



11

# Secrets To Map Collecting

**INSIDER TIPS  
TO TAKE YOUR  
COLLECTION  
TO THE  
NEXT LEVEL**

# == 11 Secrets to Map Collecting ==

## Introduction

Maps are prized by collectors around the globe for their beauty, historical significance, and the stories they tell. While there are many reasons that people collect maps, collectors typically have one feature in common - an intellectual curiosity powered by a thirst for knowledge.

Maps teach us about history, geography, politics, religion, and culture. Maps can take us to another place and another time. As Arjun I. a collector of maps of India, mused: "I love this old paper, the smell of it, the feel, the script, the cartouches, and all the imagination of it."

Regardless of your reason for collecting maps, having insider tips on the map trade can help you take your collection to the next level. Fortunately, map collectors love sharing knowledge as much as they love gathering it.

Next, you'll find eleven secrets to map collecting to ensure you find the ideal map to add to your collection.

# Developing a Collection Is Like Writing an Autobiography

1

While it may be tempting to follow the current trends in map collecting, it is not the best strategy for most collectors. A map collection should be personal. As one collector, Nolan K., put it, "You buy a painting or listen to music because it makes you feel good. Likewise looking at a map makes you feel good...I like the patina of the old map, the charm of the people on the sides of the Schedel world map (Exhibit 1, pg. 4). I like to see California as an island floating out there, or see no Mississippi River."

A map collection can be meaningful in many ways: it can trace your ancestry, showcase places you've traveled, or spark your intellectual curiosity about a particular time in history.

There are so many different types of maps to collect that it can feel overwhelming if you take a shotgun approach. It is important to select a focal point for your collection and stick with it. Collector Paul B. advises, "Find out what you are really interested in and stick to it. You're going to make some mistakes, and you're going to have some triumphs. It's the fun and joy of collecting, and it's given me a lot of pleasure over the years."

Over time you can either further refine or even expand your area of interest depending on your time and budget.



# Exhibit 1

“I like the patina of the old map, the charm of the people on the sides of the Schedel world map. I like to see California as an island floating out there, or see no Mississippi River.”

- Nolan, Map Collector



Hartmann Schedel, *Secunda Etas Mundi*, published in 1493.

# You Don't Need a Lot of Money To Collect Maps

2

Although some maps cost thousands of dollars, collecting maps can be a quite affordable hobby. There are thousands of maps available for less than \$100.

## Affordability of 19th Century Maps

This is particularly true with maps published in the 19th century, when maps and atlases became common household items and therefore more widely printed and distributed. Nineteenth century maps of most countries as well as maps of individual US states, counties and cities can readily be found at prices that won't break the budget.

## Affordability of Miniature Maps

Miniature maps (Exhibit 2, pg. 6) are also very affordable, even those dating as far back as the 1600s. Nearly every country and region around the world can be found in miniature map form, and the upside is that they are easier and less expensive to frame.



# Exhibit 2



Miniature map by Jacques Chiquet, *L'Afrique*, circa 1720, which sold for \$70.

# Where To Buy (and Not To Buy) Maps

## 3

These days it is relatively easy to find antique maps: there are map auctions, map dealers, and even map fairs. But as they say, "Buyer Beware." As with any collectible, there are people who know what they are talking about and who properly represent what they are selling, and then there's everyone else.

### Find a Reputable Seller

Many collectors have stories of being burned buying antique maps on eBay, at estate sales, or antique malls. Because antique maps are a unique collectible, it is important to find an auction house or dealer that specializes in maps to ensure that you are buying an authentic piece.

Ideally the seller should offer a certificate of authenticity with your purchase. Fortunately, it is not difficult to find a reputable seller of antique maps.

### Consider Map Fairs

The best resource for finding a good outlet is through one of the annual map fairs that are held in Miami, San Francisco, London, and Paris. These map fairs showcase map auctions and dealers from around the world. Even if you can't attend a map fair in person, their websites offer a list of map sellers along with contact information.



