



Day 3 Age of Exploration Unit  
54-74 Minutes

Obstacles: Explorer Maps

*(Adaptable for Grades 3–9)*

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**TITLE:**

Understanding Old Explorer Maps and How They Improved Over Time

**OBJECTIVE:**

Students will learn about early explorer maps, identify key features, study how maps improved, analyze a real historical map, and understand how cartographers worked during the Age of Exploration.

**GRADE LEVEL:**

Adaptable for Grades 3–9

**MATERIALS:**

- Printed or digital copies of the article
- Projector or screen
- Access to historical map images
- Access to LearnAboutAmerica.com interactive map creator
- Basic art supplies (optional)

**HISTORICAL MAP LINKS FOR DISPLAY (or use the three on the article page)**

- Waldseemüller World Map (1507):  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waldseemuller\\_map,\\_complete\\_100%25.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waldseemuller_map,_complete_100%25.jpg)
  - Carta Marina (1539):  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carta\\_Marina\\_by\\_Olaus\\_Magnus.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carta_Marina_by_Olaus_Magnus.jpeg)
  - Mercator World Map (1569):  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mercator\\_1569\\_world\\_map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mercator_1569_world_map.png)
  - Ortelius World Map (1570):  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OrteliusWorldMap1570.jpg>
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## 1. INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

### Teacher Says:

“Today we’re learning about old explorer maps—how they were created, what features they had, and how they improved over time.”

- Define *cartographer*, *compass rose*, *rhumb lines*.
- Display one of the historical maps from the links above.
- Ask:  
“Why were early maps important even if they were not perfect?”

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## 2. ARTICLE READING (7 minutes)

Choose one option:

- Teacher reads aloud
- Students read independently
- Younger students read simplified version; older students read full version

### Quick Check:

Look at the two maps made by Abraham Ortelius. The first was made in 1570 and the second in 1587. How and why do you think his second map was an improvement over the first?

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## 3. MAP ANALYSIS ACTIVITY (12 minutes)

Display the Waldseemüller Map (1507).

### Ask students:

#### 1. “What parts of the world do you recognize?”

Possible answers:

- Europe, Africa, and Asia are usually easy to identify.
- North and South America may be visible but look different from modern shapes.

- The Atlantic Ocean is often shown between Europe/Africa and the Americas.
  - Some maps include recognizable features like the Mediterranean Sea or the shape of Italy.
  - Students might identify general coastlines even if they are not perfectly drawn.
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## **2. “Why might the shapes of continents be stretched or distorted?”**

Possible answers:

- Explorers did not yet know exact coastlines and had limited information.
  - Much of the data came from sailors’ stories, which were sometimes incomplete or inaccurate.
  - Measurement tools for latitude and especially longitude were not fully developed.
  - Mapmakers had to guess about distances or connect sketchy reports from many voyages.
  - Early map projections often stretched or warped land because they tried to fit a round Earth onto flat paper.
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## **3. “What artistic decorations do you notice?”**

Possible answers:

- Sea monsters, whales, and strange creatures in the oceans
  - Galleons (old sailing ships) and small boats
  - Wind cherubs or “wind heads” blowing air across the map
  - Ornate compass roses with elaborate designs
  - Decorative borders, banners, and scrolls
  - Latin writing in fancy cartouches (gold frames)
  - Mythical animals or symbolic figures
  - Mountains and trees drawn like tiny illustrations instead of real geographic symbols
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#### 4. “What does this map show about explorers’ knowledge at the time?”

Possible answers:

- They understood parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia fairly well.
- They were still learning about the Americas, so coastlines look incomplete or guessed.
- Explorers had limited or no knowledge of the Pacific Ocean’s true size.
- Much of the interior of continents was unknown and often left blank or decorated.
- The map shows that knowledge came from voyages, not satellites or measurements.
- It reflects a mixture of real discoveries and old beliefs or legends.
- Maps were improving but still had large gaps, errors, and imaginative elements.

*(Grades 3–5: focus on visuals; Grades 6–9: discuss accuracy and projections.)*

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#### 4. MINI CREATIVE TASK (7 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/make-your-own-old-school-explorer-world-map>

Use this 7-minute section as a preview introduction:

- Show students screenshots or open the site.
  - Explain that they will design their own parchment-style explorer maps using digital tools.
  - Point out historical design elements: galleons, whales, compass roses, cherubs, and Latin labels.
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# 20-MINUTE EXTENSION: INTERACTIVE CREATIVE TASK

Use:

**Make Your Own Old-School Explorer World Map**

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/make-your-own-old-school-explorer-world-map>

## Overview

Students design their own parchment-style explorer maps by choosing classic backgrounds, painting or filling land regions, placing period-style stamps (galleons, whales, compass roses, wind cherubs, sea monsters, banners), and adding Latin labels inside ornate gold cartouches. They can pan/zoom, adjust colors and sizes, and use select, undo/redo, and erase tools before exporting a finished PNG. This blends geography with creative historical design, helping students think like early cartographers.

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## Step-by-Step (23 minutes)

### 1. Introduction to the Tool (3 minutes)

Teacher demonstrates:

- Classic background options
- Stamp categories (galleons, whales, compass roses, wind cherubs, sea monsters, etc.)
- Paint/fill tools for seas and landmasses
- Latin labels and gold cartouche frames
- How to export the final PNG

### 2. Student Design Time (15 minutes)

Students create their own old-school explorer map.

#### **Suggestions:**

Grades 3–5:

- Add at least one compass rose
- Add 2–3 stamps
- Color land and water

- Add simple labels

Grades 6–9:

- Add rhumb-line-style directional routes
- Include multiple Latin place names
- Use cartouches and banners with longer labels

### **3. Share & Reflect (5 minutes)**

Students briefly show maps on screens or submit exported PNGs.

Possible prompts:

- “Which historical features did you include?”
  - “Why did early cartographers decorate their maps?”
  - “What was most challenging about designing a map?”
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### **Optional Literacy Enrichment (20 minutes)**

Explorer Maps Reading Comprehension at

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/admin/pages/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorer-activities/explorer-maps-online-printable-reading-comprehension/>

- Online or Printable
- Two Versions: Lexiles 850 or 1000
- Passage and seven multiple choice questions
- Annotation, read aloud, and font customization options
- Printable Score Report
- Activity collects data if attached to student dashboard

## **CLOSING (2 minutes)**

Teacher reviews:

- Early maps mixed art and information

- Features that helped sailors (compass roses, rhumb lines, labels)
- How exploration improved map accuracy
- How students experienced cartography through hands-on design