

Iowa and Early Maps

By
Diana J. Fox

The discovery and subsequent exploration of the Western Hemisphere generated a flurry of surveying and map-making, and, as a result, the North American continent has been mapped more frequently than any other continent on earth. At first glance, the earliest of these maps draw our attention as works of art rather than as representations of actual geographical conditions. Explorers and travelers brought back rough field notes, general sketches, and hearsay information that the finest craftsmen of the day transformed into colorful likenesses of the continent.

Iowa began its map "career" as a great void somewhere between the known possessions of the French on the northeast and the Spanish dominions to the south. There is some speculation that early Spanish expeditions that have been documented in Kansas also reached into Iowa. No record of the Iowa journeys have been found, however, and the Spanish maps of the day include no unique features belonging only to the area that was to become Iowa. It was natural for Iowa to be represented as an empty space for many years. Cartographers knew of Spanish mapping to the south and west, French mapping to the north and east, and British mapping on the eastern sea coast. There had to be

something in the middle. Iowa and the rest of the vast area later loosely referred to as Louisiana simply had to wait for the white man to make his way that far inland.

Prior to the 18th century, many cartographers found it impossible to leave a space blank. Guillaume Delisle (1675-1726), a leading map-maker of his day, challenged tradition in 1700 when he refused to add mythical beasts and legendary seas to the unexplored interiors of continents. A great student of geography, he produced maps that had very accurate continental outlines and were much simpler in style than those of his contemporaries. Delisle objected to the widely accepted practice of speculative cartography. His guiding principal was as simple as his style. He felt that a geographer should clearly mark the rivers and mountains, because these are the natural, unchanging boundaries which lead to the development of accurate geographical representation.

On June 17, 1673, two years before Delisle's birth, Marquette and Joliet began their contribution to the accurate mapping of the Mississippi River. They had traveled from Mackinaw to Green Bay and the Fox River and then down the Wisconsin until they entered the Mississippi across from the site of the present town of McGregor, thus becoming the first white men to see what we now call Iowa. This

was to become one of the major routes from the settlements in Canada to the lands of the West. Curiously, as a result of this route, many early maps show a mountainous region in Iowa along the river. The Wisconsin side of the Mississippi is flat and marshy where the two rivers join. The Iowa side, on the other hand, rises to bluffs 500 feet above the river. Many years elapsed before further exploration corrected the misinterpretation. Other rivers also were falsely credited with mountains on their banks or near by. One such range appeared on the east bank of the Des Moines. Ordinary hills as well as bluffs may have accounted for these mountains especially if the explorer stumbled upon them after a monotonous trek across the "extensive meadows" also listed on many early maps.

The two earliest geographic features of Iowa to appear on maps were the Des Moines River and the lead mines at present-day Dubuque. The Des Moines River is the largest stream entering the Mississippi from the west, north of the Missouri. The fabled Northwest Passage through the continent filled the thoughts of many European explorers, so any river that looked navigable was cause for rising expectations. French exploration of the Des Moines quickly established the fact that this river could not extend to the sea, yet it wandered grandly through maps under numerous names and with various courses for years following the completion of the exploration. Trade with the Indians and accounts of wandering hunters and trappers provided knowledge of the lead mines as early as 1690, although Europeans did not begin to work the deposits consistently until Julien Dubuque opened his mine in 1785. The mines also experienced occasional name changes but were

generally referred to as the "mine de plomb." The economic importance of both the mines and the Des Moines contributed to their early notoriety.

Much of the problem of mapping Iowa arose because the French and Spanish never went beyond exploration to actual settlement of the area. Trappers seldom carried materials to draw maps even if they had had any cartographic skills. All information concerning Iowa on European maps came only from the tales of traders and Indians. It might pass through two, three, or more people before it reached the cartographer. By that time a great deal could be misinterpreted. Many maps, for example, show the Des Moines River flowing from a very large lake. French officials seeking information on the area were probably told that large northern lakes could be reached by following the Des Moines River. Such a description would be correct but very misleading. Actually the river passes near, but does not spring from, Spirit Lake in northern Iowa.

Natural features were not the only things misrepresented on maps. Explorers were always eager to believe and transmit stories about cities of gold or fabulous mines. Often, when looking at old maps, it is difficult to differentiate between purely fictitious locations and those that actually existed and then vanished without a trace. As late as 1833, one map of Iowa shows numerous forts, some abandoned, on the Des Moines River south of the Raccoon Fork. No archeological evidence has been found to substantiate the existence of forts at these locations.

Often providing the only basis for territorial negotiations and boundary settlements, early maps were vitally important to the countries controlling the North

American continent. If an area was discovered, explored, and mapped by an explorer for a certain government, it was important to let the rest of the world know that the government had established a claim. Lack of skilled map makers and accurate equipment led to many disputes over boundaries and possessions. Some maps accurately portray certain features but elongate the interior of the continent to almost twice its actual distance. Modern travelers may joke about how long it takes to get from the Mississippi to the Rockies, but these early explorers must have thought the plains stretched on forever. As late as the sale of Louisiana to the United States in 1803, France did not know the boundaries of this great expanse of territory.