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# There's no Such Thing as Identical Twins

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## 4

When looking at multiple maps that depict the same region, there are always differences - some small and others more obvious - that can impact the desirability and value of a map.

### Comparing Similar Maps

These two maps of Florida (Exhibit 3, pg. 9) appear nearly identical, but were created by different mapmakers. One was published in a relatively rare atlas by Henry Tanner, and the other was published in a common atlas by Samuel A. Mitchell. Even though they look the same, the one published in the rarer atlas commands a higher price.

Plagiarism wasn't taboo in centuries past, so it was common for mapmakers to copy maps from one another, often with few changes made to the map other than the mapmaker's name.

### The Use of Copper Plates

In addition, since maps were engraved on expensive copper plates, these copper plates were used repeatedly, often for decades.

When new geographical information became known, these changes would be made to the copper plate, which would then be printed again. Any alterations to a copper plate, whether a new mapmaker's name or a cartographic change, constitute a new "state" of the map, with some states more desirable to collectors than others.

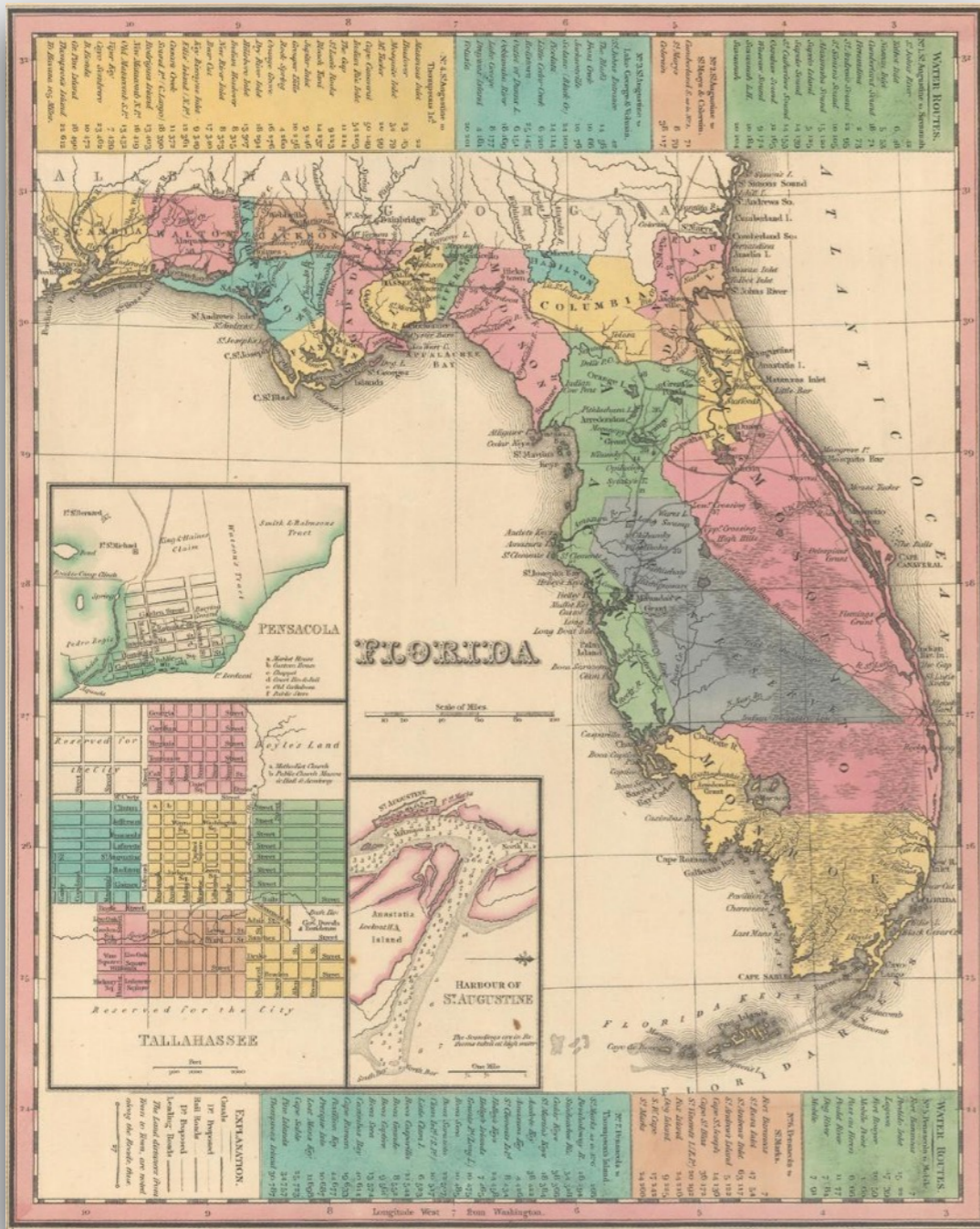
One such example is Alexis-Hubert Jaillot's map of North America, *Amerique Septentrionale*, which exists in 7 different states (Exhibit 4, pg. 10).

