

# Sea Monsters, Railroads, and Modern Highways— Mapping Out History

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Some maps are small, such as those printed in history books. Others are medium sized, like the maps that the State of North Carolina gives away each year that show our roads and highways. Still others, such as maps of the world, can be quite large. People often frame large maps and hang them on their walls. But maps, of course, are about much more than decoration.

Maps represent some of the most important and interesting primary sources that historians use. These sources often provide information not easy to find elsewhere. For example, maps can help us learn when cities and towns were established, when railroad tracks were laid, and when roads and highways were built. Comparing two maps of the same place sometimes can show us changes over time—from the political boundaries of what we now call North Carolina to the disappearance of American Indian tribes and appearance of towns in existence today, as European settlers spread out across the land.

A map is not a picture of a place, like a photograph. Instead, it is a representation, usually printed on a flat surface, of selected features of all or part of the earth. Some maps highlight the physical features of an area, such as rivers, lakes, and mountains. Others show political divisions, such as cities, states, and nations. Still others focus on human-made things, like highways, railroads, canals, dams, and airports. Or a map can include a combination of these features or others.

People began making maps even before they began to write. Early American Indians and Eskimos, for example, drew diagrams representing places familiar to them. The oldest existing map is believed to have been drawn on a Babylonian clay tablet, ca. 2500 BC.

When Europeans began to create maps of North America, they had to rely on information provided by early explorers. Sometimes these explorers simply estimated distances between places or guessed about the shape of coastlines and the sizes or lengths of islands, rivers, and sounds. Also, explorers frequently repeated other people's descriptions about places that they had not visited themselves. This meant that early maps often contained incorrect information. Some even included symbols or sketches that showed special fears and superstitions about a place. For example, some early maps of present-day North Carolina have large, dangerous sea monsters drawn in the water along the coast.

Many of the first maps of North Carolina were quite beautiful. They were printed from engraved plates and often hand-colored by artists before being offered for sale. Some have decorative borders, illustrations of ships, and fancy *cartouches*. A cartouche is an oval, oblong, or scroll-like ornamentation with information such as the title of the map and name of the cartographer (a

person who makes maps) or map seller. Map collectors prize these early maps because of their rarity and beauty.

In 1585 John White drew a map—which was published when he returned to England from what Europeans called the New World—that helps historians understand what the English knew at that time about the coast of what is now North Carolina. White had explored the region, largely by ship. Historians study his map for clues as to the locations of important American Indian villages, as well as inlets or passages through the Outer Banks barrier islands that disappeared years ago. Sometimes information on maps is the only record historians have about early places that no longer exist. White returned to North Carolina in 1587 as governor of what we today call the Lost Colony. He was a talented artist, and his attractive map is often reproduced in textbooks.

In 1640, a half century after White, a Dutchman named Willem Blaeu produced many important maps. He wanted to make a map of the southeastern part of what is today the United States. He could not visit the area personally, so he studied older maps and read reports by explorers to get information about the region. Blaeu's map is attractive and helpful. But, as with many early maps, not all of the information on it is correct.

For example, Blaeu had been told that there were tall mountains in North Carolina's interior. There are—but he drew them too close to the coast. Such errors in locating mountains, rivers, and even large bodies of water happened because mapmakers did not have all of the correct information about places that we do today. This means that—as with other sources—historians must be careful about checking accuracy.

Over the years, measuring instruments and surveying skills have improved. This has helped modern mapmakers produce better maps with more accurate and detailed information on them. Today, we even have satellites to help with making some kinds of maps.

Modern mapmakers use standard symbols and special marks to stand for different types of geographic features. For example, a solid black line will show the boundaries between states. A line of black dashes on the same map will indicate where a railroad track runs. Red or blue lines will depict roads and highways. Circles will represent the locations of cities on many maps. A large black circle will show where a major city is, and a small open circle will indicate a smaller town. An open circle with a star in it may stand for the capital city of a state. Often a map will include an explanatory table or list of the symbols and special marks that are used on it. This is known as the map's *legend*.

Early maps of North Carolina sometimes had smaller maps printed on them. These *insets* often depict city harbors or water passageways that helped ship captains. Modern maps frequently use insets, too. Most state highway maps, for instance, include insets that show the major streets in larger cities. Graphs and tables of statistics also may be printed on modern-day maps.

One 1850 map of North Carolina in the book *A New Universal Atlas Containing Maps of the Various Empires, Kingdoms, States and Republics of the World* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait and Company, 1853) offers a good example of how useful maps can be to historians. The map indicates where North Carolina's canals and railroads were in that year. It

has two helpful insets. One depicts the Neuse River and area around New Bern. The other shows the part of North Carolina where gold was found. This map also includes a legend and a table that tells the distance in miles between cities in North Carolina. What else can historians learn about our state in 1850 by studying this map?

Early maps may be decorated with sea monsters and fancy cartouches, and they may be less accurate than more recent maps. Modern maps may show things like North Carolina's railroads and highways with great accuracy and provide a great deal of other information. But whether old or new, maps can be fun to look at, and they can teach us a lot about history. The next time you confront a history mystery, don't forget to check out maps as a source.

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#### **Maps to Investigate**

The State Archives, the Outer Banks History Center, and the North Carolina Collection housed in Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have collaborated to create a Web site called North Carolina Maps, where you can find more than one thousand maps of the state. Access [www.lib.unc.edu/dc/ncmps/index.html](http://www.lib.unc.edu/dc/ncmps/index.html) .