

The memory palaces of Emma Willard

Anima Loci, December 2023

The ancient Roman-Greek mnemonic technique ‘method of loci’ involves placing information within a spatial structure to create visual associations that can be easily recalled. 19th-century American educator, women’s rights activist and cartographer, Emma Willard, enthusiastically embraced these ‘memory palaces’ as a didactic method, creating several with the intent to form a system for ‘universal history’. The following text compiles a series of her methodological explanations but also reveal how history is always drawn from a specific and situated perspective. In a world grappling with contemporary challenges such as technological bias, one cannot help but wonder what our memory palaces would look like today and in future.

Keywords: Cartography, History, Memory.

The Temple of Time

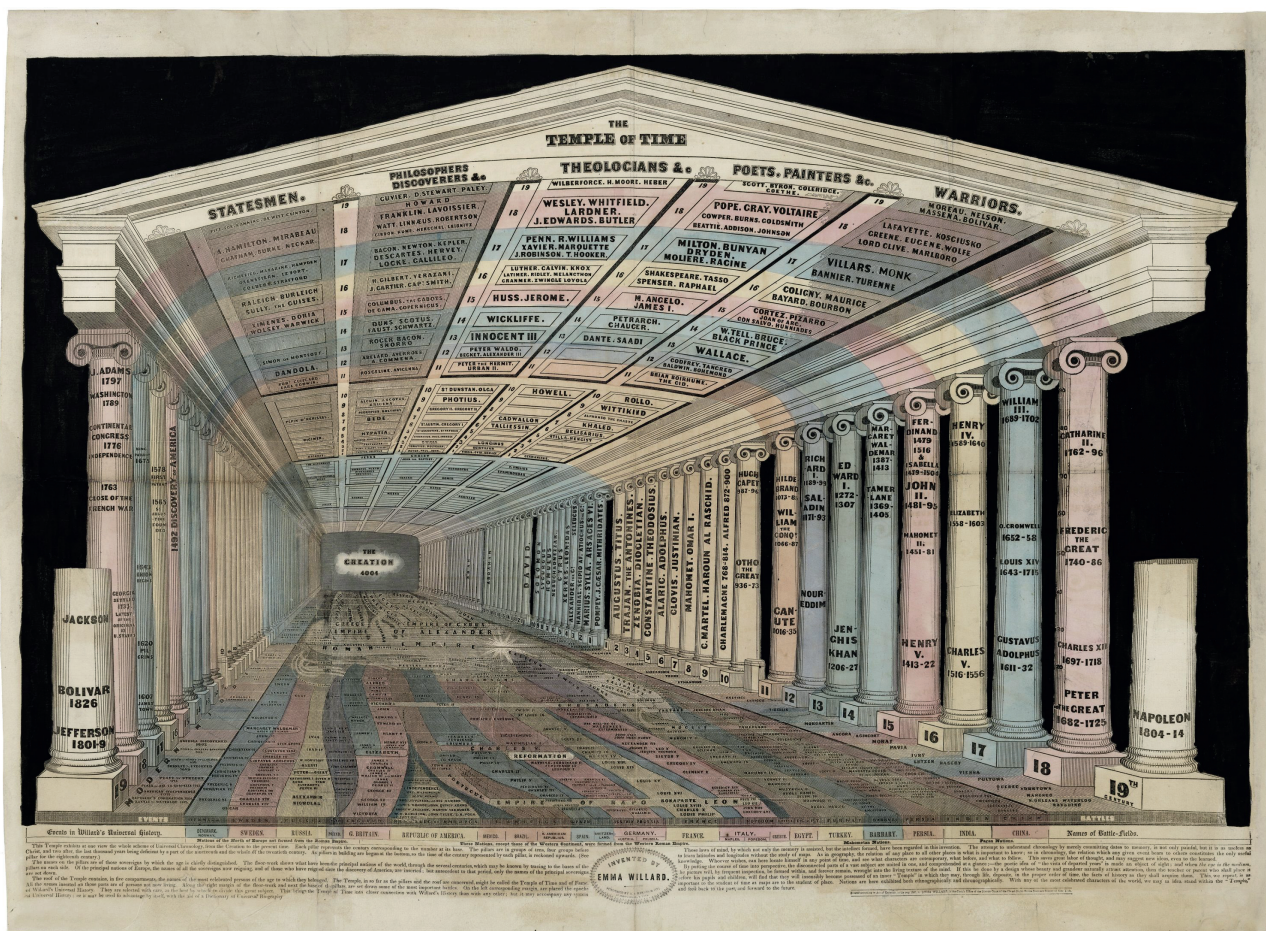
Those laws of mind, by which not only the memory is assisted but the intellect formed, have been regarded in this invention. The attempt to understand chronology by merely committing dates to memory, is not only painful, but it is as useless as to learn latitudes and longitudes, without the study of maps. As in geography, the relation of any place to all other places is what is important to know; so in chronology, the relation which any given event bears to others constitutes the only useful knowledge. Whoever wishes, can here locate himself [sic.] in any point of time, and see what characters are contemporary, what before, and what to follow. This saves great labor of thought, and may suggest new ideas, even to the learned.

