

Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin:

A Cartographic History

By Richard V. Francaviglia.

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xviii, 231 pp., maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, cartobibliography

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*Reviewed by Russell S. Kirby, PhD, MS, FACE
University of Alabama at Birmingham*

In this engaging, well-illustrated monograph, Richard Francaviglia traces the evolution of spatial knowledge of the region now known as the Great Basin in the western United States as documented through careful examination of the archival cartographic evidence.

That the author chose a challenging subject matter for his book is an understatement – even with more than four centuries of exploration, atlases, and maps for use as guides, most Americans have only the haziest concept of exactly where the Great Basin is or what defining physiographic characteristics set it apart from other North American regions. That Francaviglia succeeds so admirably is a testament to his painstaking research, organizational skills, attention to details, and highly readable prose.

The book consists of seven substantive chapters, with an introductory chapter to set the stage and a concluding chapter reflecting on the role of cartographic history for the human experience. The central chapters successively explore the region's history through an examination of maps and atlases, beginning with the period prior to 1700. Chapters then focus successively on the era of Spanish exploration during the 18th century and the early nineteenth century, with three chapters to cover the remainder of the nineteenth century and a final chapter bringing the story from 1900 to the present.

The region we now refer to as the Great Basin did not at first exist as a region in any formal sense. Appearing in the earliest maps as an empty space with stylized features, it has, as a regional entity, undergone a series of transitions: from an unknown or empty quadrant into a zone of exploration and discovery (for potential western passages and natural resources), into a theatre of geopolitical conflict, into a landscape explored for transcontinental railroad routes, mineral deposits, and the quest for scientific knowledge, and ultimately, in the twentieth century, into a region rapidly traversed by air travelers and motorists who make infrequent stops at national parks, scenic vistas and regional amenity centers. Layered on this history are the interactions of explorers and settlers (especially, beginning in the 1840s, in the expanding area of Mormon culture and settlement) with native cultures

and the spatial knowledge thereby transferred.

Grand historiographic generalizations such as the Turner thesis do not guide Francaviglia's discussion, nor are there persistent myths that he seeks to refute through his careful analyses of the cartographic record of the region. His study contributes significantly to the monographic literature on the history of exploration and discovery, and it integrates research by historical geographers, cartographers, and historians of science with primary source materials and map interpretation.

One interesting observation Francaviglia puts forward is that the Spanish knowledge of the Great Basin region was probably far greater than the information divulged to European cartographers prior to the 19th Century. It is curious that, although this study is strongly grounded in extensive archival research in major libraries and holdings of map collectors, the author did not explore historical collections in Mexico City or Madrid that might have provided evidence to substantiate this claim.

The book is well illustrated, with numerous photographs, several maps, and many reproductions of historical maps. Several of the latter include additional detail maps of areas of special interest, although one wonders in some cases whether it was necessary to reprint the full map also at a smaller scale. The monograph received careful editing, and includes notes, bibliography, and cartobibliographic references as well as an index.

This book should take its place alongside classics such as John Logan Allen's *Passage to the Garden* (1974), the works of William Goetzmann on the exploration of the American West, and related studies on the history of science in the age of discovery. As one reads this highly integrative book, however, it is likely that the inquiring mind will wander in any of several directions, leading one to wish to read more.