

**On the Origin of Map Jigsaw Puzzles:
“To teach children geography in a playful way”**

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Publisher John Wallis claimed in 1812 that he was the “original manufacturer of dissected maps and puzzles,” beginning in 1782. (Shefrin, 2003, p. 80) His claim went undisputed for 160 years. But Linda Hannas rewrote the history of the jigsaw puzzle in 1972 with her research on John Spilsbury (1739-1769). She found that this London map maker designed, cut, and sold dissected maps as early as 1763. Hannas based her conclusion on contemporary documentation, along with many surviving Spilsbury puzzles dated 1766 and later. The documentation includes his listing as a puzzle maker in the 1763 London business directory (*Mortimer’s Universal Director*) and his own undated price list. (Hannas, pp. 15-20)

Other scholars have put forward several other contenders for the title of inventor since the publication of the Hannas book. As of today, no earlier possibility has both contemporary documentation and an extant dated puzzle. However, there is abundant evidence that Spilsbury was not the inventor. In this article I review what is known about dissected maps that likely antedate Spilsbury’s.

1. Educators of the early 1700s: Hauber and Dumas

Pedagogies of the Enlightenment introduced playful teaching methods to supplement traditional rote learning. They recommended using practical examples, building relations, giving connections, logic, reasoning and (literally) touching objects and material from everyday life.

The German teacher Eberhard David Hauber wrote in January 1725 about “ways to teach children geography easily and almost through play; to cut apart along the borderlines the provinces of a country depicted on a map, throw them in a heap and instruct the pupil to sort the pieces and put them together.” (Hauber, p. 47)

Seven years later French educator Louis Dumas (1676-1744) wrote: “Another way a child will enjoy being shown geography, is cutting a card map in small equal squares, or unequal squares, when you decide to cut along the lines of latitude and longitude, and show the child the way of arranging them to make a geographical map; be it a hemisphere, a piece of the world, France, etc. And when the child has a second geographical map as a guide in front of him, he will soon assemble the pieces of the dissected map.” (Dumas, pp. 143-145)

Clearly educators had ideas about dissected maps and were discussing them even before Spilsbury’s birth.

2. Covens & Mortier

At least sixteen wooden dissected maps by Covens & Mortier of Amsterdam survive to the present day. Most show maps by Guillaume de L’Isle that he published in the 1830s. I have also found many advertisements by private teachers in the early 1700s that stress the importance of teaching geography. But there is no contemporary documentation about the sales or use of the Covens & Mortier puzzles, just a much later 1785 advertisement.

3. Johann Caspar Wettstein (1695-1760)

Johann Caspar Wettstein, originally from Basel, spent most of his adult life in England where he taught the future King George III (1738-1820) and his younger brother. He also bought geographical books and maps for them. It is likely that he bought Hauber's book, which was in vogue at the time. He was a very rigorous teacher, and proud to be Swiss. To the princes, 'Switzerland' must have been associated with 'unpleasant teaching'.

In 1744 Wettstein sent two dissected maps to the princes' Swiss governess. In an accompanying letter Wettstein writes that the drawings were his but he had to depend on craftsmen and craftswomen for the maps and dissections. He also explained that playing with these "games" would improve the princes' sense of geography. He asked the governess not to reveal the source of the puzzles because Prince Edward had told him he did not like Switzerland.

Johann Caspar Wettstein, Lady Charlotte Finch, and Mme Le Prince de Beaumont met, from 1749 on, at the home of Lord Carteret/Earl Grenville. The three educators must have discussed issues of pedagogy.

4. Le Prince

David Bailey, a fellow AGPI member, reviewed the same 1763 London directory that Hannas cites and found this listing: "Le Prince, -----, Marybone-Street. Inventor of the Dissection of Maps on Wood, by which he teaches Geography; and History, after the approved method of Madame de Beaumont, his sister." This listing is very intriguing, but there is no other information about Le Prince, not even his first name, nor about any puzzles he might have made. Shefrin (2003, p. 69) reports that Madame de Beaumont had two half-brothers who worked in the area of geography. Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (1734-1781) did some cartographical engraving, and had traveled to England. Jean-Robert Le Prince was a geographer who died in 1761 or 1762, in London where he had been living.

5. Madame Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont (1711-1780)

Jill Shefrin made the case in 2003 that Mme Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont was the first person to sell dissected maps, and thus their most probable inventor. (Shefrin, 2003, pp. 3-8). Long-time AGPI members will remember that Jill spoke about her research at the 2007 AGPI convention in San Francisco.