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By putting the course of time into perspective, the disconnected parts of a vast subject are united into one, and comprehended at a glance;-the poetic idea of "the vista of departed years" is made an object of sight; and when the eye is the medium, the picture will, by frequent inspection, be formed within, and forever remain, wrought into the living texture of the mind. If this be done by a design whose beauty and grandeur naturally attract attention, then the teacher or parent who shall place it before his pupils and children will find that they will insensibly become possessors of an inner "Temple" in which they may, through life, deposit [sic.], in the proper order of time, the facts of history as they shall acquire them. This we repeat is as important to the student of time as maps are to the student of place. Nations are here exhibited both ethnographically and chronologically. With any of the the most celebrated characters of the world, we may in idea stand within the "Temple" and look back to the past, and forward to the future.

This Temple exhibits at one view the whole scheme of Universal Chronology, from the Creation to the present time. Each pillar represents the century corresponding to the number at its base. The pillars are in groups of tens, four groups before Christ, and two after, the last thousand years being deficient by a part of the nineteenth and the whole of the twentieth century. As pillars in buildings are begun at the bottom, so the time of the century represented by each pillar, is reckoned upwards. (See pillar for the eighteenth century.)



The names of the pillars are of those sovereigns by which the age is chiefly distinguished. The floor-work shows what have been the principal nations of the world, through the several centuries, which may be known by tracing the bases of the pillars each side. Of the principal nations of Europe, the names of all the sovereigns now reigning, and of those who have reigned since the discovery of America, are inserted; but the antecedent to that period, only the names of the principle sovereigns are set down.

The roof of the Temple contains, in five compartments, the names of the most celebrated persons of the age to which they belonged. The Temple, in so far as the pillars and the roof are connected, might be called the Temple of Time and of Fame. All the names inserted

