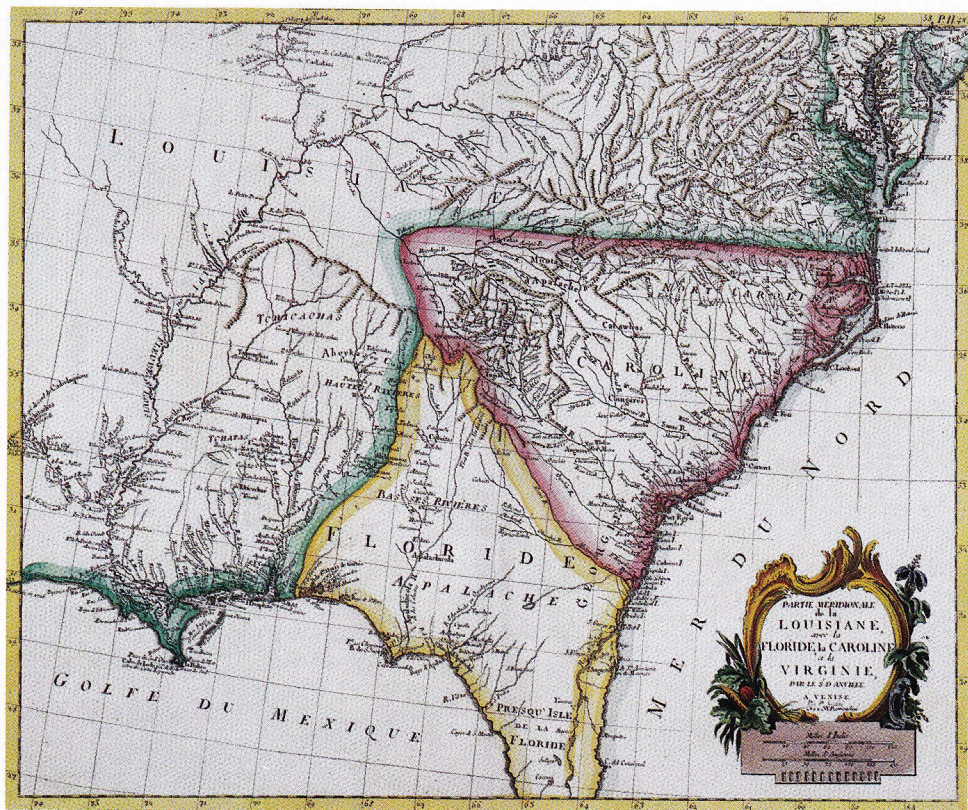


The Stories Maps Tell

How a Louisiana Collector Reads History

Photography by Sylvia Martin
Text by Peggy Shaw



ABOVE: *Partie Méridionale de la Louisiane, avec la Floride, la Caroline, et la Virginie*, by Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, is a later edition from the original done in the 1740s. This map by d'Anville, a royal geographer and cartographer in France, includes a baroque-style gold-bordered cartouche with blue-green tropical foliage and a scale with both English miles and the shorter Italian miles. It is interesting to note that land west of the Mississippi was still labeled *terra incognita*.

RIGHT: New Orleans collector Walker Y. Ronaldson, Jr., displays some of his antique New World maps. What were once used as scientific tools are today turning into decorative pieces, he observes.



When Walker Y. Ronaldson, Jr., prepares to hang an antique map in his New Orleans home, he gives it a look that is restrained, with a simple yet elegant mat and frame. This way the map speaks for itself.

Centuries-old maps of the New World do indeed have something to say. They speak of sea monsters and courageous sailors, of treacherous coastlines, of Indians, plantations, and slaves. They are reminders of rivers discovered and of vessels blown off course, of empires built and lives lost—graphic pictures of an emerging nation.

“The most important quality of the map is not the colors,” says Ronaldson, who collects maps of the Louisiana Purchase area and has dealt in antique maps for twenty years at his St. Charles Gallery. “It is the content and the history, the story the map has to tell.”

New World maps span the centuries from crude sailing charts of the fifteenth century to more expressive eighteenth-century maps, drawn with a flourish. In the earliest years, when mapmakers rarely saw the lands and waterways they drew, they depended on information from captains’ journals and explorers’ tales. These primitive methods sometimes had unreliable results: Florida shown as an island, Bimini confused with Florida, and part of Carolina sketched as a desert. Many areas were simply labeled *terra incognita* (land unknown).

Cartographers were often under the patronage of the king or a royal duke who commissioned expeditions. “This was unclaimed territory, and all of the powers of Europe were clamoring to claim it,” explains Ronaldson. “And one of their primary claims to ownership was maps. The explorers would go back to the cartographer with information, and several months later, they would produce a map. Then the publisher and the French king, for