Mme de Beaumont operated a private school for young ladies in Henrietta Street, Cavendish Square, London circa 1755. In 1756 she published "Le Magasin des Enfants" in which she recommended teaching geography to young children with maps from Jean Palairret's 1755 *Atlas Méthodique*. Palairret had simplified the maps in his atlas for educational purposes; they showed only just major political boundaries, cities, rivers and mountains.

An undated prospectus for de Beaumont's school refers to "wooden maps" that she required the girls to buy. Shefrin is certain that "wooden maps" meant dissected maps. Others suggest they could have been maps pasted to wood and covered like the hornbooks that children used to learn their letters. Alas, none of de Beaumont's wooden maps have yet been identified.

Shefrin also found mentions of education with "Madame Beaumont's wooden maps" in the letters of Mrs. Mary Delany (December 1759 and June 1760) and of Lady Holland to the Marchioness of Kildare (28 September 1762). Another reference to "wooden maps" comes from a 1765 letter from Thomas Grimstone, a student at Cheam School, to his father. He wrote, "I lost one of the Countis of my wooden map the name of it is flinshire do you think I can get another?" (Shefrin, p. 155) Young Grimstone's "wooden map" is obviously a jigsaw puzzle.

It is tempting to think that Madame de Beaumont asked John Spilsbury, then an apprentice to Thomas Jefferys in London, to draw and print maps for teaching the young. Spilsbury's maps were designed as Mme. de Beaumont advised, with just countries or counties, major cities, rivers, and mountains.

6. Lady Charlotte Finch (1725-1813)

Lady Charlotte Finch was governess to the children of King George III. The eldest child was the future George IV, who was born in 1762. Around 1765 she had a large cabinet made to hold Prince George IV's puzzles as well as those of older generations. When it came to auction in 2000 the cabinet still contained sixteen early map puzzles.

Shefrin (2003, pp. 88-123) pictures the sixteen puzzles and analyzes them in detail. She identifies eight as having been made in the late 1750s from maps in Palairet's 1755 atlas, according to the recommendations of Mme de Beaumont. There are also two Spilsbury wooden dissected maps from the 1760s.

Shefrin concludes that the remaining six puzzle maps were cut "to the direction of" Lady Charlotte in the 1760s. Three wooden ones used map engravings by other publishers. Two are plain wood cut to the shapes of political boundaries and labeled in pen or pencil. One is plain cardboard, labeled by hand in pen, and possibly made by Lady Charlotte herself. It seems possible that among these six puzzles are those sent by Wettstein in 1744, but that they are unrecognized as such because their origin was concealed from the royal children.

A handwritten note inside the cabinet credits Finch with the invention of the dissected map. But this note was written by some unknown person in the 1800s. No other evidence supports this claim, and no scholar has accepted it.

Conclusion

Dissected maps were evidently in use before 1763 to educate of children of noblemen. (Shefrin, 2003). For Britain there is a wealth of evidence about dissected maps: advertisements, letters and some puzzles in museums or private collections. John Spilsbury was the most important commercial publisher, but not the first maker of map puzzles. We have definitive written evidence that Johann Casper Wettstein commissioned wooden dissected maps in 1744 and gave them to the future King George III and his brother.

In France, despite the writings of Dumas, I have found hardly any advertisements for dissected maps, and only three eighteenth century French dissected maps survive. Nor are there any German or Dutch advertisements for dissected maps in the early 1700s despite the work of Hauber. Dissected maps must have played a role on the European Continent, but there so far is no proof.

In light of the earlier writings by Hauber and Dumas about using dissected maps in education, it seems likely that even before Wettstein other tutors and governesses to upper class children had asked local craftspeople create wooden dissected maps. The task for future research is to unearth evidence for this hypothesis in the diaries and correspondence of educators and pupils. Many castle attics remain to be searched for early dissected maps and related materials.

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About the Author. Geert Bekkering has written many books and articles about the history of Dutch and German jigsaw puzzles. He presented his earlier thoughts about the origins of dissected maps at the 2016 AGPI convention in Princeton, NJ. His newest work will be available soon in *Playing with Maps: Cartographic Games in the Western Culture* (ISBN: 9789004544062). Brill of London will publish this book in May 2023. In addition to Geert's section on dissected maps, it contains sections by Adrian Seville on Cartographic Goose Games of the 18th and 19th centuries, and by Thierry Depaulis on Cartographic Card Games.