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https://vtdigger.org/2024/12/17/then-again-on-collecting-important-vermontiana-with-historian-kevingraffagnino/

by Mark Bushnell, December 17, 2024, 1:58 pm

This 1778 map was the first to include the name "State of Vermont." The document was part map, part political statement, declaring that Vermont had a right to exist. Scan via Silver Special Collections, University of Vermont

For a map, this one is oddly disorienting. The first issue is that although the 250-year-old document charts areas of New England and New York, the name Canada appears at the bottom. The mapmaker has, rather unconventionally, chosen to orient north to the map's bottom left corner. Even after the viewer mentally turns the map, however, it still looks strange to modern eyes. Many of the town names are unfamiliar and large sections of the territory bear no names at all, as if they have never been surveyed.

But to people who saw this map when it was first published in 1778, the most striking part might have been the words near its center: "State of Vermont." By literally putting Vermont on the map for the first time, the mapmaker was making a political statement, a defiant declaration of Vermonters' right to self-determination. This was, after all, just a year after a disputed section of New England had declared itself the independent state of Vermont.

The region had long been contested by Native tribes and the French. Once the British took control of the area, the colonies of New Hampshire and New York battled in court over which colony could grant land in what is today Vermont. The struggle continued even after revolution was declared.

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The maker of the map was taking sides in that fight. A note in the map's corner calls New York's grants "spurious" and says they were often issued to "favourites of these Princes of Land Jobbers," i.e. these were fake titles issued to friends of speculators. In contrast, the note says the newly minted Vermonters held their New Hampshire charters "by the triple title of honest purchase(,) of Industry in Settling; and now lately that of Conquest."

The map is unsigned but is attributed to Bernard Romans, a Dutch-born mapmaker who sailed to North America in the 1750s and eventually came to embrace the American cause. While serving under Benedict Arnold during the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in 1775, Romans met members of the Green Mountain Boys and became an ardent supporter of Vermont independence.

Of all the documents ever published about Vermont, this is sort of a holy grail for collectors. And it's nearly as rare. Four original copies are known to exist in the collections of national libraries and educational institutions. A few more might be in private hands. Perhaps others lurk, forgotten, in somebody's attic.

Vermont historian Kevin Graffagnino dreams of someday finding three previously undiscovered copies of the original Romans map. He'd donate one to the University of Vermont library, where he was the longtime curator of Vermont history and later director of Special Collections, and one to the Vermont Historical Society, where he served as executive director. He'd keep the third copy. A person is allowed to dream.