



MAPPING IN MICHIGAN  
& THE GREAT LAKES REGION

*Edited by David I. Macleod*

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# Louis Charles Karpinski and the Cartography of the Great Lakes

Mary Sponberg Pedley

**F**OR GREAT LAKES MAP ENTHUSIASTS AND MICHIGAN HISTORIANS, THE NAME “KARPINSKI” evokes two related phrases: “Karpinski number” and “not in Karpinski.” These phrases refer, of course, to the 1931 *Bibliography of the Printed Maps of Michigan*, by Louis Karpinski, with its accompanying *Historical Atlas of the Great Lakes and Michigan*. But these are not the only works that deserve the appellation “Karpinski.” Even more famous is his *Bibliography of Mathematical Works Printed in America through 1850*, which has served collectors of American imprints so well. The work *Early Military Books in the University of Michigan Libraries*, written with Thomas Spaulding, may also claim “Karpinski” status.<sup>1</sup>

These titles represent only a small portion of Karpinski’s written opus. His work in the form of monographs and articles concerning the history of mathematics and the history of science fills a foot of shelf space. The most recent bibliography of Karpinski articles, reviews, and speeches in the history of cartography numbered 166 items.<sup>2</sup>

Besides bibliographies and monographs, the label “Karpinski” also refers to collections. For the cartographically inclined, the “Karpinski collection” signifies the more than seven hundred photostats of manuscript maps in European collections relating to American history.

But this is not the only “Karpinski collection.” Yale University houses the Karpinski–von Wieser collection of maps and atlases; another Karpinski map collection resides at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida; and yet another finds its home in the library of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America in New York City.

Nor are “Karpinski collections” just maps. There is a Karpinski collection of Lutheriana and early Protestant books in the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School.<sup>3</sup> And Karpinski sold a collection of

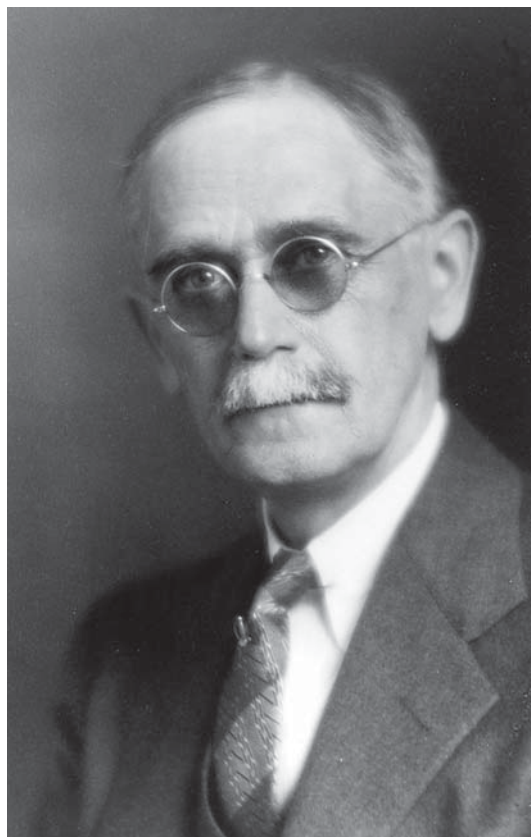
children's literature to the Detroit Public Library.<sup>4</sup> The one hundred slides concerning the history of mathematics that Karpinski produced from the illustrations in his *Bibliography of Mathematical Works* and sold in sets could also be called a “Karpinski collection.”

