

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 64 – June 2020

The Meanings of Maps

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



This month's *Found in the Archives* explores special maps in the Clerk's custody. As with convenient phone apps that most people use today, maps were a crucial part of 18th and 19th century citizens' lives. Readers of *Found in the Archives* have seen maps as part of past FITA topics, since they are a great visual representation of Fairfax County places and ideas, both past and present. Looking

at early Fairfax County maps provides insight into the way Fairfax farmers and merchants understood their environment, as well as the relationship they had with the land itself. The details of even the simplest map reveals what the motivations and priorities were to the mapmaker. You will want to click and zoom a lot for this edition of *Found in the Archives*!

Unlike today's maps, 18th and 19th century maps were not created for mass distribution to a consuming public, but rather, they were created to achieve a very specific purpose for a few interested people. They could illustrate a point of property dispute (as would often happen in boundary dispute cases before the Court), providing a visual description of where major events took place. Other times, the map was a symbolic show of authority over the land therein. The Historic Records Center preserves highway plats, subdivision plats, town plans, plats that accompany deeds and chancery cases, atlas maps, tax maps and boundary-line dispute maps. Maps are often attached to a deed or other land record. The great thing about maps is that the older the map, the more the researcher sees how land has changed over time, and even the personality of the surveyor who drew the map.

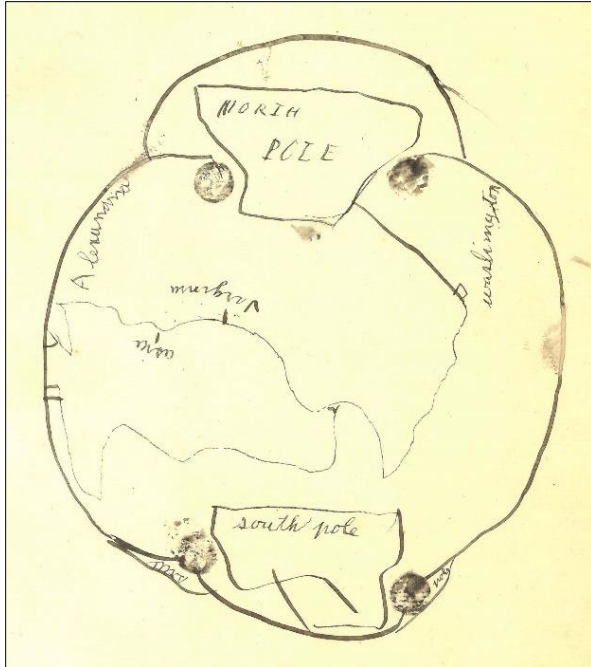


Figure 1: Fairfax Estrays Book: 1784-1828 front matter

The Court's 1784 Estrays Book has one such map, which is presumed to be a mere doodle from a Civil War-era soldier. An "estray" was livestock that wandered onto someone's property, and the Clerk was charged, under 18th century Virginia law, to keep a well-bound book of all the disputes over who owned these wandering animals. The claimant who found a cow, horse, or other animal would need to show the Court that they made efforts to find the owner before trying to claim it for themselves. In Figure 1, the hand-drawn map appears to be a representation of the whole Earth due to its circular shape demarking a North and South pole. The North and South poles appear as masses protruding out of the rest of the drawn globe. Near the middle of the amateur map, a line divides two sections of land. One side is labeled as Virginia, while the other side is labeled as Asia. The Asia/Virginia contact suggests the creator's Virginia-centric attitude; that Virginia is the center of the world.

In the close-up at the right (Figure 2), in the lower left shows what appears to be mountain ranges. Knowing that this is probably a doodle from a Civil War soldier comports with the map's rudimentary skill-level.

