

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING | August 23, 2013

## What Lurks Beyond the Boundaries

By AMANDA FOREMAN

For adults vacationing with children, the greatest test of endurance used to be putting up with the refrain "Are we there yet?" The invention of Google Maps along with similar Internet tools has mercifully spread peace and good times where guesswork and frayed nerves reigned before.

Still, it is important to remember that the desire to know "where and when" is one of the noblest questions of humankind. The earliest efforts to ascribe boundaries to space and time were directed up instead of down. The ancients began with the lights in the night sky. The oldest star chart in existence depicts the Orion constellation, carved onto the tusk of a woolly mammoth during the Stone Age.



Thirty thousand years later, at around 700 B.C., the Babylonians bequeathed to history the first known attempts to map the world. These weren't simply points on a tablet linking A to B, but interpretations of the seen and unseen, the mythological and the philosophical. The Babylonians

saw themselves as an island civilization at the center of the world, encircled by a "bitter river."

Each subsequent civilization has had its own method of coping with the terrors that lie beyond the cartographer's ken. A Roman map showing the vast road network of the empire labeled the mysterious lands outside its boundaries with dire warnings: "in his locis elephanti nascuntur," "in his locis scorpiones nascuntur" and "hic cenocephali nascuntur": In these places elephants, scorpions and dog-headed beings are born. The *mappa mundi* of the Middle Ages listed dragons, men with horns 4 feet long and walruses, among the dangers awaiting those foolhardy enough to venture beyond Christendom.

The 19th-century British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury once remarked that too many hours spent poring over maps drove men to madness. The 15th-century Chinese held similar views. Once the world leaders in cartography, in 1433 the Ming Dynasty court suddenly reversed course. Blaming the country's ills on the wasteful expense of exploration, the Xuande emperor forbade the construction of ships with more than two masts. For good measure, all the maps and records belonging to China's greatest navigator, Zheng He, were confiscated or destroyed. By the 16th century there wasn't one oceangoing ship left in the country.

European leaders, by contrast, couldn't look at a map of the world without wishing that they owned just a little bit more, or that their neighbors owned just a little bit less. Napoleon grandly erased the Holy Roman Empire from the map. After his demise, the Russians and Germans erased yet more of the old kingdoms. In Africa, the Portuguese colored the parts they coveted in pink; the British colored theirs in red.

There are precious few instances when a map has been the instrument of peace. But one notable exception resides in a little-known incident in diplomatic history.

During the early 19th century, Britain and the U.S. fought over America's expanding borders. In the late 1830s, Anglo-U.S. relations teetered precariously over the putative boundary between Canada and Maine.

The problem was that previous treaties had been rather vague about its location. Secretary of State Daniel Webster was digging in for a fight when, quite by chance, the State Department secretly learned of an 18th-century map that validated the British claims. Meanwhile, in London, a clearing out of an old bureau in the Foreign Office uncovered a map that supported the American claims.

Terrified that still another map might be lurking in the shadows, the two sides hurried through the negotiations. To this day, the 1842 Webster-Ashburton treaty remains a model of reason and compromise. Google Maps might have achieved a similar result, but it wouldn't have been as exciting.

*A version of this article appeared August 23, 2013, on page C12 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: What Lurks Beyond the Boundaries.*