In addition to the books he wrote and the maps he collected, Karpinski also sold books, maps, and atlases to many libraries throughout North America, from Yale in the East to The Newberry Library in the Midwest. He also gave away books: to college libraries, like that of St. Olaf in Minnesota; to individuals, such as prisoner number 54578 in Jackson Prison; and to worthy causes, such as the “Committee for the Rehabilitation of Polish Science and Culture” after World War II.<sup>5</sup>

Louis Charles Karpinski (1878–1956) was a professor of mathematics on the faculty of the University of Michigan from 1904 to 1948 (fig. 1). His scholarly expertise was twofold. First, he specialized in mathematical education and wrote about the quality of teaching, curriculum, and textbooks in America's schools. Second, he was a historian of mathematics. His research on early mathematical texts led to several jointly authored monographs on the history of numbers, on the numerical notation for zero, and on the manuscripts of early works of algebra. He was a collector of manuscripts, maps, and books. He was a campus gadfly who did not hesitate to write directly and often to the board of regents of the university, nudging them to raise faculty salaries, encouraging faculty representation on the board, and deploring the decline of academic standards. Karpinski also raised intellectual and ethical questions on the national level. He was one of the first people in academe to warn of the mushrooming connection between money and science, as the link between private business interests and “scientific experts” grew ever stronger. And he was a dealer who plied his wares of books and maps to numerous libraries during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The focus for this chapter is on Karpinski's *Bibliography of the Printed Maps of Michigan* and his contributions to the history of cartography of the state. But widening the lens to include Karpinski's other interests and aspects of his character provides a context for assessing and appreciating his work on Michigan maps.

Karpinski was born on August 5, 1878, in Rochester, New York. His father, Henry Karpinski, had emigrated from Warsaw, Poland, and his mother, Mary Louise Engesser, from Gebweiler in the Alsace. Henry Karpinski worked for the very young Eastman Company (founded in 1884) in Rochester before moving his family to Oswego, New York, to start his own cleaning and dyeing business. Louis's later letters to his parents from Europe, written in English, French, and German (though, surprisingly, not Polish—a lack he himself regretted), reflect this immigrant background. He graduated from the English and German curriculum of Oswego High School, where he exhibited his mental gifts as a chess player, challenging older players in high-level matches sponsored by the New York State Chess Association and becoming state champion in 1896.<sup>6</sup> After receiving a teacher's diploma from Oswego State Normal School in 1897, Karpinski taught for two years—in Southold, Long Island, and then at Berea College in Kentucky. This Appalachian experience of training teachers to serve in poor mountain communities taught Karpinski about the large demands made on public school teachers and convinced him of the need for a practical approach to teaching mathematics in order to educate a numerate population. These ideas would be incorporated in his later writing.

In 1899, Karpinski entered Cornell University, where he earned a B.A. in mathematics in 1901. He received high recommendations from his professors at Cornell, one of whom described him as an “excellent student, clear in thought, thorough in his work, good looking with fine manners, making a favorable impression,” adding that “he is human and takes a living active interest in the affairs of the day.”<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1.** Louis Charles Karpinski (1878–1956), professor of mathematics at the University of Michigan, 1904–1948. Faculty Portraits Collection, Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Yet when Karpinski sought posts teaching math at universities west of the Appalachians, he was disappointed to learn that a Ph.D. was required. Since few institutions in America offered Ph.D. programs in mathematics in the early twentieth century, Karpinski went to Europe to complete his training.

In September 1901, he entered the University of Strasbourg in his mother's native Alsace, which was then part of Germany. His only financial support came from his parents and his salary from teaching young men at the American College in Strasbourg, a prep school for American boys from wealthy families.<sup>8</sup> Karpinski wrote his thesis on number theory with Professor Hans Weber and received his Ph.D. in 1903. During his two years in Strasbourg, he visited paternal relatives in Poland and traveled to Italy, Austria, and Germany, whetting an appetite for European travel that would only increase in his later years. Returning to the United States in 1903, Karpinski married his sweetheart from Cornell, Grace Woods, with whom he would have six children. He taught at his alma mater, Oswego State Normal School, for a year and in 1904 arrived at the University of Michigan's Department of Mathematics, where he remained until his retirement in 1948.