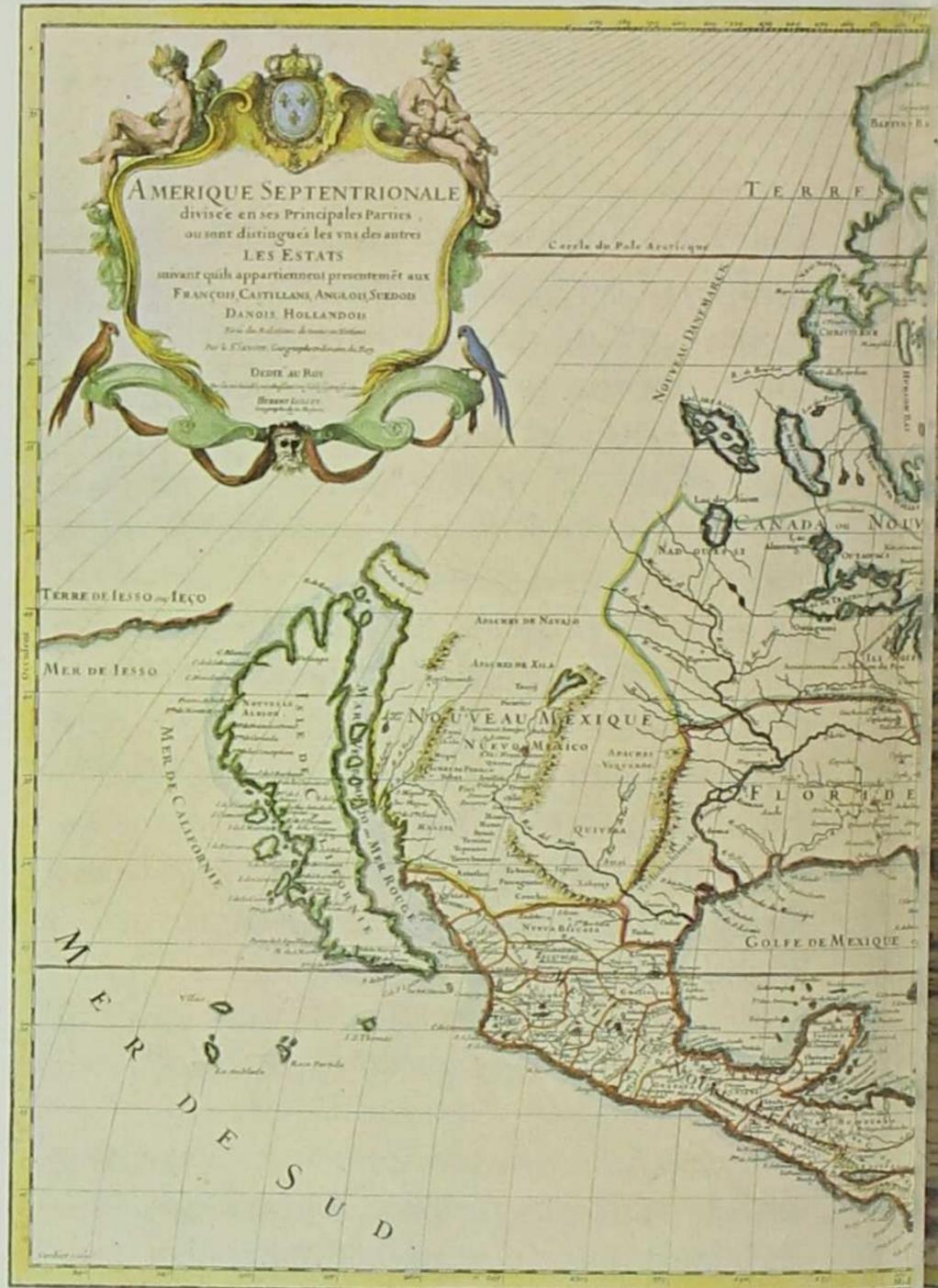
Iowa's new owners began the first thorough mapping. The Americans had shown themselves to be very observant cartographers concerning matters of military importance as well as geographical significance. First, the United States sent military expeditions up the Missouri, the Mississippi, and the Des Moines Rivers to create a pool of information on Indian villages, possible fort sites, natural and man-made passageways, and possible supply points. The expeditions of Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny in 1835 produced the first well-documented exploration of the interior of the state. Kearny led a party of 150 soldiers up the Des Moines to find a site for a fort on the Raccoon Fork. Several of the company continued on to explore additional areas in the north central portion of the state. One member of the expedition, Lieutenant Albert M. Lea, a civil engineer and an accomplished draughtsman, later compiled the information gathered by the group into a map and booklet. This small book

aroused great interest among people in the East and helped to increase the tide of settlers ready to come to Iowa.

Forty years previous to Kearny and Lea's discoveries, the United States government established a systematic surveying plan in the Land Ordinance of 1785. The Ordinance provided for the division of land into townships and sections. Government surveyors divided Iowa according to these guidelines and produced survey maps and field notes which contained extensive information on each newly numbered section of land. These survey maps were submitted to Congress by the Surveyor General's Office as part of the annual reports of the General Land Office. They appeared periodically in Congressional publications from 1841 to 1861, each a few years after the actual surveying had been done. David McClelland, born and raised in Washington, D.C., engraved many of the survey maps for the federal government. Using the notes and sketches from the Surveyor General's Office in Dubuque, he created the first official maps of the Territory. He became an expert on Iowa geography even though he probably never visited the state.

