

Rare Map on Display at Library Scored Some “Firsts”

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Engraver Abel Buell “came out of nowhere,” at least in terms of cartography, when he printed a United States map in 1784. “He’d never done a map before,” says Ed Redmond of the Library’s Geography and Map Division. Nonetheless, Buell set records.

He was the first U.S. citizen to print a map of the United States in the United States after the Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783. The treaty formally concluded the American Revolution and recognized the United States as an independent nation. Buell was also the first person to copyright a map in the United States.

Buell’s “New and Correct Map of the United States of North America” is the centerpiece of “Mapping a New Nation,”

an exhibition in the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. Philanthropist David M. Rubenstein purchased Buell’s map at auction in 2010 and made it available for public display at the Library.

The wall map contains no original cartographic material, Redmond says; instead, Buell seems to have combined elements of maps published earlier in Europe. “Buell, who lived in New Haven, Connecticut, may have accessed other maps at nearby Yale University,” Redmond suggests. “That’s a supposition, however; we can’t prove it.”

With Kimberli Curry of the Interpretive Programs Office and Julie Miller of the Manuscript Division, Redmond identified maps in the Library’s collections that Buell may have used as sources, including them in the exhibition. “As the largest map library in the world, we have in our collections the maps Buell likely would have had available to him,” Redmond says.

Buell’s map documents a unique time in U.S. history. “Before adoption

Connecticut was the first U.S. state to pass a copyright statute. On January 8, 1783, it enacted “An Act for the Encouragement of Literature and Genius.” In 1790, the federal government incorporated copyright protection in the U.S. Constitution.



Abel Buell, “New and Correct Map of the United States of North America,” 1784. On deposit to the Library of Congress from David M. Rubenstein.

of the Constitution in 1787, the federal government couldn’t establish boundaries between states or force surrender of the western lands some states claimed,” Redmond notes. “As a result, the boundaries of many states in Buell’s map extend west from the Atlantic coast all the way to the Mississippi River.”

Buell petitioned the General Assembly of Connecticut for a copyright for his soon-to-be-printed map on October 28, 1783, nine months after Connecticut became the first U.S. state to enact a copyright law. By October 28, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Jersey had also passed copyright laws, but none expressly

protected maps, as Connecticut’s law did. Thus Buell became the first person to copyright a map in the new nation.

Lawrence Wroth, Buell’s biographer, described Buell as creative and versatile but also restless and impulsive, which perhaps explains his conviction in 1764 for counterfeiting. Buell served jail time, had the tip of his ear cut off, and had his forehead branded with the letter C, a standard penalty of the time.

His colorful life notwithstanding, Buell had the skill and wherewithal to create his own cartographic conception of the United States, rich in symbolism of the emerging new nation. ©

