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Bio:

Christy Hyman is a fifth year PhD student focusing on historical geography at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Her research focuses on African American efforts toward cultural and political assertion in the Great Dismal Swamp region during the antebellum era as well as the attendant political, social and environmental costs of human/landscape resource exploitation. Hyman uses GIS and other digital tools to observe to what extent computational methods in GIS and visualization can inform us of human experiences while pointing out the processes deriving from past oppressive systems in society threatening human potential.

Presentation Title:

Abstract|Concretize|Simplify: The Tensions of Critical GIS and Historical Geography

Abstract:

My presentation animates the tensions involved in creating spatial models of historical phenomena utilizing a circa 1844 map: “A Map of The Roads and Country Between Edenton and Norfolk with the Dismal Swamp and Great Park Canals.” The initial phase of analysis for this project focuses on a group of enslaved runaways from the eastern portion of North Carolina in Perquimans County who escaped from slavery in 1829. After gleaning person and place names from runaway slave advertisements as well as ground-truthing the spatial arrangement of the Perquimans County area, I made a trip to the Perquimans County Register to review deed and canal maps from the period and cross reference the information to assure map locations were substantiated. What followed was extensive hand-annotating that identified sites within the area where enslaved people could be apprehended. These sites were the dwellings of documented slave patrol militia who served from 1820-1830. My talk will reveal the range of difficulty for enslaved runaways to move from one place to another in their search for freedom.

In terms of building digital spatial models, the decisions made when “simplifying” landscape features-whether through manipulating the shape of a polyline, “smoothing” areas of irregularly shaped coastline or eliminating features altogether are often done to satisfy cartographic aesthetics.

This presentation describes the challenges of utilizing antebellum maps while highlighting the importance of foregrounding the culturally contingent qualities of knowledge representation found within them.