As settlement progressed, mapping became more complete. Emmigrant guides often contained maps to help new arrivals discover possible home sites. Land speculators also issued maps as selling aids. By the time of statehood in 1846 the eastern third of Iowa was well mapped and documented. Settlement of the rest of the state had just begun and maps showed a few settlements in the newly created counties, but even these sketchy indications of civilizations were a great improvement over the mythical beasts and inland seas that once supposedly occupied the area. □

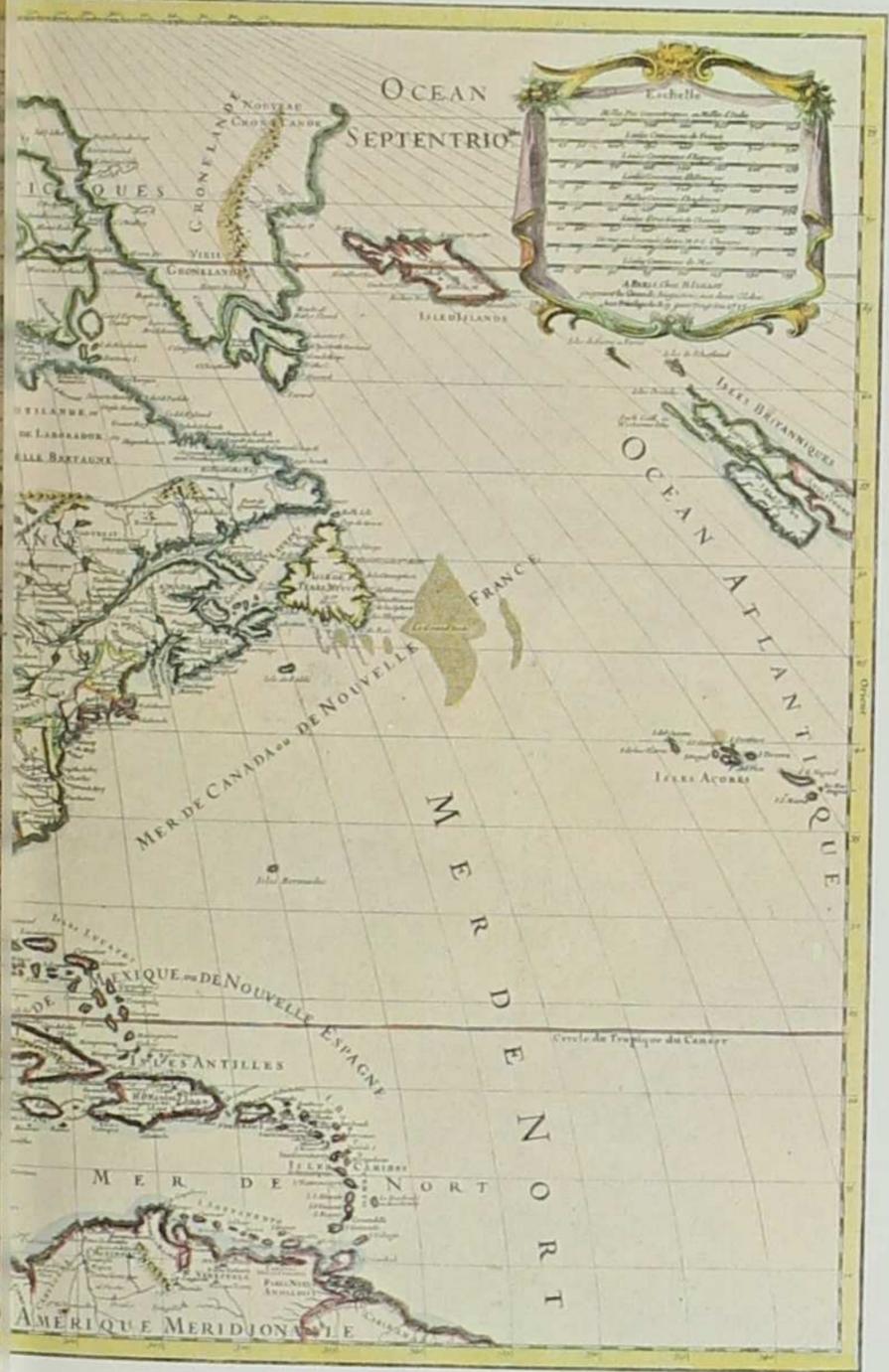
A Sanson and Joillot map, ca. 1713. An earlier version of the same map had more subtly-colored "cartouches" and was missing the Mississippi River. The same plates were used to make both versions, with additions and corrections added to this version probably by Joillot. The Mississippi has shifted to the west here, and it winds more than it should, but great advances had been made and the silhouette of Iowa has appeared.