### Points of Reference

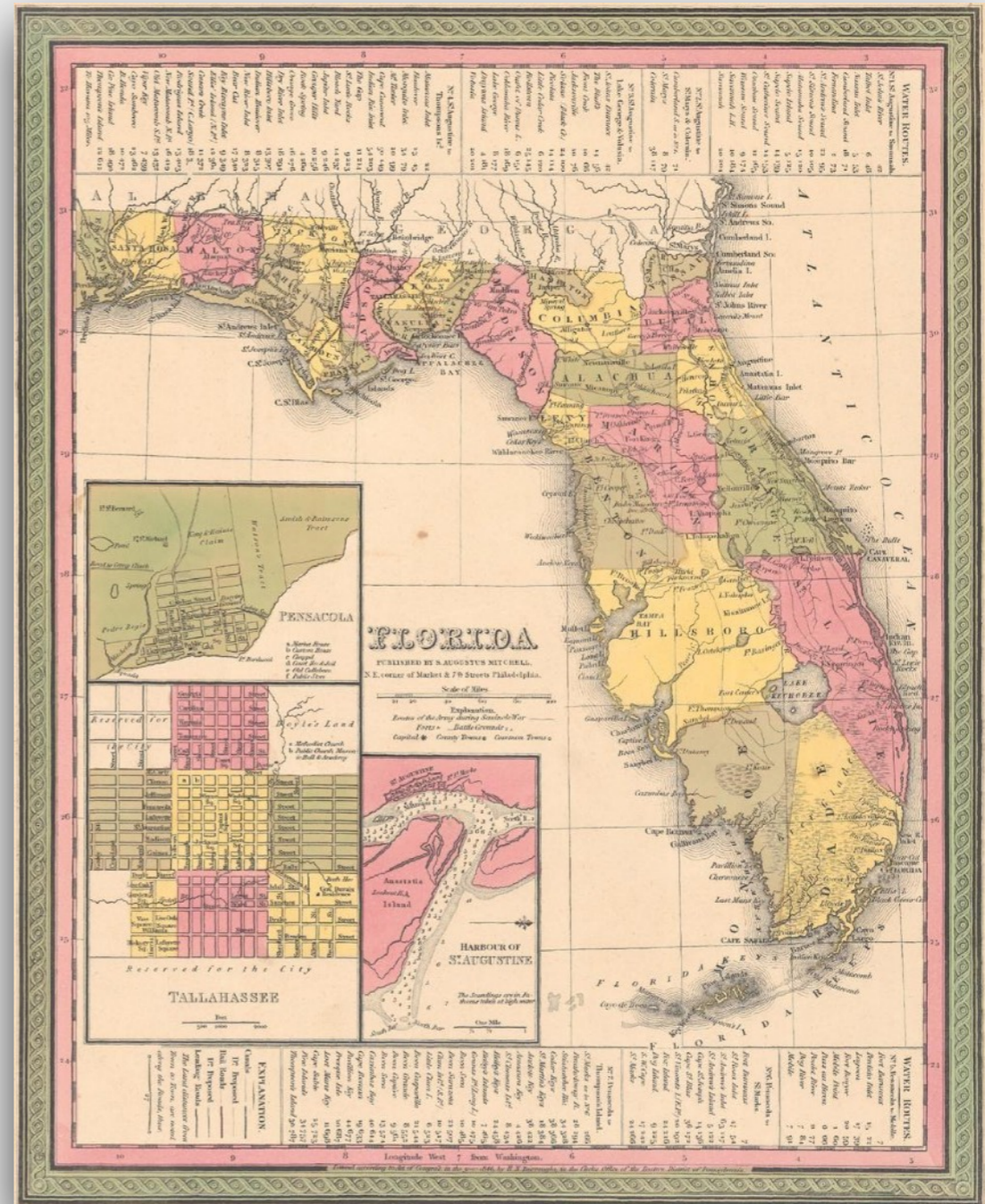
Reputable sellers will be able to explain what factors make a specific map more interesting and historically significant than other similar maps, and therefore command a premium price. You can also arm yourself with this information by perusing reference books on antique maps. Whether you choose to follow a map seller's expertise or do some research on your own, there are plenty of resources to make you confident in your next purchase.