At Michigan, he deepened his commitment to the teaching of mathematics in public schools. From 1905 to 1907, he worked with schoolteachers in the summer schools of the Chautauqua Institution in New York. In 1909 and 1910, he was invited to participate in the summer school for teachers at Columbia University. There he met and collaborated with the founder of Columbia's mathematics education program, David Eugene Smith, who fueled Karpinski's interest in the history of mathematics through his own writings and collections. Together, he and Karpinski wrote *The Hindu-Arabic Numerals*, which explored the transmission of Hindu numerals to the Arabs.<sup>9</sup> Smith collected rare mathematical works and introduced Karpinski to his fellow collector and enthusiast, George A. Plimpton, the founder of Ginn and Company.<sup>10</sup> Back in Ann Arbor, Professor Alexander Ziwet, who taught mathematics in the engineering college, encouraged Karpinski's historical enthusiasms and was a model of the collecting spirit. Eventually, Ziwet's collection of early mathematical works became part of the collections of the University of Michigan.<sup>11</sup>

Karpinski's scholarly work in the history of mathematics focused on the transmission of ideas, especially from the East to the West and particularly on primary manuscript sources, such as the translation of algebraic texts from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> Whether exploring the origins of "algorithm" and "algebra" or unraveling the history of numbers and the use of the zero, Karpinski identified and reiterated in numerous publications the importance of Arabic and Hindu contributions to math and science. Although this debt to the East was not new to mathematical audiences, Karpinski brought it to the attention of a more general audience, particularly teachers. His scholarly prestige was rewarded in 1937, when President Franklin Roosevelt appointed him as one of three United States representatives to the celebration in Paris of the René Descartes tercentenary.

Karpinski wrote widely for both learned audiences and the popular press. One finds him discoursing on "The 'Quadripartitum Numerorum' of John of Meurs" in *Bibliotheca Mathematica* or on "The Decimal Point" in *Science* or on "Notes on the Word 'Algebra'" in *Modern Language Notes*.<sup>13</sup> He contributed more than one hundred articles to Henry Ford's weekly, *The Dearborn Independent*, ranging from the historical ("How the Great Lakes Were Placed on the Map") to the topical ("France and America—an Industrial Contrast").<sup>14</sup> Taking advantage of the University of Michigan's recently acquired papyrus collection, Karpinski published articles on the mathematical papyri that introduced algebraic equations into Greece.<sup>15</sup> He contributed to mathematics teaching with his textbook *Unified Mathematics*.<sup>16</sup> He also

wrote many short articles and pamphlets dealing with the practical applications of mathematics, such as “Arithmetic for the Lumberman” and “Arithmetic for the Farm.”<sup>17</sup> Such articles not only provided pedagogical examples and instructions for the teacher but also lambasted contemporary textbooks for offering no useful help in employing arithmetic for everyday purposes.<sup>18</sup>

Karpinski had a finely tuned sense of the importance of public education and the accessibility of knowledge; he viewed college professors as stewards of the public trust. He sharply criticized those who abused their university status or quasi-intellectual qualifications. He blasted the “textbook racket” run by “educational quacks” whose students, when they arrived at positions of power and influence in school systems, ensured that the textbooks written by their former professors were adopted by their schools. “At one teachers’ college enjoying an international reputation,” he railed, “there was [sic] at one time no less [sic] than 12 faculty members writing textbooks on arithmetic. . . . Yet I would testify, under oath if necessary, that at least 10 of these men are incompetent.” Though such writers knew nothing about their subjects, complained Karpinski, they were richly rewarded when school districts adopted their books.<sup>19</sup>

Karpinski’s idealism and intellectual honesty were not always appreciated. In 1943, he was elected president of the History of Science Society for his work on the history of mathematics. Ex officio, he addressed the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) on the universities’ involvement with private industry in developing resources that could be used for the public good but were used instead for private gain. He offered a resolution urging the ACLS to deplore the support of university professors and researchers by private industry and to encourage those professors who did receive support to declare their private interests before they offered “expert” testimony as scientists.<sup>20</sup> His position on this issue was so controversial that Karpinski was asked to resign as president of the History of Science Society, which he did in December 1943.<sup>21</sup>