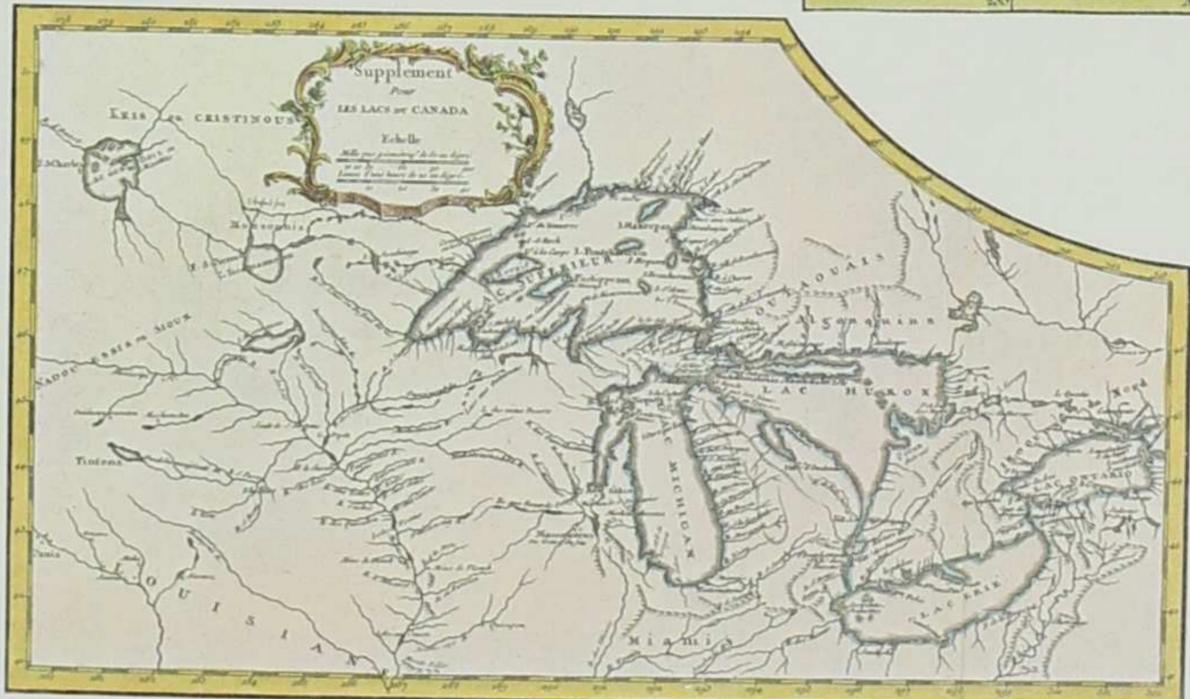
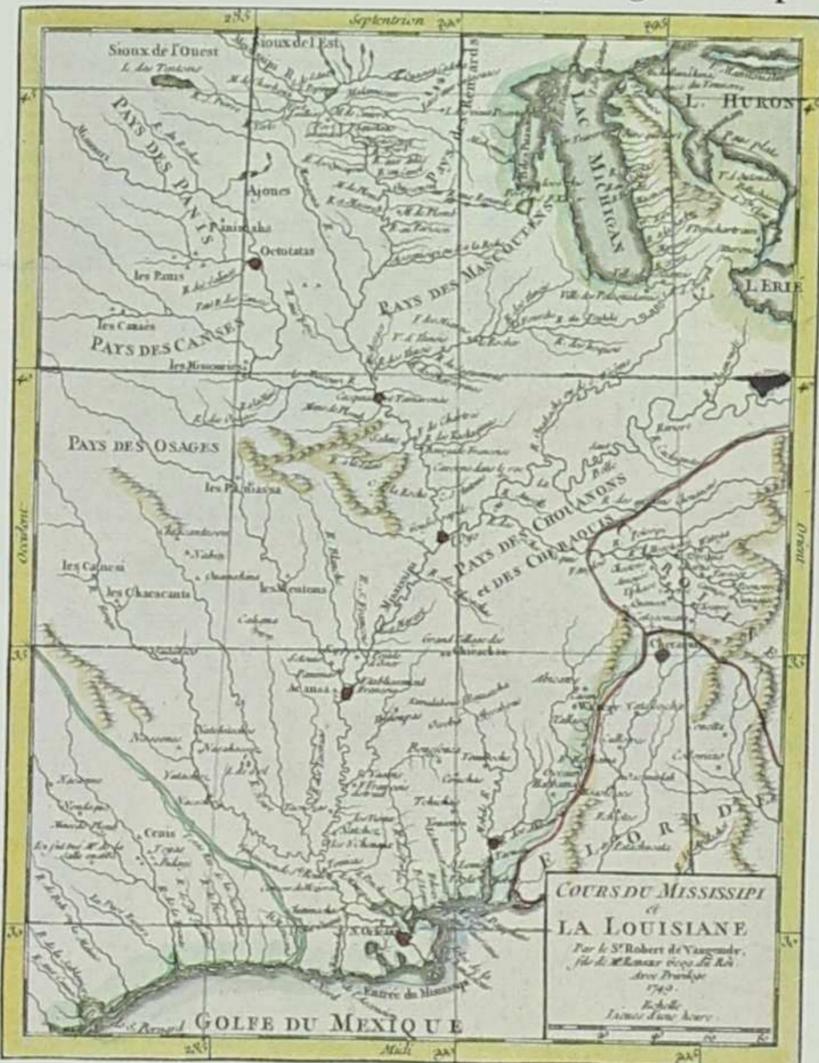
One of the many maps of America appearing in books, as indicated by the plate number in the corner. The plate was made ca. 1757. Notice the loss of the lakes but the return of the mountains along the Des Moines.

This lovely map of Western Canada appeared in G. T. Roynal's *Philosophical and Political History* issued in 1780. Mountains again dominate the Des Moines River Valley.





A Mississippi River map from the family of Robert de Vaugondys, known for their use of exact ground information rather than speculative geography. The detail here suggests they probably used explorers' notes when composing the map.



A detail from Robert de Vaugondys's 1755 map of New France.

