Maps of Independence Hall

Many IMCoS members will visit Chicago and Milwaukee this October for our 20th International Symposium. Those with additional time might want to plan a visit to Philadelphia and see the maps on permanent display in Independence Hall. Independence Hall originally was the colonial Pennsylvania State House. The Pennsylvania Proprietors moved into the building when it was partially completed in 1736. A group of radicals from thirteen British-American colonies met there during the hot summer of 1776. There they wrote a Declaration of Independence that included the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The adoption of this “Declaration of the thirteen United States of America” led to war, and then independence of the colonies.

The Assembly Room, located on the first floor, was the Representatives’ meeting room. The Long Gallery, on the second floor, was probably the largest enclosed area in colonial America. The room could hold 500 people for a sit-down dinner. It was a hospital ward during the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1777-8. Benjamin Franklin in 1747 wrote his London agent William Strahan “I must desire you to send me per first Opportunity the Maps formerly wrote for, viz. Popple’s large one of North America pasted on Rollers; Ditto bound in a book; and 8 or 10 other maps of equal size to be had; they are for the Long Gallery and the Assembly Room in the Statehouse. If none so large are to be got, let Prospects of Cities, Buildings &c. be pasted round them, to make them large.” Franklin’s letter suggests that maps were hung in the first floor Assembly Room and the second floor Long Gallery. The originals have been lost and there is no record of what maps were hung. Twentieth century curators acquired colonial era maps that they thought would be appropriate for Independence Hall. The curators chose to hang them on the second floor framed behind glass in period or reproduction frames because of their rarity and condition.

An east prospect of the city of Philadelphia; taken by George Heap from the Jersey shore, under the direction of Nicholas Scull, surveyor general of the Province of Pennsylvania (Thomas Jefferys, London, 1754) greets the second floor visitor at the top of the stair tower. The belfry of Independence Hall is easily seen on this large panoramic view of the city. The stair tower and the belfry were added to Independence Hall in 1750-56 when the building was completed.

A large entrance foyer extends from the stair tower to the Long Gallery. The Long Gallery has been restored to look as it did during the colonial period. The south wall in colonial times was used to display oil portraits of local dignitaries like the mayor and members of the Governor’s Council as well as maps of the British colonies. Today seven colonial maps depicting the original thirteen colonies line the south wall. The northern colonies are viewed on A map of the most inhabited part of New England, containing the provinces of Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire, with the colonies of Connecticut and Rhode Island, divided into counties and townships; the whole composed from actual surveys and its situation adjusted by astronomical observations (Carington Bowles, London, 1771) and An accurate map of His Majesty's Province of New-Hampshire in New England, taken from actual surveys of all the inhabited part, and from the best information of what is uninhabited, together with the adjacent countries, which exhibits
the theatre of this war in that part of the world, by Col. Blanchard and the Revd. Mr. Langdon (Thomas Jefferys, London, 1761).

The middle colonies are represented with The provinces of New York and New Jersey; with part of Pensilvania, and the province of Quebec. Drawn by Major Holland, Surveyor General, of the Northern District in America. Corrected and improved, from the original materials, by Governr. Pownall, Member of Parliament, 1776 (Robert Sayer & John Bennett, London, 1776) and A map of Pensilvsnyia exhibiting not only the improved parts of that Province, but also its extensive frontiers: Laid down from actual surveys, and chiefly from the late map of W. Scull published in 1770; and humbly inscribed to the Honorable Thomas Penn and Richard Penn, Esquires, true and absolute proprietaries & Governors of the Province of Pensilvsnyia and the territories thereunto belonging (Robert Sayer & John Bennett, London, 1775).

Three maps show the southern colonies: A map of the most inhabited part of Virginia containing the whole province of Maryland with part of Pensilvsnyia, New Jersey and North Carolina. Drawn by Joshua Fry & Peter Jefferson in 1751 (Thomas Jefferys, London, 1755); An accurate map of North and South Carolina with their Indian frontiers, shewing in a distinct manner all the mountains, rivers, swamps, marshes, bays, creeks, harbours, sandbanks and soundings on the coasts; with the roads and Indian paths; as well as the boundary or provincial lines, the several townships and other divisions of the land in both the provinces; the whole from actual surveys by Henry Mouzon and others (Robert Sayer & John Bennett, London, 1775); and A map of South Carolina and a part of Georgia. Containing the whole sea-coast; all the islands, inlets, rivers, creeks, parishes, townships, boroughs, roads, and bridges; as also, several plantations, with their proper boundary-lines, their names, and the names of their proprietors. Composed from surveys taken by the Hon. William Bull, Esq., Lt. Gov., Capt. Gascoign, Hugh Bryan, Esq; and the author William De Brahm, surveyor general to the province of South Carolina, one of the surveyors of Georgia, and the late Cpt. Engineer under his Imperial Majesty Charles VII (Thomas Jefferys, London, 1757).

A Committee Room is behind the east side of the Long Gallery. During the colonial period this room housed a small library and a small arms armory. A map of the British and French dominions in North America: with the roads, distances, limits, and extent of the settlements by Dr. Jno. Mitchell (Johannes Covens & Cornelis Mortier, Amsterdam, 1755) is now usually hanging in the room, but unfortunately it was out at the conservator at the time of my visit. Hopefully it soon will be returned to the room.

Behind the west side of the Long Gallery is the Governor’s Council Chamber. Today sitting on a table in that room is a pair of globes. The terrestrial and celestial globes are each 17 inches in diameter, and are mounted on a mahogany stand. They were drawn “according to the latest observation by Leonard Cushee” and “sold by Cushee near St. Dunstand’s Church” (London, circa 1750).

Philadelphia has many important historical buildings within the boundaries of Independence National Historical Park. Take time to visit some of the other buildings. The “Liberty Bell” is in a pavilion across the street from Independence Hall. Three blocks to the east
is “Welcome Park.” It is named after William Penn’s ship “Welcome.” King Charles II granted Penn the colony of Pennsylvania in 1681 in lieu of a debt owed his father. You can relax in “Welcome Park” and walk on the large scale reproduction of A portraiture of the city of Philadelphia in the Province of Pennsylvania in America / by Thomas Holme, Surveyor General that is engraved into the marble paving stones of the park. The original map, published in London 1683, advertised William Penn’s rectangular layout for his “City of Brotherly Love.”

Three map collections might be of interest to those with additional time in Philadelphia. The American Philosophical Society Library, located across the street from Independence Hall, has an interesting collection of 17th to 19th century maps. A much larger collection is seven blocks away in the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Nearby is the main branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Several old atlases are in the rare book room, and the map reading room has a limited collection of old maps. Among the maps is the Kelso Collection of about 25 different maps in the Jansson-Visscher series of maps of New England.

Philadelphia is a beautiful city to visit. Two or three days could easily be filled with touring the many historical sites and museums in the city.

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