The New World

What began with explorers’ dreams of finding a direct route to Asia expanded into the mapping and colonization of the American continent. The area of future Minnesota took shape on the map, in dramatic fashion. In studying mapmakers’ work, we learn much about them and about the popular beliefs of their eras.

By glancing . . . at the Map of the lakes, and of the territories on which are settled most of the tribes of these regions, one will gain more light upon all these Missions than by long descriptions that might be given to them.

—Claude Dablon (1609–1697), Jesuit missionary
Mapping and Measuring the Land

The 530-million-acre Louisiana Purchase from France by the United States (1803) eliminated concern over complete access to the important Mississippi River port of New Orleans. Over the years, barriers in surveying this vast territory—which doubled the size of the country—included a lack of trained mapmaking (military) officers, sectional jealousies, and constitutional issues. Nevertheless, “indomitable men” and their sponsors trekked ahead, and eventually Congress became a willing partner in exploring western lands, culminating in surveyors walking “every prairie, woods, and swamp mile” of the area that became Minnesota.

In eighteen minutes we passed from the island to the outlet of the Mississippi, and we found the river, already a child, brisk and lively . . . . An hour after our departure we found the Mississippi to be already thirty to forty feet wide and two to four feet deep . . . . The water is crystal clear.

—Joseph Nicollet, cartographer and geographer, August 30, 1836

1810
Nicholas King
Map of the Mississippi River: From its Source to the Mouth of the Missouri
Laid down from the notes of the Lieut. Z. M. Pike . . .
New York: F. P. Harper, 1810

At the same time Lewis and Clark were exploring the newly purchased Louisiana territory, Zebulon Pike was sent out to discover the source of the Mississippi River. While he was not, perhaps, the best person for the job, his notes were put to good use by cartographer Antoine Nau. Nau produced a manuscript map of the upper Mississippi, which Nicholas King scaled down and printed, creating another landmark in the knowledge of the upper Mississippi. Pike’s expedition and map proved that the British traders in the river valley still had a strong presence.

1843
Joseph N. Nicollet
Report Intended to Illustrate a Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River, Made by J. N. Nicollet, While in the Employ of the Corps of Topographical Engineers
Washington, D.C.: United States Senate, 1843

As the first scientific measurement of this area, it is impossible to overstate the importance of this map. Nicollet’s attention to detail corrected the distortions of his predecessors. One of the enduringly significant aspects of the map is that, by using informants of the Plains, Nicollet captured the original names of geographical features. Another important feature is that the cartographer personally explored across the area of this map and meticulously noted the features important to the nineteenth-century traveler. Look closely to find the marked trails and canoe portages, notably between the Mississippi and the water routes to the Great Lakes.

The country you are going to see is my hunting ground.
I have traveled with you many days. I shall go with you farther.
I will myself furnish the maps you have requested, and will guide you onward.

—Oza Windib (Yellow Head), Ojibwe leader who assisted ethnologist and geographer Henry Schoolcraft on his journey through Minnesota territory beginning in 1832

Oza Windib (Yellow Head), about 1850