# Exhibit 3



Map of Florida by Henry Tanner, published 1836, and sold for \$300.



Map of Florida by Samuel A. Mitchell, published 1846, and sold for \$150.

# Exhibit 4



The 2nd state of Jaillot's map shows California as an island, a popular cartographic "myth" among collectors.



The 5th state of Jaillot's map is more up-to-date and accurate, but is only worth half of the earlier edition.

“The ones that escape you, you think about forever... particularly ones that are rare. You never know if you're going to get a second bite of that apple.”

DAVID, MAP COLLECTOR

# Condition Is (Almost Always) King

## 5

With most collectibles "condition is king," and where antique maps are concerned, this usually rings true. Most maps were printed on paper, and while modern paper is cheap, thin, and tears easily, antique paper is typically much more robust. This is due to the fact that paper used to be made by hand using cotton or linen rags. The paper-making process resulted in long, sturdy fibers within the paper that made it thick and durable.

### From Wood Pulp to Cotton Paper

It wasn't until the 19th century that cotton was replaced by wood pulp as the main ingredient in paper, which resulted in thinner, much more fragile paper. It is not uncommon to find a 400-year old map that appears to be in perfect condition, whereas a 100-year old map will often suffer from tears and other condition issues. This doesn't mean that collectors don't buy maps printed on wood pulp paper, it simply means that they are more forgiving about condition problems with these "younger" maps.

While you should always buy a map in the best condition you can find and afford, some maps may not be available without some flaws. Some condition issues are common on many maps and won't significantly decrease the value unless they are distracting to the eye:

- age spots (called foxing) (Exhibit 5A, pg. 13)
- light soiling
- light browning of the paper (called toning) (Exhibit 5B, pg. 13)
- faint damp stains (Exhibit 5C, pg. 14)
- small worm holes (Exhibit 5D, pg. 14)
- minor creases

When condition issues are confined to the blank margins (the edges of the sheet of paper outside of the printed map) they often don't impact the value of the map at all. Some flaws - such as tears, worm holes, and toning - can be professionally repaired by a paper conservator, making the flaws nearly invisible and therefore minimizing any impact to the map's value.

## Exhibit 5



A. Spots of foxing appear mostly confined to the blank margins of this map.



B. The paper on this map has toned along the edges of the sheet, caused by non-archival framing materials.

## Exhibit 5



C. Because these damp stains are distracting to the overall map, they significantly decrease its value.



D. This diagonal worm hole appears along the edge of the map.

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# The Truth About Color

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## 6

Although most collectors prefer maps that are colored, as color can highlight the interesting geographical and decorative details, color does not always increase the desirability of a map. Some maps were not meant to be colored; in particular maps from the late 15th through early 16th centuries were published in black ink without any color added. With these early maps, most collectors prefer that they remain in their original uncolored state.

Starting in the 16th century, publishers would offer atlases sans color and made-to-order, providing affluent or important clientele with options to upgrade their copies.

