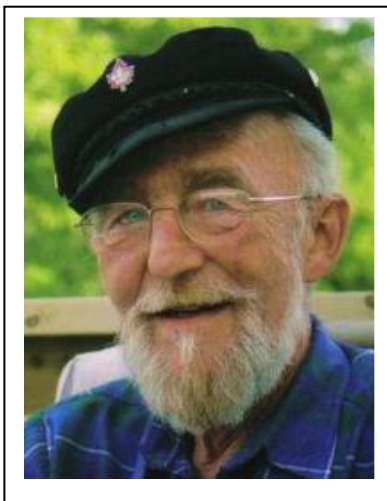


The Family Historian

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Column #49

Maps



I am probably a certifiable cartophile. I grew up on my father's stories of travel and exploration and I really do love maps. A North American road Atlas and an Almanac with geopolitical maps of the world are at hand beside my reading chair and a World Atlas and several historical atlases are at my desk. The filing drawer of my desk is overstuffed with a very eclectic collection of maps.

Almost every museum exhibit that I designed and built contained at least one map and I frequently used them as visual aids in teaching and lecturing.

I mention all this because maps can be very useful, even essential, tools of the Family History researcher and I want you to know that I am completely objective in my view of the subject.

While maps can show us exact locations of places, county boundaries, likely travel routes, etc. of our ancestors, they can do a lot more. I love the old County Atlas maps that can give us a real flavour of the community that our ancestors lived in. Who their neighbors were, where the schools, churches, cemeteries, and stores were and how they got there.

Among my favorite maps are the topographical ones. It may take a little effort to really get a feel for interpreting the map but it is worth it. Get one of your own home area and study it in detail.

Start considering how the features on the map affect your life. The hills, waterways, marshes, quarries, mills, distance and terrain between neighbors, and from shopping areas, schools, and churches all impact your life. Do the hills funnel the wind and rain over your land? Do you have to go far to fish? Do hills block the sun in morning or afternoon? Is it a joy to look out your window in the morning, the afternoon? Can you go for a row or a paddle nearby?

Now take a topographical map of your ancestor's area and try to see how the location was likely to affect them. It is the next best thing to being there and may even encourage you to visit the site of their home. The surrounding topography can also help us to locate features like cemeteries, that we might be looking for and the best route to reach them.

County Atlases can usually be found in local libraries; and area museums and archives are usually well endowed with wonderful maps. Conservation Authorities frequently sell topographical maps of their area. There are several internet sites that feature historical maps but I usually don't find it very satisfying to study part of a map on a computer monitor.

A number of people that I research lived in Montreal and one of the maps I am looking for is a street map of Montreal from the late 1950's or earlier. This would be before all the street name changes and the building of the new superhighways that crisscross the city and that seriously changed the landscape.

Anything that helps us to better understand our ancestors will enrich the story that we can tell about them.

County Atlases Online

Thanks to reader Dave Corbett for the reminder about the County Atlas Project at McGill University. These wonderful books are being digitized and are available online at: <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/default.htm>.

These maps show the concessions and lots, identify some of the lot owners and locate churches, post offices, etc. Most of the local libraries have a reprint edition for the local county atlas but if you want to consult it from home, or need information on another county, this is a handy resource.