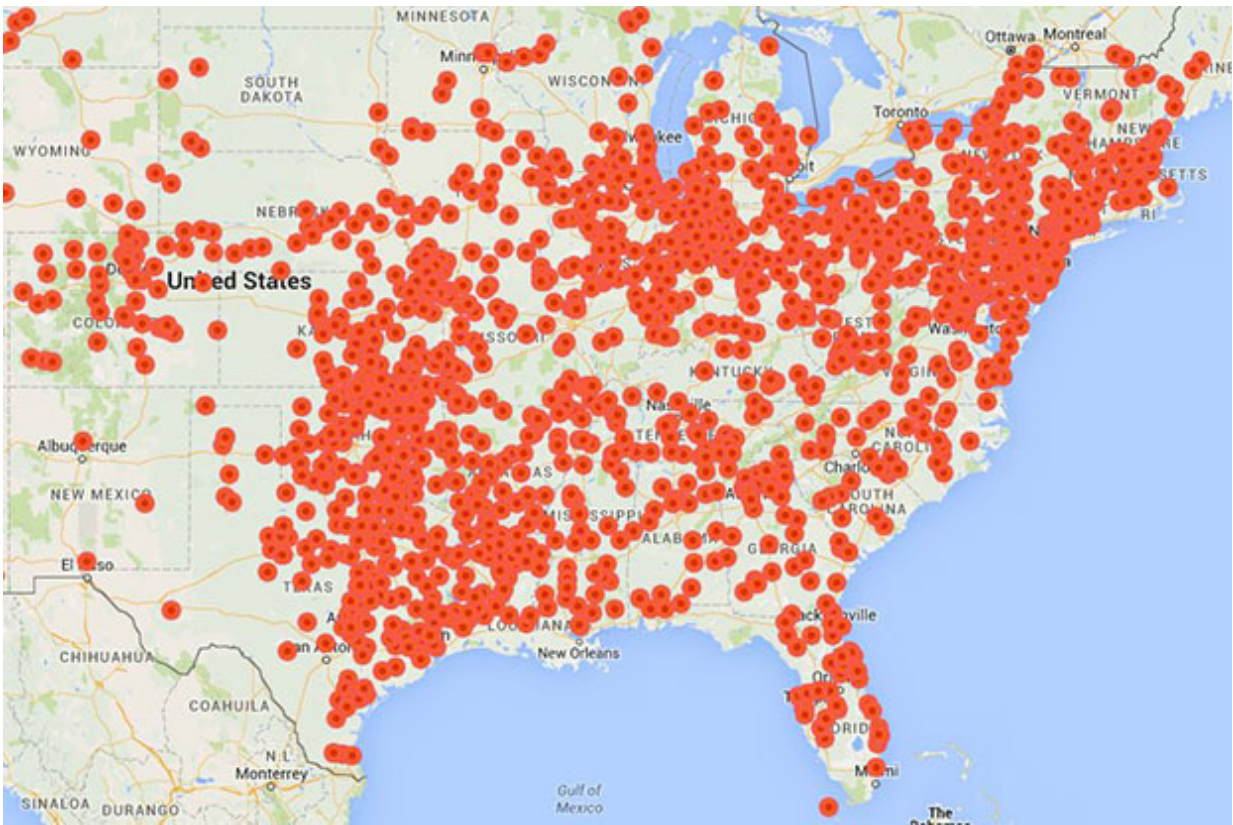


# Digital map shows spread of KKK across United States like 'a contagion'

November 24 2015, by Brian Mcneill



Each red dot represents a local Klan chapter, known as a Klavern, that spread across the country between 1915 and 1940.

A joint project between a Virginia Commonwealth University history professor and VCU Libraries shows for the first time how the Ku Klux

Klan spread across the United States between 1915 and 1940, establishing chapters in all 50 states with an estimated membership of between 2 million and 8 million.

The project, "[Mapping the Second Ku Klux Klan, 1915-1940](#)," is an animated, online map that illustrates the rise of the second Klan, which was founded in Atlanta in 1915 and spread rapidly across the country to total more than 2,000 local units, known as Klaverns.

"The project is using technology to demonstrate, and make available for people to contemplate, the nationwide spread of the Ku Klux Klan," said John Kneebone, Ph.D., associate professor and chair of the Department of History in the College of Humanities and Sciences. "This map shows that you can't just say 'Oh, it was those crazy people in the South.' The [KKK] was in the mainstream."

The map, he said, invites the viewer to learn about the Klan in their own area, and to reflect on how the Klan's vile message of racism, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism appealed to so many millions of Americans.