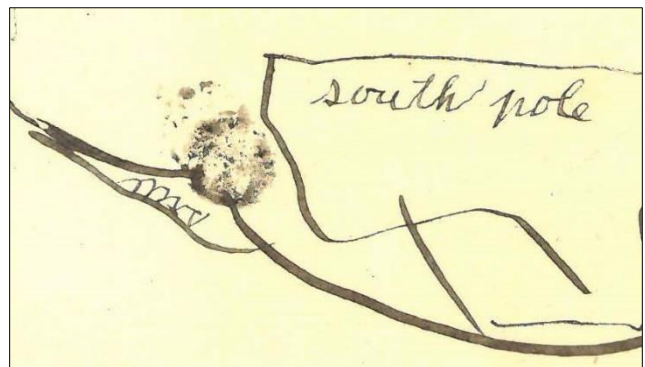


Figure 2: Fairfax Estrays Book: 1784-1828 front matter, Close-up

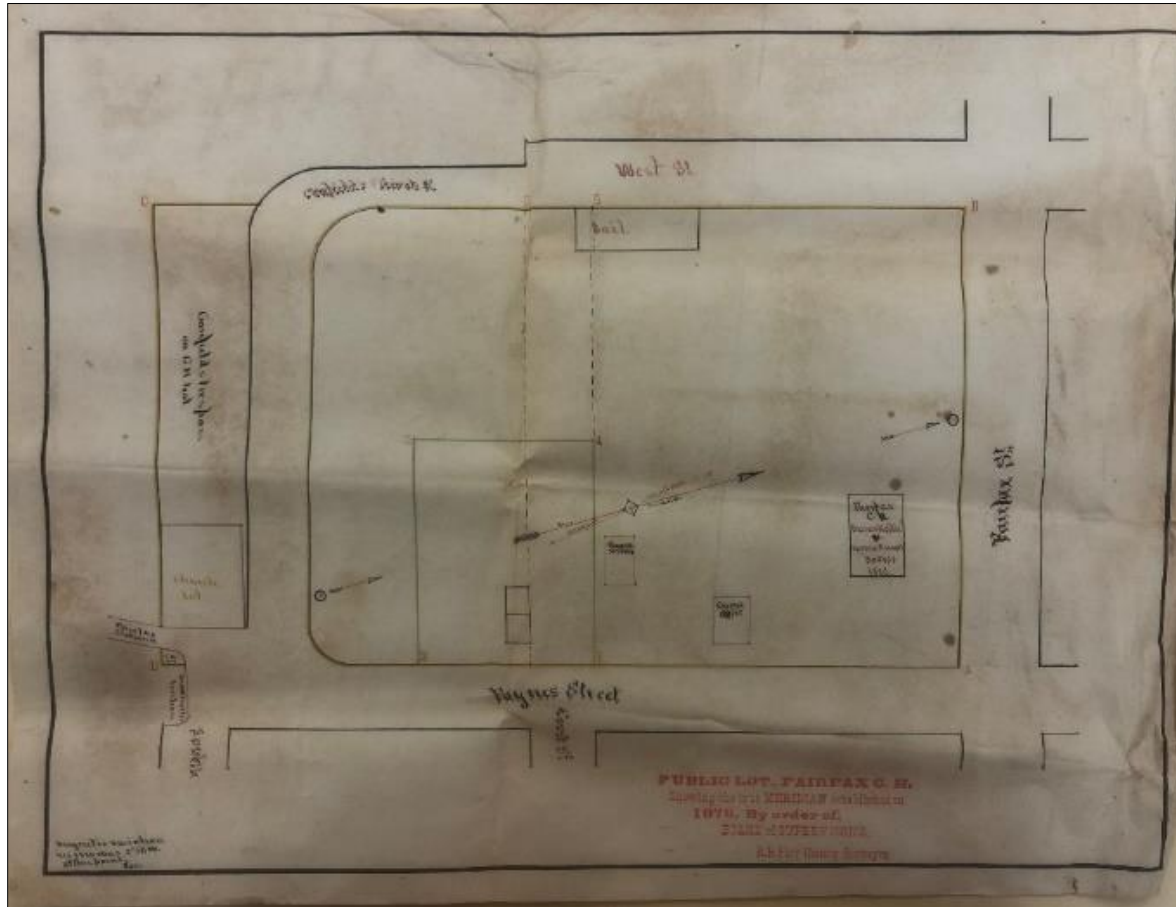


Figure 3: Fairfax Deed Book U-4 page 364

The Clerk of Court maintains several plats depicting the 1799 Courthouse itself, and larger courthouse grounds and surroundings. Figure 3 depicts an 1876 map of the Courthouse. Its clean lines and labeling make it an easy map to read. The accompanying deed recorded with this plat indicates that the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors needed to correctly allot public land that was incorrectly indicated by a previous survey and plat. This corrected map places West Street at the top of the page, with the Courthouse towards the bottom right-hand corner. For researchers, the top of a map indicates the creator's perspective, signaling the surveyor's standing position, relative to the subject land. The Courthouse is distinguished by a box that contains the names of the active judges as of the date of the survey, and the Clerk's office and the 1805 jail are also featured. Their prominence ties to them as points of reference mentioned in the deed book.



Figure 4: Hopkins Atlas, page 73

Another beautiful map is found in the 1879 *Hopkins Atlas*, as seen in Figure 4. This map shows West Street running parallel from right to left, with the 1799 Courthouse centered near the middle of the map. A small rectangle near where the Clerk's office appeared in the previous map indicates consistency of that building location. This map denotes where the residents of the town of Fairfax lived when the map was created. The surveyors included home ownership and business owners for the rural Fairfax in the late 19th century. For additional publicity in the *Hopkins Atlas*, business owners could have their names and professions featured on the map if they donated funds for

the Atlas. In this way, map-making can offer facts and history for researchers doing genealogical research. The green shading highlights main points of interest for the community, and this Fairfax plat is helpful for understanding how the area around Fairfax Courthouse has changed.

While today, most of us use maps to get from point A to point B, maps and plats have historically had much to tell us about the stories of people – who they were and the lives they lived. Early maps can offer a snapshot into the lives that preceded our own, the people that contributed to the world we live in and sometimes even reflected in the names of the roads GPS directs us down.

For more information on these and other records, please call the Historic Records Center at 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

An update on Historic Records Center operations:

Currently, the Historic Records Center remains closed to the public, but we look forward to reopening soon, as circumstances allow. In the meantime, we are working and are happy to help with your research from home. You can reach the archival team by calling 703-246-4168 or emailing CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov. We look forward to seeing you all in-person again soon!

