



# USING MAPS IN FAMILY HISTORY

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Maps are symbolic representations of places. So how can we interpret them to inform our family history?

Maps can be extremely useful in family history, but are a little underutilised. Perhaps if we learned how to understand them better, we could get more use out of them.

Maps can, of course, show where your ancestors lived and the features around these places. Knowledge of nearby features, such as mountains, rivers, forests, roads, railways and big towns, can reveal details of ancestral lives. For example, mountains tend to impede travel, while roads and railways facilitate it. Big towns may be where baptisms and marriages took place and where records may still be found.

Maps can provide information about the distance between places, allowing you to assess the likelihood that your ancestors moved between them. By studying a chronological series of maps, you may be able to determine how a settlement has changed over time, when something was built, when boundaries changed and identify how the names of places have changed.

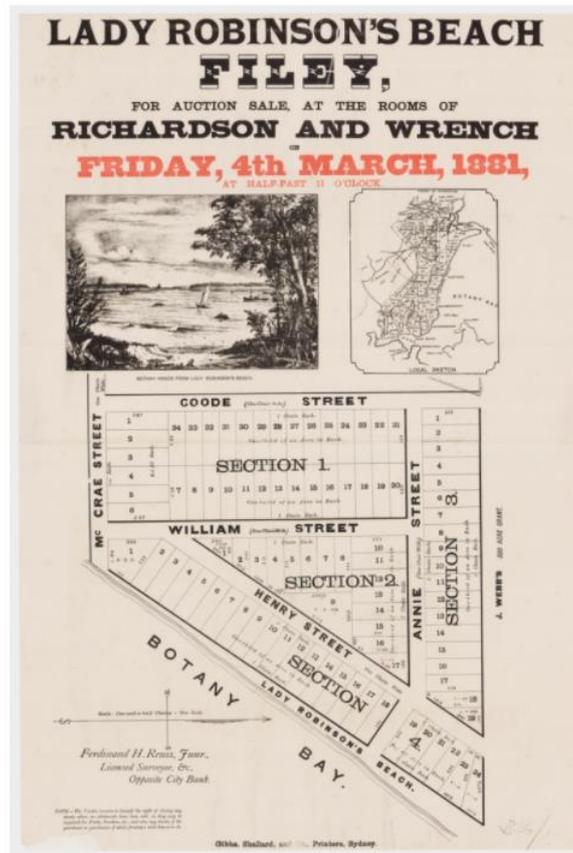
## Context and provenance

Examining the context and provenance of a source is always important, but for maps it is particularly so. As maps are symbolic representations of a place we cannot interpret them effectively unless we understand who made them, when and why.

A map is an image of a place at a particular time, but it is nothing like a photography. Reducing the details of a place to fit on a page means some features are omitted. The choice of what to include and what to omit depends on the purpose of the map.

The context of maps is spatial, chronological and cultural. Spatial, because a map represents just a portion of the earth and it helps to know where the map sits within the broader landscape. Chronological, because the map represents a place in time and without knowledge of the date it is pretty useless. Cultural, because culture influences the purpose of the map, and the symbols and conventions used.





*If you are lucky, the map itself may provide contextual information. Brighton le Sands subdivision, New South Wales Australia (State Library, New South Wales)*

When exploring the context and provenance of a map, look for information about both the creator of the map and the publisher. Try to find the date that it was created and the date that it was published – these two dates could vary considerably. It is also important to consider whether the creator of the map had primary knowledge of the place or has based the map on other sources.

### Analysing content

Why was the map created? What was the creator trying to achieve? This information will help you determine biases or intentional deceptions reflected in the map, and also help you interpret the symbols.

No maps contain details of every feature. They omit details and they simplify features. Be aware of this and consider the implications for any conclusions you are drawing from the map.

Mapping conventions exist and if they have been applied to the map they will assist your analysis. The title may help you identify the purpose, location and date. There may be a north arrow or compass rose to help you orientate, or if not, perhaps north is at the top of the map. If a scale is included, that will help you judge distances, however, not all maps contain scales. Even worse, maps may employ different scales in different parts of the map. Look for a legend or key to the symbols used. If there is none, examine similar maps and see if the legend on those maps help.





Subdivision plan, Brighton le Sands, New South Wales Australia. Scale altered to exaggerate proximity of the beach to the railway line (State Library, New South Wales)

Although it will be difficult to determine, try to find out the source of the data used to compile the map. Maps may be original or derivative sources. They may be produced by a surveyor based on their own research in the field, or derived from other maps, photos, drawings and descriptions.

### Using maps

Maps can provide valuable information for your family history, such as the distance between two places. You will need to make a judgement call in each circumstance to determine whether a map is the best source to cite for that information. In some cases, additional sources will be needed, while in others, an old map may be the only evidence available.





*Jamaica, 1763. This map is the only evidence I have of the location of land granted to my ancestor (Jamaican Family Search, provenance unknown)*

More and more maps are being made available online. This is fantastic for family history, because the digital images are often rich in content and the technology makes it easy to navigate around the map and zoom in on the features of interest.

Extracts of maps are a great way to illustrate your family history. Vast numbers of old maps are available with no copyright restrictions. When using newer maps, take care to examine both copyright and licensing restrictions that may apply.

### **Citing maps**

#### **Format**

Title and/or description (including location), date and/or edition, creator, repository

For online maps, you might add the URL

#### **Examples**

Parish of Arding, County of Sandon, 4th edn, Lands Department, 27 September 1926, Mitchell Library Parish Maps

Plan of the village of North Harbour, 1828, Thomas Mitchell, NSW State Library, <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/74VvMR26ywpb/PB32BB5LGMR3X>



## How and where to find them

The best places for maps depends on the location of the map you are searching for. However, you might like to try these websites:

### Portals

FamilySearch wiki [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main\\_Page](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page)

Cyndi's list, maps category

Genuki <https://www.genuki.org.uk/>

### A few other good sites

[www.loc.gov/maps/collections](http://www.loc.gov/maps/collections) Library of Congress

[www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com) David Rumsey Historical Maps Collection

<https://www.layersoflondon.org/> Layers of London

<https://www.oldmapsonline.org/> Old Maps Online

<https://maps.nls.uk/> National Library of Scotland

Your State and National Libraries, and archives. Look for guides, such as NSW State Archives

<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/collections-and-research/guides-and-indexes/maps-and-plans/guides>

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### To cite this article:

Lautrec, Danielle, 'Using maps in family history', *Generations Genealogy*, <http://www.generationsgenealogy.com.au>, posted 25 December 2021



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