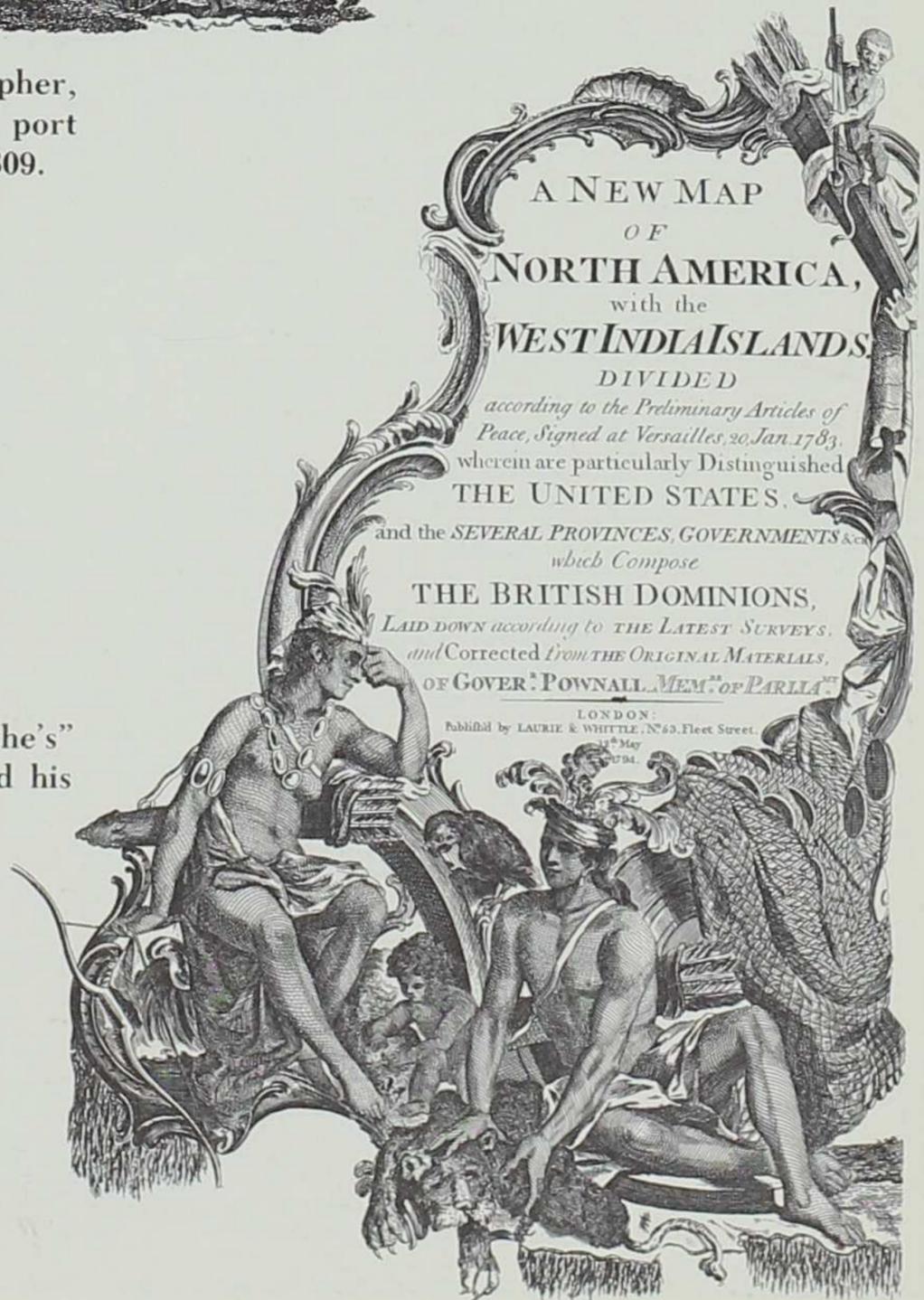


Plate of North America from Bradford's 1838 Atlas.



THE
UNITED STATES
 OF NORTH AMERICA:
 with the
BRITISH TERRITORIES
 AND THOSE OF SPAIN,
Published by W. Faden, Charing Cross,
Geographer to His Majesty, and to
His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales,
 1809.

Faden, a highly respected British cartographer, furnished this engraving of an American port scene for his map of the United States in 1809.



