinct surveys of every county in the state."

New York State's longtime Surveyor-General Simeon de Witt, in a communication to the State Legislature acclaiming David H. Burr's forthcoming 1829 map of the state, compared the latter with Eddy's map. He noted that Burr's "general map of the state [is] to be 50 by 60 inches, embracing besides the state drawn according to the provisions of the act, the district of the country comprehended by Eddy's map of the state of New York, and the adjacent parts, to be filled in the same manner as directed for the map of the state."

Prior to his death, Eddy had also been invited by Governor Dickenson, and other state leaders, to compile a map of New Jersey. To assist Eddy in this effort, the New Jersey Legislature passed a "resolution directing that he be supplied from the public offices of the state with such copies of surveys or records as he might suppose useful for his purpose." Regrettably, the New Jersey map was never completed.

The *Review* biography also reported that "the premature death of this useful man has also deprived the country of an American atlas, which he had been solicited to undertake by a number of enterprising individuals."

During his short life, Eddy authored a number of essays on botany, geography, and internal improvements in New York State in addition to his cartographical contributions. Although the cause of Eddy's early death is not given in the sketch, in view of his earlier illness, which induced him to spend more time outdoors, we may assume that he suffered from tuberculosis.

The *American Monthly Magazine* sketch concludes with this testimonial: "it is unfortunately too frequently our lot to lament the seemingly untimely departure of aspiring genius and worth: but it may confidently be said, seldom could our regret and lamentation be more feelingly bestowed than on the subject of this brief memorial. Time and talents have rarely been more constantly or more undeviatingly directed to objects of substantial importance, and it is painful to reflect that his fatal illness was prematurely induced in consequence of his heart and his moral excellence command our regard: for the services he has rendered let the debt of gratitude be paid to his memory."



Reference:

1 Walter W. Ristow, *American maps and mapmakers* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985).

This detail of the 1818 map by Eddy shows New York City and vicinity, the southeastern part of New York State, as well as major segments of the states of New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. (By courtesy of the Library of Congress)