Describing himself as a “Democrat, reformed Republican,” Karpinski was never slow to stir the political pot. Such headlines as “Karpinski Says GOP Tax Cut Would Be ‘Gift’ for the Wealthy” reflect both his interest in current affairs and his detailed response to statistical issues.<sup>22</sup> As a concerned citizen, Karpinski wrote several articles questioning the setting of utility rates by private companies and the methods used to assess fees, pointing out that shifting rate scales could manipulate the costs passed on to the consumer. He was fiercely opposed to the privatization of energy and water resources, commodities necessary for human existence. His uninhibited directness earned him a reputation of “always making speeches” and provoking sharp discussion in the faculty club.<sup>23</sup> He did not hesitate to approach the regents of the university on a variety of issues. For example, he urged them to appoint a faculty member to the governing board, as was the case at Cornell, and questioned private practice and fees charged by professors in the university’s medical school. He was the driving force behind the petition of 1917 asking for a study of faculty salaries, a survey completed in 1918.<sup>24</sup> He was an early promoter of the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association, holding life insurance policy number one.<sup>25</sup>

His concern for equitable faculty stipends appears in his scholarly work. Describing the life of the sixteenth-century mathematician and scholar Johann Scheybl, professor of Euclid and arithmetic at the University of Tübingen, Karpinski could not forbear remarking, “How little some aspects of university life have changed during four centuries is shown by the fact that Scheybl twice, in 1551 and 1562, requested of the university authorities an increase of salary in order that he might pay his debts and obtain the necessaries of life.”<sup>26</sup>

New technology captured Karpinski's imagination. He saw great potential in the photograph, the slide, and the photostat as tools for teaching and research. He appreciated the potential of the photostat for allowing scholars access to rare materials, and his early book reviews reveal his faith in illustrations as a boon to abstract subjects such as mathematics. He himself used the slide projector as a pedagogical device at an early moment in its history by presenting an *illustrated* lecture on the history of algebra at the first meeting of the Mathematical Association of America in 1915. In 1931, Karpinski designed four sets of slides depicting the history of arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and higher mathematics that were projected on the four sides of a column devoted to mathematics in the Hall of Science, for the Century of Progress Exposition at the 1932 World's Fair in Chicago.<sup>27</sup> They were advertised as "The History of Mathematics in 100 slides . . . as run continuously every day on four screens in the Mathematics Exhibit, Century of Progress Exposition." He later offered the slide sets for sale: twenty-five slides for \$22. Each slide had text on the left (two hundred words, with a finely calibrated reading time of one minute) and an illustration on the right.

The practical mathematics of Karpinski's growing family of six children no doubt drew him to buy and sell slides, photostats, books, and maps. His 1947 tax return describes his secondary business as selling books to libraries.<sup>28</sup> It is not clear when Karpinski's business interests in the book and map trade began, though his New York mentors and fellow collectors, David Eugene Smith and George Plimpton, perhaps offered opportunities to him. By 1925, he had amassed a collection of 297 American imprints that he offered to the William L. Clements Library for \$1,000.<sup>29</sup> Karpinski had clearly entered the trade by 1932, when he made a remarkable sale to Yale University. He had acquired (or was the agent for) the collection of Franz von Wieser, a geographer who had been one of the scholars who drew attention to the extraordinary Waldseemüller world map of 1507, known for first using the name America. On his travels in Austria and Germany, Karpinski met von Wieser's son, Hans, who introduced him to his father's student and Waldseemüller map scholar, Father Josef Fischer, S.J. Fischer introduced Karpinski to the owner of the map, Prince Max Waldburg-Wolfegg. For a brief time, Karpinski claimed to have procured the right to sell the map in the United States for one million Reichsmarks. The prince, however, ultimately proved reluctant to sell, noting that a time of economic depression with extensive unemployment was not a propitious moment for a national treasure to leave Germany.<sup>30</sup>

Karpinski combined Franz von Wieser's maps and atlases with a complete collection of the works of the Americanist Henry Harrisse and enough other titles to make up a collection of 625 atlases, more than 3,000 maps, in excess of 1,300 geographical works, and a pair of twenty-four-inch Blaeu globes. Karpinski sold this collection to Yale for \$25,000, a sum so large in the early years of the Great Depression that the Yale officials negotiated an installment plan to pay the debt.<sup>31</sup>