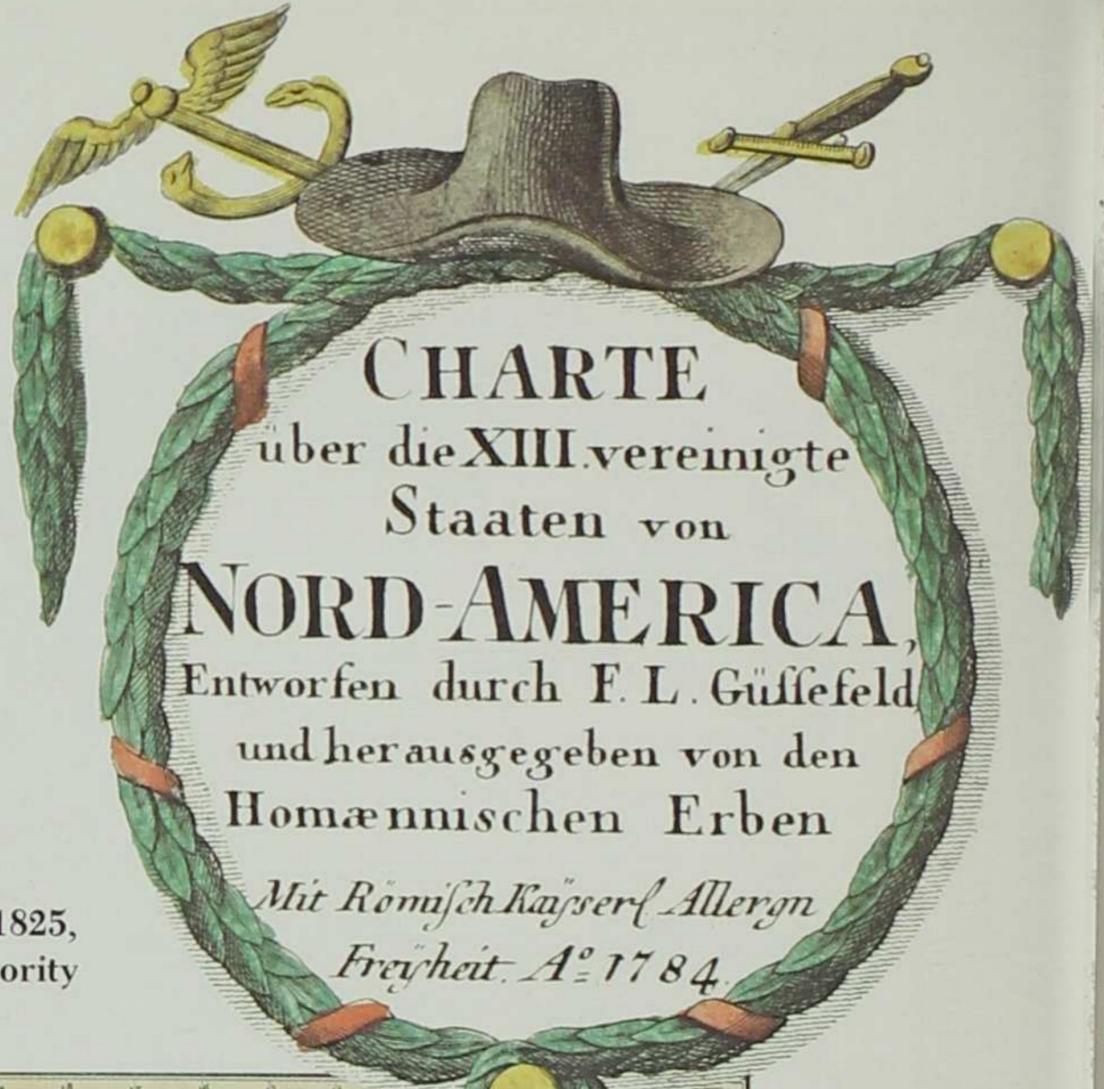
A NEW MAP
 OF
NORTH AMERICA,
 with the
WEST INDIA ISLANDS
 DIVIDED
according to the Preliminary Articles of
Peace, Signed at Versailles, 20 Jan. 1783,
wherein are particularly Distinguished
THE UNITED STATES.

and the *SEVERAL PROVINCES, GOVERNMENTS &c*
which Compose

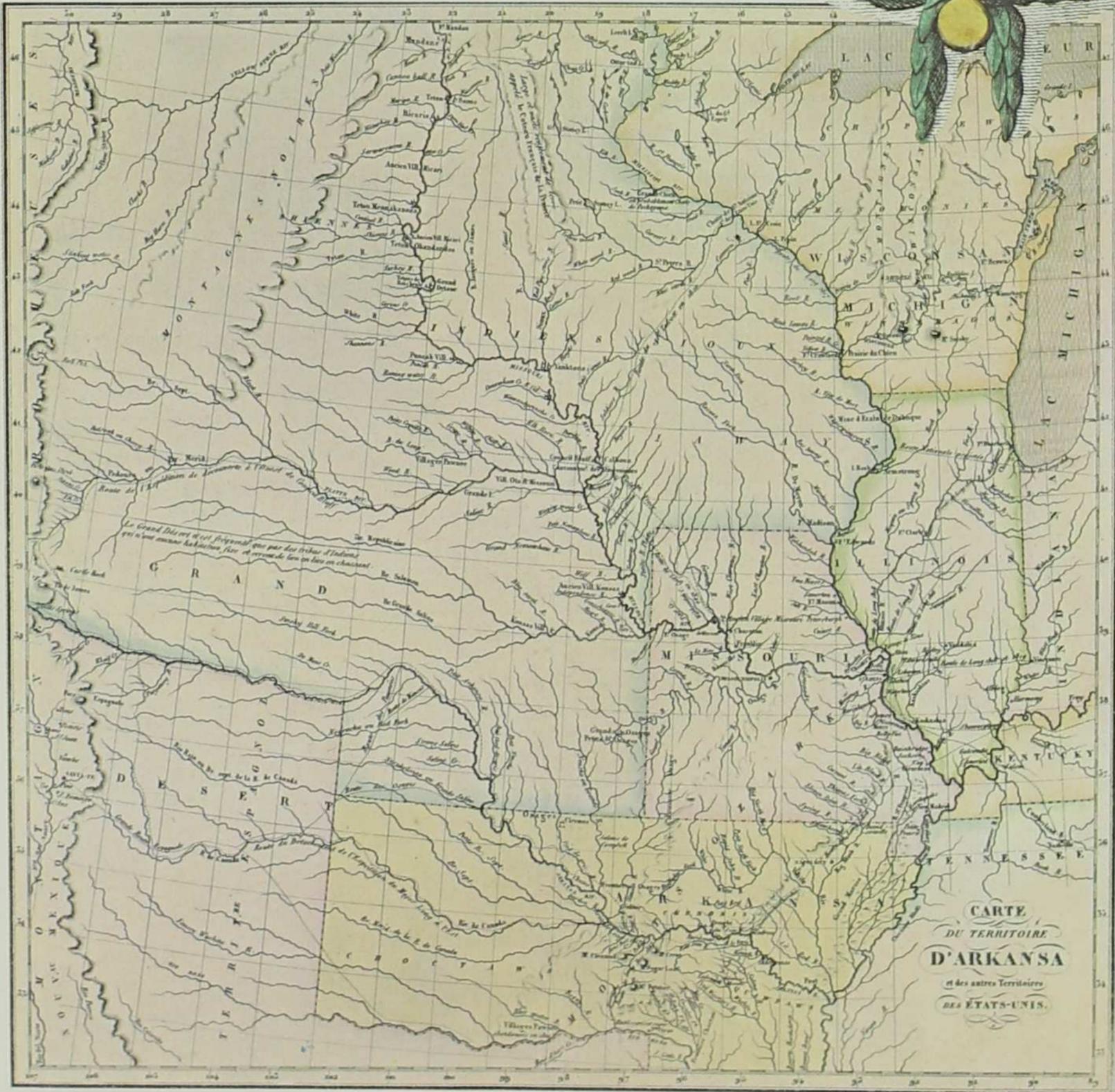
THE BRITISH DOMINIONS,
Laid down according to the LATEST SURVEYS,
and Corrected from the ORIGINAL MATERIALS,
 OF GOVER^r. POWNALL MEM^r. OF PARLIA^m.

