

History By The Numbers

Data as a Primary Source

Many times today we use visualizations to “make sense” of data in a quick, digestible format. Infographics are the latest trend in making data understandable, but this technique has been around for quite a while.

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I. Examine the chart created in 1897 by Arthur Hodgkin Scaife for the Comparative Synoptical Chart Co., Limited entitled: [History of the Civil War in the United States, 1860-1865](#). On first glance, this can be overwhelming, but just like with any other primary source, data requires the “observe, reflect, question” treatment to get a better understanding of what is being presented. This particular data visualization is full of different sets of information that are all related to each other in various ways!

Start by looking at the overall layout. How is the information presented on the vertical axis? (i.e. What is generally happening as the reader follows the chart from top to bottom?)

Note that that the chart is organized with 1860 at the bottom, progressing chronologically toward 1865 at the top of the page. Many people view the beginning of the Civil War as the attack on Fort Sumter (4/12/1861), so why do you think the chart begins in December of 1860?

Make your way to the bottom of the chart. What are the various elements in the key? What do the colors stand for?

What other information is presented in the footer? What state gave the most troops during the war?

Not only does the chart move vertically, but also horizontally. How is the chart divided on the horizontal axis? (i.e. What do all the columns represent?)

Lastly, what do the zig-zag lines throughout the middle of the chart represent?

At this point, you should have a better understanding of what the chart is trying to communicate. Just like most sources, what may look overwhelming at first is much more understandable after taking some time to observe. List three things that you gathered from this chart.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

This chart also came with [background information](#). When taking in data, just as any other primary source, analyzing the credibility and method of the chart is critical to understanding what you're reading. Take a moment to look through the supplemental material and the "Description of the Chart" section. How does this compare with what you were able to figure out on your own?

Just as with any examination of credibility, it is also important to know who the publisher is. Examine this [ad from the Comparative Synoptical Chart Company](#) in 1898. What additional information does it tell you about the chart you're examining?

II. Mapping the routes of the various armies the way Scaife did shows a different perspective on how the war was fought.

Examine the overall look of the chart. What are some big-picture trends you see in the movement (or lack of movement) of the armies? When did fighting increase in Southern states?

On the maps provided, label the routes with the corresponding armies.

III. Finances also played a large part in the Civil War, and Scaife does not leave out some of this information. Where and what has Scaife included pertaining to currency on this chart?

Why do you think the start dates for these columns are different for the North and the South?

What was the approximate value of the Northern currency when the Southern reached “nil?”

Why do you think Scaife included this information?

IV. Historical Events are scattered all over the chart, even those beyond those of battlefield clashes.

When was the Confederacy moved to Richmond?	
...and when did Richmond fall?	
First Confederate conscription enacted?	
When was Nevada admitted to the Union?	
When were the New York Draft Riots?	

V. Today we interact with data in many different ways, our lives bombarded by charts and tables. This chart was created just over 30 years after the end of the war. Examine [this modern infographic](#) (or Google others). How are they different? Similar?

Similar	Different

Think about the data that exists and is available to you today. How would Scaife been able to assemble his information? How would you?

	19 th Century	21 st Century
Location Data		
Finance Data (Currency)		
Causalities		
Army Size (Individual Count)		

Now think again about how Scaife went about creating this chart and how each part was chosen. What questions might you have for him?

How does this data help you better understand the Civil War?

See also video (The Fallen): <https://vimeo.com/128373915>