

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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EARLY IDAHO MAPS

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Like most western states, Idaho has been an interesting subject for mapping. Because of a diverse, complex terrain, Idaho's geography was understood very poorly until about 1890 when state admission was achieved. Antique Idaho maps have a quaint, confused aspect that rather faithfully reflects early misconceptions of Idaho geography. After Idaho was discovered in 1805 by Lewis and Clark (who mapped their Lemhi-Salmon and Lolo-Clearwater routes between Montana and Washington), fur hunters explored Idaho's geographic resources in their search for beaver. David Thompson provided relatively accurate maps of part of North Idaho, which he based upon careful survey. He did what he could for lands farther south, which Donald Mackenzie and other prominent trappers explored for two more decades. John C. Fremont mapped much of Idaho's Oregon and California trail routes, and other army map makers provided Idaho railroad surveys before settlement began in 1860. By that time, Idaho's major rivers were identified and most mountain ranges were explored. But map renditions of much of Idaho's wilderness remained vague at best.

Gold discoveries in 1860 led to a rapid succession of Idaho mining camps in many remote mountain areas. When they were included on existing Idaho area maps, they often were represented as covering a vast area totally out of proportion to their size. Often placed in incorrect locations anyway, they lend great interest to maps that are distorted by hastily prepared, inaccurate information that disturbed early Idaho miners but entertains later generations who no longer are deceived by incorrect cartography.

Idaho's political boundaries, drawn in geographical ignorance that is reflected in old maps, also were inappropriate. Only a minimum amount of attention was paid to Idaho's misunderstood geography in defining territorial as well as many early county boundaries. When Idaho became a state in 1890, long-established territorial boundaries gained permanence even though they still lacked geographical suitability. Mistakes in county boundaries, which sometimes crossed each other in absurd and random patterns, were subject to gradual correction. With accurate land surveys, correct conceptions of Idaho geography replaced fanciful representations that made old Idaho maps interesting if not reliable.

A choice collection of early Idaho maps has been published as an Idaho State Historical Society education project. Printed on large pages, with fifteen in full color, this twenty-eight-page early Idaho atlas includes all or parts of forty-four old maps. They are reproduced on a scale large enough to be clearly legible and are arranged to illustrate important stages in Idaho development.

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