This is the most common question asked by those new to the world of antique maps.

Fortunately, it is hard to forge an antique map, particularly one printed before the early 1800s. So convincing fakes are few and far between.

Legitimate modern reproductions and facsimiles of antique maps are quite common, but are also easy to recognize: somewhere on the printed image, usually below the border, will be a statement in modern type such as "Reproduced by [such-and-such publishing co.]," followed by a 20th- or 21st-century date.

Aside from forgeries, however, another risk is facsimiles of early maps produced to be bound in as illustrations to 19th- and early 20th-century books on history and map-making. They were not originally intended to deceive, but when removed from their binding can fool an unwary buyer.

This article reviews a number of telltale features that can help you assess the age of a map. One caveat: few of these tests are on their own conclusive. The process usually involves accumulating a number of pieces of evidence which, when assembled, provide very strong evidence for or against a map’s antiquity.

General characteristics of antique maps
Antique maps were printed by a variety of methods, each of which leaves telltale signs. Whatever the printing process, however, these maps have certain characteristics in common.

Paper
Most old paper looks old. First, there is usually some toning (faint browning) to the paper, particularly at the edges. Further, there is almost always some wear, such as creases, tears or holes; soiling, such as finger smudges at the lower corners; or rust-colored spots known as “foxing.” That said, presence of absence of such features is suggestive rather than conclusive: aging can be faked, while a small percentage of genuine maps do show up on the market in pristine condition.

Prior to the late 1700s the paper used in printing was made from a pulp of macerated cotton rags spread in a thin layer on a wire screen and allowed to dry. Such “laid” paper feels somewhat rough to the touch. Further, the wire screen imprints the paper with a distinct pattern of vertical lines spaced about an inch apart transected by a mesh of closely-spaced horizontal lines. Later “wove” papers are both smoother in feel and lack this line pattern. This provides one of the few conclusive tests described in this article: a map not on cotton laid paper could not have been printed before about 1775.

Evidence of binding
Most antique maps show traces of having once been bound into a book or periodical. The most common of these is one or more folds, usually down the center of the map. Traces of a “binder’s stub” may also be visible. This was a thin strip of paper glued to the rear of a map and used as the point of binding. Even if the stub has been removed, a strip of faint browning from glue residue may be visible.

In other cases, maps were sewn into a binding using a margin as the attachment point. After disbinding this margin is often left both somewhat ragged and visibly narrower than the others.

While presence of binding signs is reasonably good evidence for a map’s antiquity, the converse is not necessarily true. Some early maps were issued unbound (“broadsheet” format) and by their nature will lack such features.

Coloring
For anyone but the specialist a map’s coloring is rarely useful as evidence for or against antiquity. Many early maps

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Early plans of Massachusetts towns: the Resolve of 1830

On March 1, 1830 the Massachusetts legislature resolved “that the inhabitants of the City of Boston, and the several towns and districts in the Commonwealth, be, and they hereby are, required to make, or cause to be made... accurate plans of their respective towns or districts.”1

This language reiterated word-for-word a Resolve of 1794, the first time the state had ordered a comprehensive survey effort. Though the resulting plans were not published separately, they had been used to compile the first official map of Massachusetts (1798).2

At about 3 inches to a mile, the updated plans were to include much detail:

- the names, courses, and magnitude of rivers and smaller streams; roads, public and private, with their courses; the situation of houses for public worship, court houses, and other public buildings...
- bridges; ferries; falls; ponds; shores; harbors; islands; mountains; hills; mills and manufactories; mines and minerals, and of what kind; iron works and furnaces; meadows (salt and fresh); and wood land...

Dozens of plans were produced in manuscript and filed with the state, in whose archives they still reside. John G. Hales, the most prolific of the surveyors involved, alone produced at least 45 in 1830-31.3

**Town plans in print**

Many of these plans were also printed and published in broadsheet format, and in some cases bound in to early town histories. They appear to have been privately published by individuals with some connection to the towns, and were usually printed by one of the Boston lithographic printing establishments—most often Pendleton’s.

More than 40 of the plans were printed between 1830-36.4 These include for example plans of Cambridge, Concord, Dorchester and Milton, Newton, Plymouth, Roxbury, and Wellfleet. Towns in the Boston metropolitan area predominate; to the west we know only of plans of Worcester, Amherst, Northampton and West Springfield.5

In most cases, these are the first printed plans of their respective towns and are significant historical documents. They are also quite lovely examples of indigenous draftsmanship and engraving. To date, little has been written about them.6

**Visual features of the plans**

Per the Resolve, the plans generally show both major and minor topographical and geographical features. The Gloucester plan (fig. 1)—and perhaps other plans of coastal towns—also provides fairly extensive information about water depths, shoals and other navigation hazards.

Man-made features such as roads, buildings and the locations of commercial, government, and religious establishments are also generally depicted (though the Gloucester plan is lacking in this regard).

Also following the resolve, the plans carefully delineate town boundaries and provide data about distances to county seats and to Boston.

Most of these plans lack the embellishments that lend charm to many earlier printed maps—grand cartouches, sailing ships, sea monsters, &c. Two exceptions are the plans of Amherst (fig. 2) and Worcester, which are framed by profile views of local landmarks. Even the unadorned plans are somehow quite attractive, however, due perhaps to the variety of line styles used to delineate hills, coastlines, forests, roads and other features.