### **When Was Color Added?**

Choices in color ranged from simple outline color, which means that only the borderlines were highlighted, to elaborate full color examples that only the wealthiest could afford.

If color was added soon after the map was printed around the time of its publication, it is referred to as original or contemporary color (Exhibit 6, pg. 16). Maps that feature original color are a big draw for collectors, especially when the color is well-preserved.

Later color (also called modern or recent color) was applied well after the map's publication. It's a broad term; later color could have been applied yesterday in a startling replica of the old style or hundreds of years ago in a sloppy, anachronistic hand. Because it tends to increase the value of the map, sellers will typically point out when they believe an example is in original color. If a map isn't advertised as being in original color, it is likely later color.

## The Effects of Oxidation

There is one situation in which original color decreases the value of a map, and that occurs with oxidation. Oxidation refers to the chemical reaction that occurs when certain substances are exposed to oxygen. Verdegris, the green pigment used on early maps, oxidizes over many years to varying degrees. At its most mild, oxidation causes the green pigment to turn darker or slightly brown; however in severe situations the green pigment deteriorates the paper and causes brittleness and cracking. This can be most readily seen by holding the paper up to light, or by viewing the back of the map.

While maps with well-preserved, original color are highly prized by collectors, they are less common on the market than their modern-colored counterparts.

## Exhibit 6



Two examples of the same world map by Willem Blaeu, with contemporary color on the left and modern color on the right.





# Be Wary of Framed Maps

7

A framed map on a wall can be the centerpiece of a room. Unfortunately, old framing materials and techniques are the leading cause of damage to antique maps.

## Inferior Materials

Prior to the 1980's, it was not standard practice in the framing industry to use archival or acid-free materials, which are required to safely preserve paper. As a result, maps framed with non-archival materials suffer a myriad of problems, such as toning, brittleness, and cracking. Oftentimes, these problems are not visible through the glass or can be hidden by the matting around the map.

## What Might the Frame Be Covering Up?

Even if a map was framed using only archival materials, the frame and the matting can hide imperfections that decrease the value of the map. The condition of a map cannot be determined until the map has been inspected outside of a frame. Unless a seller has viewed a map outside of the frame and can guarantee its condition, you should be concerned. This is why most reputable map auctioneers and dealers will not sell framed maps.



# ==== Telltale Signs That a Map Isn't Genuine ====

## 8

Although forgeries are common in the art world, fortunately they are not a major problem for antique map collectors. However, collectors must always be on the lookout for reproductions. Even though reproductions were not created with the intent to deceive, they can be mistaken for the real thing.

A few key steps to verify a map's authenticity:

### 1. Examine the map outside of a frame

Most reproductions will indicate that they are reprints, either in the blank margin below the map or on the back of the map, both of which are typically hidden in a frame.

### 2. Get a sense for the paper

The type of paper used should correspond with the time period when the map was printed. If the paper looks like modern, wood pulp paper and the map is supposed to be from the 17th century when maps were printed on cotton rag paper, then it's a red flag.