"Everywhere there was population, there was the Klan," Kneebone said. "Think about being a young person—black or Jewish or Catholic—and growing up, knowing that these were everywhere."

Kneebone built a list of local KKK chapters by piecing together information culled from the hate group's official publications, including newspapers and magazines with such names as The Fellowship Forum, Kourier Magazine, Indiana Fiery Cross and Imperial Night Hawk.

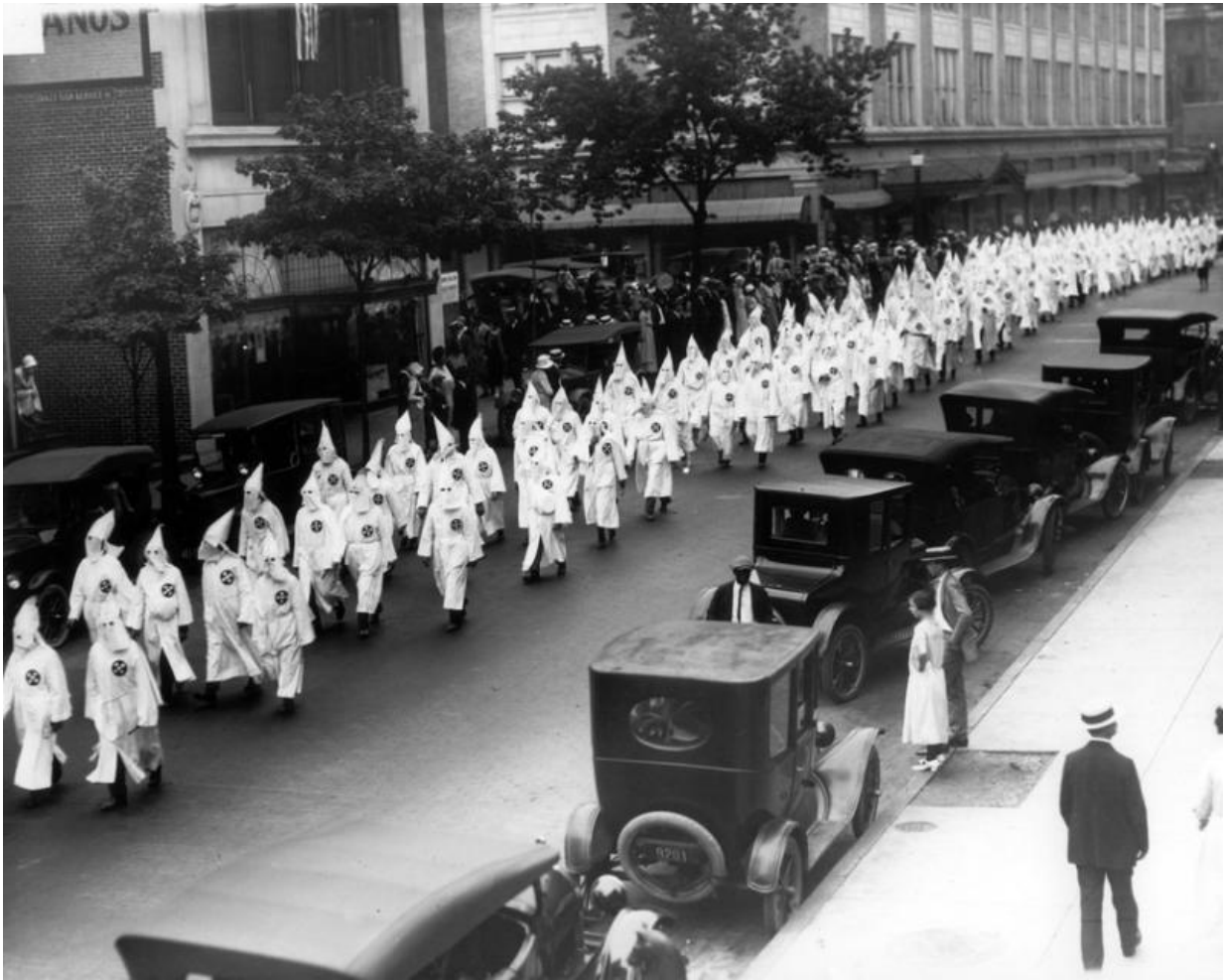
He partnered with digital librarians at VCU Libraries to use his data to map out the list of KKK chapters and illustrate their chronological rise across the country.

"This project models innovative collaboration between libraries and scholars," said Jimmy Ghaphery, head of digital technologies for VCU Libraries. "Building on the extensive research and scholarly context that Dr. Kneebone brought to bear, the VCU Libraries was able to provide support for data normalization, data visualization and a publishing platform. In publishing the raw data set, the door remains open for other researchers to jump in and join us."