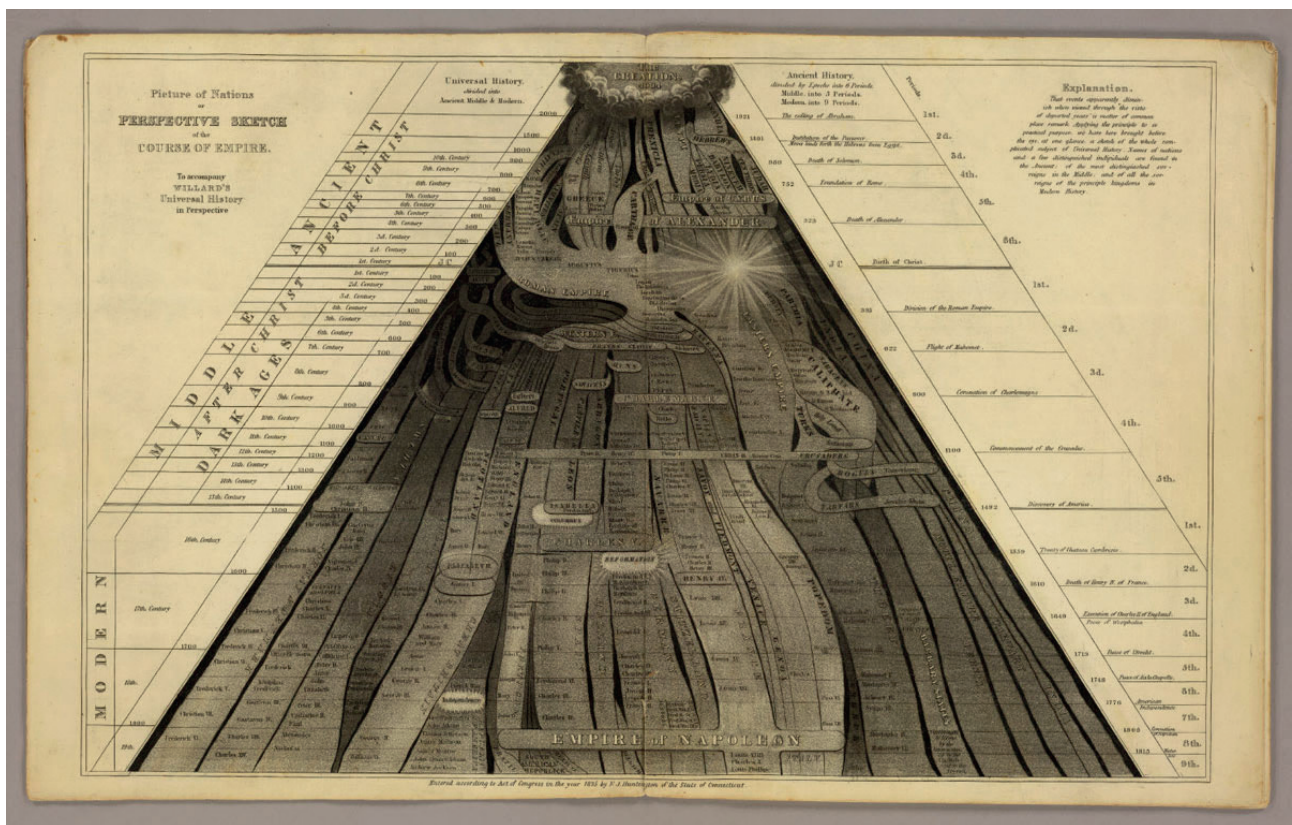
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on those parts are of persons not now living. Along the right marking of the floor-work and the next base of the pillars, are set down some of the most important battles. On the left corresponding margin, are placed the epochs of Willard's Universal History. They are selected with care, as the best bet which to divide this great subject. This brings the Temple of Time into closer connection with Willard's History than any other; but it may accompany any system of Universal History; or it may be used for advantage by itself, with the aim of a Dictionary of Universal Biography.

A Picture of Nations or Perspective Sketch of the Course of Empire.

That events apparently diminish when viewed through the vista of departed years is a matter of common place remark. Applying the principle to a practical purpose we have here brought before the eye, at one glance, a sketch of the whole complicated subject of Universal History. Names of nations and a few distinguished individuals are found in the Ancient; of the most distinguished sovereigns in the Middle; and of all the sovereigns of the principal kingdoms in Modern History.



Willard's Chronographer of American History

To measure Time by Space, is universal among civilised nations, and as the hours, and minutes, and seconds of a clock measure the time of a day, so do the centuries, tens, and single years of the Chronographer, measure the time of American History. And as in a clock, the outer rim is divided to show the parts of time, so is here the outer rim of *Circle of Time*: and as the hands of the clock point out the hours and minutes, so do the branches of the *Historic Tree* point to the century and the year in which the event or epoch which is expressed thereon happened.

A general knowledge of Chronology, is as indispensable to History, as a general knowledge of latitude and longitude is to Geography. But to learn single dates, apart from a general plan of Chronology addressed to the eye, is as useless as to learn latitudes and longitudes

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without reference to a map. The eye is the only medium of permanent impression. The essential point in a date, is to know the *relative* place of an event, or how it stands in time, compared with other important events. The scholar in the school-room, or the gentleman in his study, what's such a *visible plan of Time* for the study of history, the same as he wants a visible plan of place, viz. a map, for the study of geography, or of books of travels.