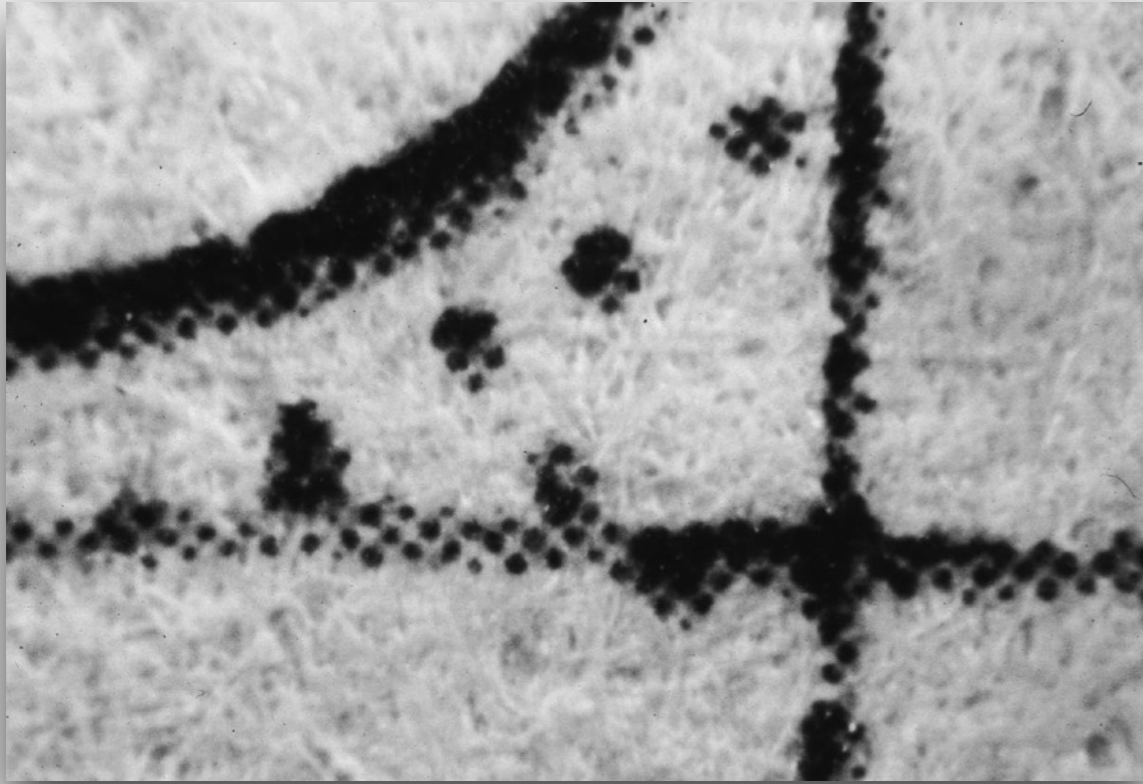
### 3. Use a magnifier

Even a 10x magnification of the map will betray a reproduction by inspecting the black ink lines. An original engraving will have crisp, distinct and continuous lines, whereas most reproductions will have blurred lines, tiny specks of ink spattered around the lines, or the lines will be made up of tiny dots of ink. (Exhibit 7A, pg. 20)

### 4. Compare it with an original

It is not difficult to find an image of the same map on the internet, and by comparing the questionable map with a known original, you can spot differences. The easiest feature to compare is the plate mark, which appears as a shadow of ink along the edge of the copper plate when it was printed. On a reproduction, the plate mark will either be missing or will be added in a different size or location from the original. (Exhibit 7B, pg. 20)

## Exhibit 7



A. A magnified image of a map reproduced using modern printing techniques, with lines comprised of visible dots of ink.  
(Image courtesy of *Collecting Old Maps*, Manasek, Griggs & Griggs)



B. The plate mark from an original antique map appears as a shadow of ink surrounding the border of the map.

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# How To Value a Map

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It's easier to figure out what to buy than to decide how much to pay. Determining what a map is worth is part science and part art. In general terms, a map is worth whatever the market will bear, so one way to get a sense for a map's value is to look at how much it has sold for in the past.

## Consider Multiple Variables

Of course when comparing prices, you have to take into account the differences in condition, color, and the state of the different examples of the map, as each of these factors affects the price. You must also take into consideration whether the comparable prices are auction results (also called hammer prices) or dealer prices, as the latter will typically be higher than auction results. Two great resources for map prices are [RareBookHub.com](http://RareBookHub.com) and [OldMaps.com](http://OldMaps.com), and values listed within the last 5-7 years are still considered relevant.

## Comps for Rare Maps

Some maps are uncommon and haven't appeared on the market in many years. For rare maps, you may not find any historical pricing, so you'll have to look at prices for similar maps. In these instances, compare maps that show the same geographical region, were published within 10 years of the map in question, and are similar in size.