LONDON:
 Published by LAURIE & WHITTLE, N^o. 63. Fleet Street.

Fact and fantasy contributed to this "cartouche's" depiction of the noble American native and his possessions.

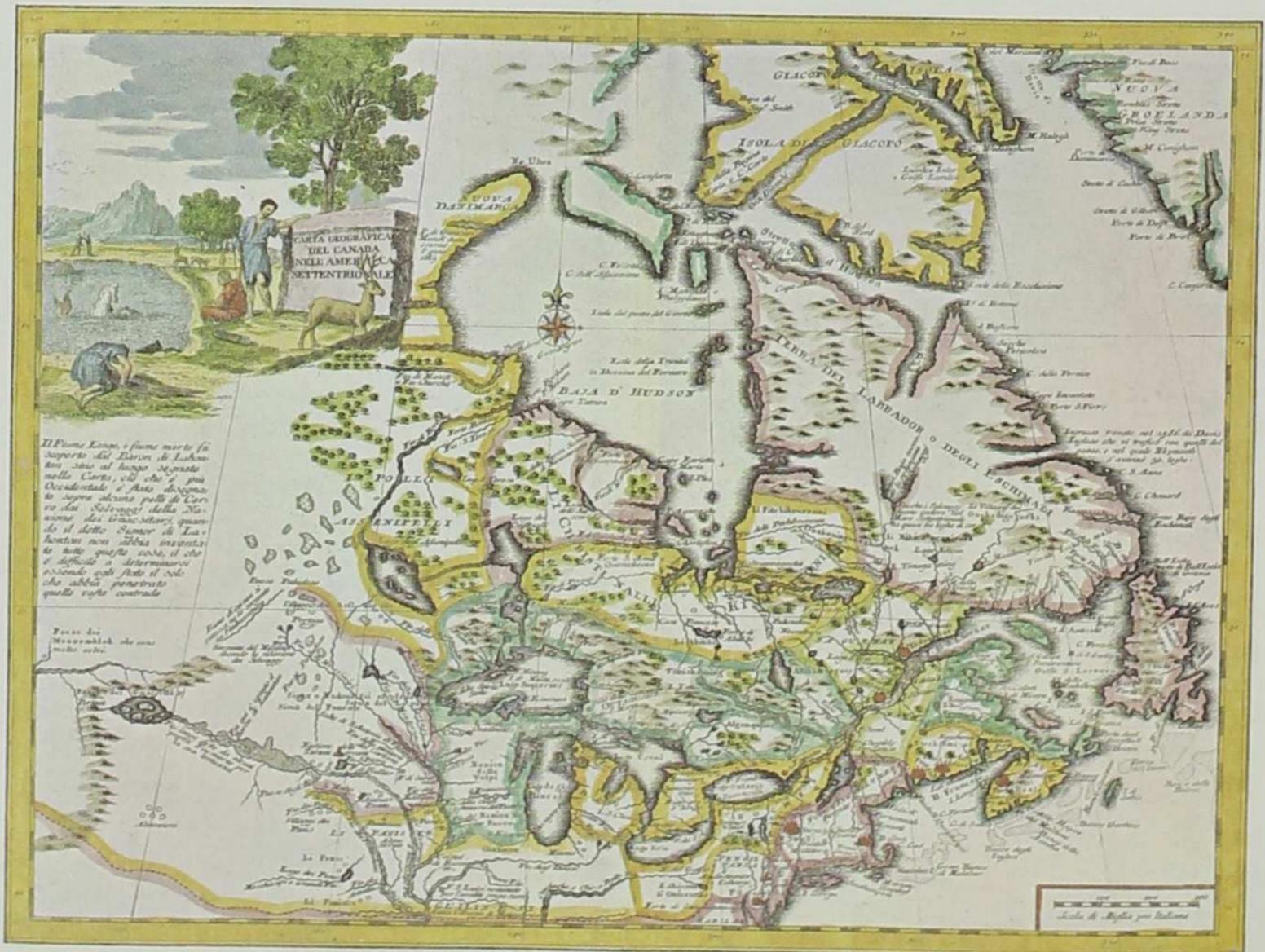


A French map of Arkansas Territory, ca. 1825, demonstrates the indefinite nature of authority over Iowa.

