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"Map You Way Through Brighton" (Current display at the CoBACH Center)

As you visit the Brighton Area Historical Society's display at the CoBACH Center, "Map your way through Brighton" it might be interesting to think about the history of mapping of Michigan.

Although the Great Lakes of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Superior all played a vital role in the lives and histories of the Native American people living along its shores, it's only been in the last five hundred years that printed maps of the Great Lakes have existed. The first printed maps and charts were the result of explorers, missionaries, fur traders, and military personnel. Surveyors, land and mineral speculators, government power brokers, engravers, printers and merchants also contributed to the production and selling of maps, sometimes even incorporating Native American folklore and knowledge into their wares.

The most recognizable landmass of the Great Lakes is the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, which is shaped like a mitten. The developing accuracy of cartography in the region over the last five centuries can be gauged by using a contemporary satellite image of the Michigan mitten as a guidepost.

In 1671, a Franciscan missionary, Father Louis Hennepin, accompanied Rene Robert Cavalier de LaSalle on his expedition to discover the mouth of the Mississippi. Father Hennepin recorded their exploits in a 1683 book that included the first map to show all five Great Lakes with roughly the correct boundaries. European monarchs had staked out possessions in the Great Lakes, yet not one of them could locate what they had claimed because there were too few trigonometric surveys of the New World. By 1703, Guillaume de l'Isle spearheaded the approach of geography and cartography as a science, using astronomical observations and actual surveys as the basis of his map making.

In 1744, when the Jesuit priest and historian Pierre Francoise de Charlevoix published The History and General Description of New France after he had visited the Great Lakes area, he included a map drawn by Nicolas Bellin that was so influential that it was copied many times in the coming years, including by the influential British mapmaker John Mitchell when he produced his map of North America.

This map of John Mitchell's remained so popular that it was revised and copied over the next thirty years, and became the official map used by both British and American diplomats during the negotiation of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. The treaty gave all Indian territory east of the Mississippi to the United States and extended the Indian and white settler boundary to the Ohio River. This framework ushered in the next phase of mapping the Great Lakes, in preparation for the arrival of white settlers from the newly minted United States of America.

Soon after the establishment of the new nation of the United States, Congress passed a very important ordinance: the Land Ordinance of 1785, which created the U.S. Public Land Survey System. The goal of this was to prevent a repetition of the disorder, confusion and litigation that has so often accompanied land ownership in the original thirteen colonies. The ordinance instituted the Rectangular System over the entire public domain, identifying parcels of land in the Midwest by township, range and section, rather than the colonial metes and bounds system.

The first U.S. federal surveys of Michigan Territory took place in 1815, accomplished with the aid of a magnetic compass and a surveyor's chain. This rudimentary equipment sometimes caused less than accurate field surveys, and as the surveying of Michigan Territory slowly progressed through 1822, the outline of the state began to change shape.

(*The following resources were used by Jerry Damon for the above story, "Clarke Historical Map Database"; MSU Map Library and State of Michigan , "A Brief History of the Michigan Geological Survey.")*