The project is significant for VCU Libraries because it marks the first time the digital librarians have worked directly with a faculty researcher to develop a digital visualization of their work.

"It kind of indicates where libraries are going in general, moving more into the digital humanities realm, where we're working with scholars to find new ways to disseminate scholarship," said Erin White, web systems librarian with VCU Libraries, who worked on the project. "This is really exciting from our perspective because it's a new thing that we're exploring that has great potential for us as an organization."

The map's animation shows red dots, each representing a local Klan, spreading across the country "like a contagion," said Shariq Torres, a web applications analyst with [digital technologies](#) who oversaw creation of the map.



Wearing white robes and hoods, members of the Ku Klux Klan parade on Grace Street in Richmond circa 1925. Credit: The Valentine

"A lot of times today, talk of racism says this region is bad or that region is bad. No, all of it is bad. And this map shows that," he said. "[Even after the KKK disbanded], all those people were still in the community. They became cops, they became judges, they became lawyers, they became teachers. They were all throughout the community. I see it as a very striking example of the sort of institutionalized racism that remains in the country today."

The map shows that unlike the first KKK of Reconstruction and the third Klan of the civil rights era, both of which were concentrated in the Deep South, the second Klan was far more widespread. It operated not only in all 50 states, but even in spots like Panama, where the Panama Canal was under American control.

"It's not even the full picture because we don't have all the data. But even with the data we have, every state is represented," Torres said. "This organization's ideas were so mainstream that people were fine with it. They were fine with excluding [black people](#). That trickles down to everything else – housing inspectors, cops, policymakers, everything."

Kneebone suspects that the second KKK was more widespread than the map conveys because they only included local Klans that were mentioned in the group's publications.

"You've got an organization with thousands of units and millions of members, so there's [a lot of these organizational records that existed]," he said. "I'm convinced that a lot of folks, years later, came across these [Klan documents] in grandpa's attic and went 'Oh, my god. I've got to get rid of this.'"

The rise of the second KKK was fueled in large part by the 1915 film "The Birth of a Nation," which was a fictional and highly racist depiction of Reconstruction that portrays the first KKK, which operated between 1865 and 1871, as the saviors of white America.

"In class, I describe it as pornography for racists," Kneebone said. "It's a horrible movie."

World War I also played a role in spreading the Klan, Kneebone said.

"World War I comes and the nation becomes fixated on the dangers of

aliens and hyphenated Americans and disloyal people, which leads to a good deal of extralegal violence against dissenters," he said. "People were whipped, tar-and-feathered, even hung. People were forced to kneel and kiss the flag. The generic term that the press used for these actions was Ku Klux Klan. So the message was out that the Klan is one, a good thing, thanks to 'The Birth of a Nation.' And two, it's the means by which the community protects itself."

The second Klan went into decline in 1925 when the man behind the group's expansion in the Midwest, David Curtiss Stephenson, was arrested and convicted of the second-degree murder of a woman named Madge Oberholtzer, who had been raped and beaten and who ultimately committed suicide. "That was the final blow that showed just how low and corrupt the Klan is," Kneebone said.

Most historians, he said, end the story of the second Klan around 1925 when membership begins to drop off. However, Kneebone's research shows that local Klan units continued to meet, even outside the South.

The second KKK met its end in the 1940s when the IRS essentially shut it down for its failure to pay taxes. Yet the Klan did not go away entirely, Kneebone said. In Virginia, for example, it simply reincorporated under another name, the American Shore Patrol.

It is important to understand the second KKK, Kneebone said, not only to come to grips with the widespread racism that permeated the country, but also because it tells the story of the Klan's courageous opponents.

"In the long run, the importance of this project is the opponents," he said. "What comes out of the opposition to the Klan is for the first time black Americans, Catholic Americans, Jewish Americans, work together."

The coalition of Klan opponents formed the basis of the modern Democratic Party.

"It's important for us in terms of politics," Kneebone said. "This is when the Democratic Party, which had been the leave-us-alone party of racism, begins turning toward the party of liberalism."

Notably, opposition to the KKK and "The Birth of a Nation" was also a defining moment in the early days of the NAACP.

"From the emergence of 'Birth of a Nation,' the NAACP, which had been founded in 1910, had seen the movie as a base libel of black people and an evil film with a terrible, terrible message and fought really hard to have it banned in various cities," Kneebone said. "In many ways, this is the making of the NAACP."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

Citation: Digital map shows spread of KKK across United States like 'a contagion' (2015, November 24) retrieved 9 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-digital-kkk-states-contagion.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.