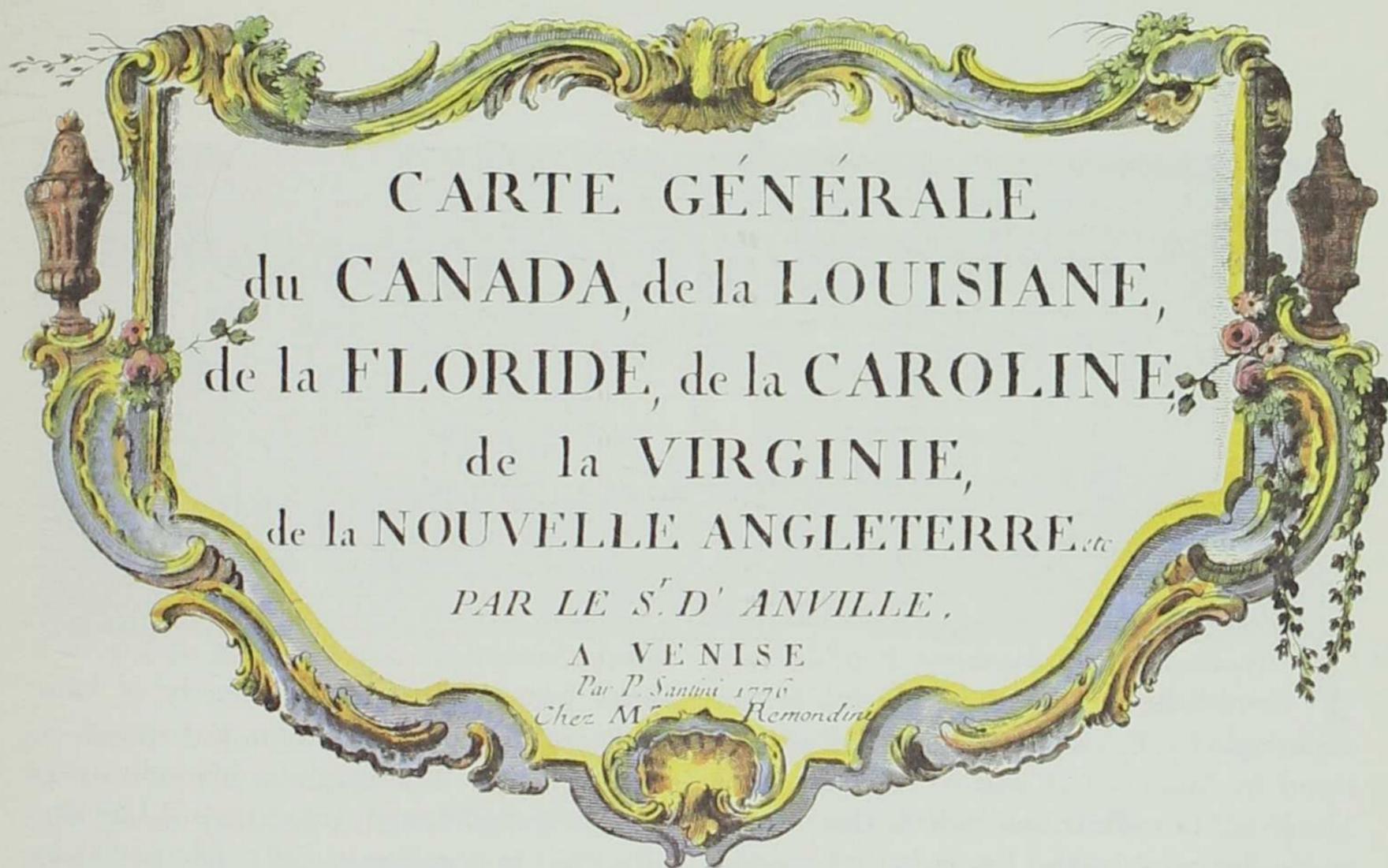




Seale's map of North America, issued in 1774, could have been produced as early as 1732. Territorial boundaries do not appear to be indicated, though the colors give the impression they were. The Des Moines (Moingona River) has again been stretched into lakes and the Morte River. Notice the placement and naming of Indian tribes.



A Venetian
edge of the
earlier
changed
touche? I
have been
the Fur d



A colorful "cartouche" from a 1776 Venetian map.

Note on Sources

The major sources for this article were: Gerald R. Crone, *Maps and their makers* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1968); Ronald V. Tooley, *Maps and map-makers* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1952); David Woodward, ed. *Five Centuries of map printing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); George C. Groce & David H. Wallace, *The New York Historical Society's dictionary of artists in America, 1565-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); and Leland Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1974). Special thanks go to Loren Horton and Alan Schroder for their suggestions and comments.

Venetian map of 1740, showing a good knowledge of the Great Lakes. A copy of a portion of an earlier Delisle map, the language has been changed from French to Italian, a new "cartouche" has been added, and several new cities have been mapped. Notice the strange course of the Fur dei Meingona (Des Moines River).