**Collecting early Massachusetts town plans**

Recently we have seen few of these plans circulating on the market, so acquiring one will likely require patience. As a start, we suggest making your interest known to locally-based dealers such as Boston Rare Maps, though you may also have luck with one of the fine dealers in the New York area. If you are willing to invest more effort, monitor both the New England and nationally-known auction houses. Finally, you may have luck in used and antiquarian bookshops, particularly those specializing in early town histories that may contain these plans.

**Notes**

1 Resolves of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, passed at the several sessions of the General Court, commencing May, 1828, and ending June, 1831. Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1831, p. 270.


5 Many of these can be viewed at the collections of the Boston Public Library, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Peabody-Essex Museum.

were colored, but many were not; in fact, most maps were issued in both colored and uncolored versions. On the other hand, modern colorists are quite capable of coloring maps in a convincingly "antique" manner.

**Specific characteristics of engraved maps**

Between roughly 1550 and 1825, the vast majority of printed maps were produced by engraving. In this process, an image is first inscribed into a copper plate using a sharp tool. The plate is inked and then wiped, leaving ink only in the inscribed areas. Finally, the image is printed using a powerful press to force the ink residue from the plate into a sheet of moistened paper.

Other methods have also been used to print early maps. In particular, many maps from before 1550 are woodcuts, while most maps from 1825-1900 are lithographs. Verifying the antiquity of these maps is more challenging and will not be addressed here.

The engraved line

The engraved line appears solid when viewed under magnification, unlike modern "halftone" printing which creates arrays of tiny dots that appear solid when viewed unaided. Any map whose lines show this halftone pattern is absolutely a later production.

There are two more subtle features of engraved lines. First, they often end in a very fine, sharp point; this is best seen in the tails of calligraphic lettering or in the parallel lines ("hatching") used to demarcate coastlines (fig. 1). Second, they have a bold, three-dimensional appearance, particularly when viewed from an oblique angle or with a raking light. In fact they are three-dimensional; the press forces the paper into the engraved area of the plate, so that the inked areas of the paper are very slightly raised. By comparison other maps, especially lithographs and modern photo-reproductions, have a "flat" appearance.

The platemark

The pressure applied in printing leaves a depression on the paper matching the dimensions of the engraved plate. The platemark, or the outer edge of this depression, is visible as a fine indentation just outside the neatline, the thin line that defines the border of most printed maps (fig. 2). If a map purporting to be an engraving has good margins but lacks a platemark, it has either been trimmed and had new margins added or is not an engraving as is claimed.

Platemarks can be faked, however, so the presence of one is not conclusive. One suspicious sign is a mark that is too "perfect" or prominent. True platemarks are usually subtle and not necessarily apparent at first glance. They also often have a small amount of smudging from residual ink. Another cause for concern is a mark that is too far from the neatline. Due to the expense of copper, engravers typically used plates that were just large enough to fit the map image. Most true platemarks, especially on 16th and 17th century maps, are half an inch or less from the neatline.

**Purchasing antique maps**

You can be confident purchasing from any reputable dealer or auction house specializing in antique paper. Take care, however, when working with dealers or auctioneers offering prints as an adjunct to their core business. This is a matter not of honesty but of knowledge; they may simply lack the expertise to authenticate cartographic material. In this case, it is important to do your research and to physically examine the map before purchase.

Finally, “trust your gut.” If a map doesn’t look or feel “right,” just walk away ... or at least ask a lot of questions.

**Further reading**


Kok, Hans, “Distinguishing Fake from Real,” IMCOS Bulletin, no 2 (available online at www.harvey27.demon.co.uk/imcos/bulletin2.htm).


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**Boston Rare Maps** is a regular exhibitor at antique shows and antiquarian book shows throughout New England and the greater New York area. Visit [www.bostonraremaps.com](http://www.bostonraremaps.com) for information about our show schedule.

We have delivered a number of well-received presentations about antique maps and map collecting at local organizations. Please contact us if you would be interested in scheduling an event.

Finally, we are always interested in building our inventory of antique maps related to New England and the Northeast. Feel free to let us know if you have items for sale.
Selected items from stock

**Barnsley, H., *A New and Correct Chart of the Sea Coast of New-England…*, ca. 1751-94**

$3750

**Kitchin, T., *A New and Accurate Map of the British Dominions in America*, ca. 1763**

$2150

**Homann, J., *Nova Anglia…*, ca. 1716 / ca. 1750**

$2500

**Vissecher, N., *Orbis Terrarum Typus de Integro in Plurimus Emendatus*, 1657**

$3900

**Wetstein, R. & J., et al., *De Werelt Caart*, 1718**

$1750

**SDUK, *Boston with Charlestown and Roxbury*, 1877**

$475

**Bache, A.D., *New York Bay and Harbor*, 1861**

$850

**Barnsley, H., *Orbis Terrarum Typus de Integro in Plurimus Emendatus*, 1657**

$3900

**Wetstein, R. & J., et al., *De Werelt Caart*, 1718**

$1750

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