However, the rarer a map is, the more valuable it will likely be in relation to comparable maps. Ultimately the market will decide what these maps are worth, and if you come across a really rare piece, don't miss out. As David M., a collector of US Gulf Coast maps, explains, "The ones that escape you, you think about forever... particularly ones that are rare. You never know if you're going to get a second bite of that apple."

Some maps are quite common, while others are only offered on the market once every 10-20 years.



“Find out what you are really interested in and stick to it. You're going to make some mistakes, and you're going to have some triumphs. It's the fun and joy of collecting, and it's given me a lot of pleasure over the years.”

**PAUL, MAP COLLECTOR**

# A Rare Map Isn't Necessarily A Valuable Map

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Although rarity is a factor that determines the value of a map, it isn't the only, or even most important factor. The most influential factor in determining value is popularity.

## Supply and Demand

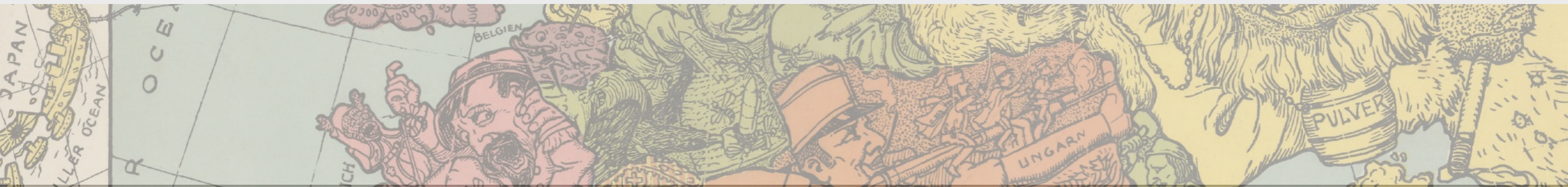
Certain maps are more desirable among collectors, or have large collecting communities. There are more collectors of maps of Texas and California, for instance, than maps of North Dakota, and as demand increases so does value.

Obviously supply also plays a factor, and some maps are less common than others either because more were printed or more survived over the years. But if a map isn't desirable, then the fact that it is rare doesn't matter.

Of course popularity changes over time as collecting interests change, so you never know if your map will suddenly increase in value.

## Go Beyond Search Engines

A final point on rarity: just because you don't find a map online doesn't mean it's rare. There are millions of maps in public institutions and private collections, most of which are not searchable online.



# How To Be a Map Custodian

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The fact that so many antique maps have survived for hundreds of years is incredible. Once you add a piece to your collection, you must take steps to preserve your historical artifact for generations to come.

## Handle with Care

Maps should never be handled by the very edge of the paper, as that can cause tears; ideally you should pick up a map several inches from the edge of the paper, using both hands to provide adequate support. Paper clips, binder clips, post-it notes, and tape should never be used on antique paper, as they can damage the image or paper surface. If you must write notations on a map (preferably on the back), using a soft leaded pencil is fine.

## Framing a Map

Many collectors opt to frame their maps both to preserve and appreciate them. As collector Arjun I. explains, "We don't hide them. We live with them -- they are all around us."

Maps should be framed by a professional using only acid-free, PH-neutral materials, reversible mounting adhesives, and sealed frames. Framed maps must be kept away from direct light sources and high humidity to prevent damage to the paper.

## Other Storage Options

Once you've run out of wall space, there are other options for preserving maps. Companies such as Gaylord Archival and University Products sell archival sleeves and folders for storing maps, which can then be housed in a flat file, on an easel, or on any flat surface. Clear archival sleeves are an excellent choice for maps, as they protect the map from any tears or damage due to handling, while still allowing you to view both the front and back of the map.

Regardless of how you choose to store and display your maps, consider yourself a temporary custodian, whose responsibility is to ensure your collection's continued survival for the next few centuries.



# About Old World Auctions

Old World Auctions specializes in genuine antique maps, atlases and decorative graphics originating between the 14th and early 20th centuries. Our online auctions operate on a consignment basis, with all material personally inspected by OWA map experts prior to listing on the website.

Each item is carefully researched and described and we guarantee the authenticity and condition of each item with a 100% money-back guarantee.

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