In 1850 the knowledge of geology was in an early exploratory stage, especially in America. In England and Europe sufficient progress had been made in the study of the stratified rocks and their contained fossils to contrast markedly with American lack of observations. It could not have been otherwise. The first task of a geologist, entering upon a new field, is to discover and locate the various rock formations. He must have a map, upon which to delineate their distribution. But in 1850 the mapping of America was very crude. Even the eastern country was known only in broad outline and the west was imperfectly explored. Nevertheless, by 1850, material progress had been made in determining the ages and distribution of the sedimentary rocks of the United States east of the Mississippi and of Canada. Logan of Canada, Hall of New York, the Rogers brothers of Pennsylvania and Virginia, Safford of Tennessee, and many others who felt the urge to read the record in the rocks, had identified the strata of certain great periods of geological time, had classified them in order of relative age, and had mapped them with such accuracy as the conditions permitted.

That they had been able to accomplish so much was in part due to the fact that the great leaders in English geology, Sedgewick and Murchison, had established for that country a succession of strata and fossils, which is the same as that of eastern North America.