Over the years, Karpinski sold maps, atlases, and books to many other institutions, including The Newberry Library, the New York Public Library, Ohio State University, Indiana University, Purdue University, the State University of New York at Albany, and Michigan State College. Many of these sales were under the aegis of the McGregor Plan, with which the Clements Library at the University of Michigan was associated.<sup>32</sup> Karpinski also donated books and maps to the law library of Berea College, where he had taught as a young man, to the American Book Center for War Devastated Libraries, and to the Rebuilders of Poland.<sup>33</sup> In the manner of many dealers, when he sold maps and books to libraries, he often left several others as gifts.<sup>34</sup> He sometimes offered his services as a lecturer in addition to the sale of maps. To the Cleveland Public Library, he wrote: "I have an interesting group of twenty separate maps

. . . of great value as a permanent exhibition. . . . I offer them to you for \$1,000. . . . I would be glad to lecture on the subject. . . . I would bring this group as well as slides of other maps. The lecture fee would be one hundred dollars.”<sup>35</sup> In his retirement years, Karpinski continued his trade in maps and atlases and expanded his interests to include the American Civil War, English literature, and early American history.

Karpinski’s connection with the history of cartography can be traced to the expansion years at the University of Michigan. When Karpinski arrived in 1904, the university’s third president, James B. Angell (who was eighty and had been president for thirty-eight years), was near retiring. The “golden years” of the Angell presidency were noted for the growth and increasing prestige of the school. Harry B. Hutchins succeeded Angell as the university’s fourth president, and by 1910, Michigan’s fifty-six hundred students made it the third-largest university in the United States, after Columbia and the University of Chicago. Hutchins was supported by a board of regents that included three members especially interested in curriculum, buildings, and libraries: Junius Beal, a local Ann Arbor editor and book collector; Lucius L. Hubbard, a geology professor at Michigan Technical University in Houghton, a Harvard graduate with a Ph.D. from Bonn and a law degree from Boston University, and a collector of rare books; and William L. Clements, an industrialist from Bay City, whose collection of rare books on early America derived from a literature course he had taken as an undergraduate at the university.<sup>36</sup> Clements would leave his collection, which included many maps and atlases, to the university along with the money to build the library that now bears his name. His energy and commitment to acquiring original source material would attract and engage Karpinski in the pursuit of maps.

President Hutchins enlarged the scope of the university by adding courses in journalism, an extension service, the departments of fine arts and political science, and a “tough” graduate school.<sup>37</sup> The building of the university’s collections and its library kept pace with these efforts. Francis Kelsey, professor of classics and archaeology, was given a two-year leave from 1919 to 1921 to travel in Europe and the Near East to acquire antiquities and papyri for the university. William Warner Bishop was lured away from the Library of Congress in 1915 to direct and build the collections of the university library. Bishop traveled to France in 1921, where he acquired the large library of the Americanist Henri Vignaud, with William Clements paying a share of the cost.<sup>38</sup> The Vignaud collection contained a large number of atlases and antiquarian maps, many of which entered the collections of the Clements Library. Throughout the 1920s, Clements continued to collect materials for his library, aided by antiquarian book dealers and his librarian, Randolph G. Adams.

In this atmosphere of growth at the university, Karpinski was able to give full rein to his own collecting instincts, particularly in the history of mathematics. With the support of the university librarians, Theodore Koch and William Bishop, as well as Randolph Adams, Karpinski traveled regularly to Europe to collect books for the university’s history of mathematics collection.<sup>39</sup> His acquisitions included volumes about applied geometry and trigonometry, navigation, surveying, and geodesy. Thus, the history of cartography was an easy leap for Karpinski. Ann Arbor was becoming a congenial center for this subject, with the Clements Library pushing the University of Michigan to the forefront of research institutions for American history and the acquisition of the Vignaud maps and atlases adding to its stature.

In this same period, immediately following the First World War, the work of the Carnegie Institution in Europe attracted Clements’s attention. The Carnegie Institution was supporting the American historian Waldo G. Leland, who was assembling the *Guide to Materials for American History in the Libraries*

**Figure 2.** *Amerique Septentrionale* (1685–1686).

J. B. L. Franquelin, Karpinski photostat 641. Courtesy of the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

