Finding Buried Treasures: Historical Water Maps

Historical maps are true treasures! They convey important information in ways other documents cannot. However, maps in general, and maps of water bodies in particular, can seem buried within archival collections. Finding them often takes carefully prepared search strategies.

Using the Colorado River as an example, tips for finding historical maps of water bodies are illustrated.

**Tips for Finding Historical Water Maps**

1. **Learn the current and past names** of the body of water. The Colorado River was not always what it is today! Prior to 1921, the Colorado River began at the confluence of the Green and Grand rivers. Then, federal legislation changed the name of the Grand to the Colorado. Earlier in its history, the river was also known as the Bunkara River, Blue River, and the Rio Colorado. Also, consider searching with abbreviations that may have been used.

2. **Know the surrounding geography.** Few maps show only a body of water itself, but rather the area surrounding it. The Colorado River Basin includes seven states and Mexico, so there are seven state maps, two country maps, and many county maps that could help. Also, consider maps of nearby cities, as well as regional and watershed maps.

3. **Consider the archival collections of people or organizations** closely associated with a body of water as good starting points for related maps. For example, Delph Carpenter worked on the Colorado River Compact and Ival Goslin worked for the Upper Colorado River Commission, so both of their collections contain related maps.

4. **Do some preliminary research on the history** of the water body. Since water is in short supply but high demand in the West, conflicts are common, with some going all the way to the Supreme Court, such as *Arizona vs. California*. Learning about the development of the resource and associated disputes can lead to discovering litigation, legislation, and more that may incorporate maps.
Expand your search:

1. Consider **tributaries** to the main water body of interest. For the Colorado, this could mean that maps of the Green River, Gila River, and many more may be useful.

2. Consider various **engineering or other manmade developments** built or proposed. Maps may be localized to particular reservoirs, irrigation projects, power projects, or trans-mountain diversions. For the Colorado River, dozens of these exist, including the Colorado-Big Thompson Project (a trans-mountain diversion often abbreviated CBT).

3. Remember that maps can be **parts of other documents**, such as atlases, books, and reports, as well as included in archival correspondence files if one person sent them to another. Maps can also be found in promotional materials, such as pamphlets and brochures explaining projects like the Colorado River Storage Project.

Narrow your search:

1. Select a **time period** of interest – will only a 1922 map do?

2. Decide if the **publisher or creator** is important – do you need a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) map in particular?

3. Determine the **scale, or level of detail**, needed – do you need to see the entire river from headwaters to delta, or the exact location of a ditch diversion?

4. Decide if a certain **type of map** is required – examples include topographic, political, geographic, and road maps.

5. Determine if a specific **theme** is important – does the map have to show geology, land use, precipitation averages, flow volumes, soil types, etc.?

6. Use **coordinates** if an exact location needs to be examined – examples include geographic (latitude/longitude) and land survey (township/range/section).

Online searching of archival sources is often restricted to keyword searches, so be **creative** in your choice of terms. Don’t give up after searching just the name of the water body. And of course, always remember that archivists and librarians can help you find these buried treasures!