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A Cartographic Journey Through Las Vegas History
Tracing the Las Vegas Landscape Through Maps

Part 1
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[Editor’s note: larger, color versions of the figures can be viewed at www.waml.org]

Mention the name “Las Vegas” today, and most people automatically focus on gambling or its reputation for risqué entertainment and overflowing buffets -- the more knowledgeable among them, however, might remark on the incredible population growth and construction that has characterized its development in recent years. Beyond the serious demands that this growth has placed on the existing infrastructure and its power and water resources, this development has also affected the production of local maps, street guides and atlases. Most are out-of-date soon after they are published as housing and condo developments, strip malls and business and industrial complexes expand monthly and yearly into areas that were previously undeveloped, and new street names jockey for position in the increasingly larger indexes that accompany these street guides and maps.

Yet changes in the Las Vegas landscape are nothing new -- cartographically speaking. A portrait of its dramatic growth can be observed by examining a sampling of historic maps held in the Special Collections Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Beginning with one of the earliest published maps to include the Las Vegas region created during Fremont’s exploration of the West in the mid-19th century to a post-millennium satellite-based map of the Las Vegas metropolitan area -- this cartographic journey will provide a visual guide to the changes that have occurred in the Las Vegas landscape over roughly the past 160 years. From its earliest days as a watering hole for explorers and travelers traversing the Mohave Desert and as the site of a short-lived nineteenth-century Mormon mission from neighboring Utah, to its significance as the main railway stop on the line from Salt Lake to Los Angeles and its role as the gateway to Boulder (later Hoover) Dam, Las Vegas would evolve into the gaming and entertainment capital of the world by the mid-twentieth century. Through it all, maps, whether designed for governmental, exploration, land speculation or tourism purposes, have reflected the physical changes wrought by these events and each has a unique story to tell.

It is generally believed that traders who traversed the Spanish Trail in the period between 1830-1848 first encountered the area that we now know as Las Vegas. The Spanish Trail, located in what was then Mexican territory, wound its way from Santa Fe to Los Angeles through a harsh desert landscape, and the abundant spring waters found in the area provided a welcome watering hole for travelers and animals alike. Unknown Spanish explorers named the area “Las Vegas” -- the meadows -- after the lush grasses that grew up around the springs. It is not known exactly when and by whom the area received this name, but in his journal entry for May 3, 1844, noted explorer and U.S. Army Captain John C. Fremont remarked:

“After a day’s journey of eighteen miles, in a northeasterly direction, we encamped in the midst of another very large basin, at a camping ground called Las Vegas -- a
term which the Spaniards used to signify fertile or marshy plains, in contradistinction to llanos, which they apply to dry and sterile plains.” (Fremont, 1845, p. 266)

Fremont was only one in a series of Western explorers (Anglo and Spanish alike) who made their way through this area, but it was his surveying expedition on behalf of the US Army’s Corps of Topographical Engineers, that resulted in the creation of one of the earliest published maps to feature Las Vegas. In Fremont’s Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-’44 (1845), the accompanying map was drawn by expedition topographer, Charles Preuss, and shows “Vegas” as a tiny dot surrounded by vast expanses of uncharted space with the “trail from Pueblo de Los Angeles to Santa Fe” clearly running through it. (figure 1) Even in this early map, Preuss managed to capture the distinctive features of the Las Vegas Valley such as its mountain ranges and the Virgin and Colorado Rivers. The words “Pah-Utah Indians” noted on this part of the map make it clear that Fremont’s expedition also made contact with the indigenous peoples of the area.

Figure 1

Las Vegas Landscape Through Maps 65
Just eleven years later, a map of this same territory was vastly different, reflecting the changes wrought by the secession of Mexican lands to the United States in 1848, and the further disposition of these lands following the Compromise of 1850. Although known primarily for establishing the boundaries of California, the Compromise legislation also created the Utah and New Mexico territories. (Elliott, 1973) A hand-colored leaf from an atlas published in 1855 (figure 2) shows how almost ninety percent of present-day Nevada was included within the Utah territory, and “Vegas” stood alone in the northwest corner of New Mexico territory, just south of the Virgin and Muddy Rivers, and northwest of the mighty Rio Colorado.

The year 1855 was also notable in that it saw the establishment of the first white settlement at Las Vegas when Brigham Young sent some thirty men to colonize this important segment of the “Mormon Corridor” which connected Salt Lake City and San Bernardino (California). With its abundant water supply, good soil and favorable climate, Las Vegas seemed the perfect spot for the Las Vegas Mission. Young directed the colonists to build a fort for security, raise crops (corn, wheat, squash and melons), and extend the Mormon faith to the Indians. (Pahe, 1971)
John Steele, one of the colonists, detailed much of the mission’s daily life in his diary; his hand-drawn map of the fort and its surroundings provides one of the few contemporary glimpses of the Las Vegas Mission. A facsimile of Steele’s map (figure 3) shows how his drawing, while not to scale, captured elements of the Las Vegas landscape such as the mountain ranges, Mesquite trees, “tooly grass” (tule) and a large area he referred to as “barron desert.” The map also shows the arrangement of the fort, the “correll,” the adobies and the surrounding farm and garden plots.

By summer 1858, a number of factors – leadership conflicts, a failed lead mining operation, crop failures, lack of supplies – led Mormon Church officials to abandon the Las Vegas mission and its settlement. Left to the elements, much of the abandoned settlement deteriorated, but portions of it could still serve as a welcome place of respite for the increased number of freight and mail carriers traveling between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. (Paher, 1971)

Throughout the time of the Mormon settlement, and even after the creation of the Nevada Territory in 1861, Las Vegas remained within the boundaries of the New Mexico Territory. As the US Congress added additional land to the Nevada Territory, and it moved toward statehood, the likelihood of Las Vegas becoming a part of the 36th state seemed remote. (Elliott, 1973) In February 1863, the former Mormon settlement/watering hole/trading post became part of the newly created Arizona Territory that had been carved out of northwestern portions of the New Mexico Territory. (Roske, 1986) A colored-atlas plate of Nevada by W.H. Gamble of Philadelphia (figure 4) dated just one year after it had
achieved statehood (1865) illustrates the contemporary boundaries of the state. Although the northern portion of the Arizona Territory is visible in the map, as are the Muddy, Rio and Colorado Rivers, Las Vegas is just barely out of sight below the 37th longitude line.

That portion of the Arizona Territory that contained Las Vegas and its surroundings was initially designated Mohave County in 1864, but became Pah-Ute County during the proceedings of the Second Session of the Arizona Territory in December 1865. It was this Pah-Ute County that Congress then decreed could be added to the state of Nevada via the consent of its legislature. Not surprisingly, Arizona protested, but to no avail. At the Third Session of the Nevada Legislature in 1867, the Governor impressed upon members the importance of adding this piece of land “...connecting us as it does with the navigable waters of the Colorado River, and embracing extensive and valuable agricultural and mineral lands...” to the state of Nevada. (Edwards, 1978, p. 244) Shortly thereafter, the Legislature passed a resolution accepting this territory and some 12,225 square miles were ceded to Nevada as it reached the final limits of its territorial expansion.
Contemporary maps in UNLV Special Collections that reflect this significant change in the history of Nevada include a plate from A.J. Johnson’s California also Utah, Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona (figure 5) which shows not only Las Vegas but also notes the existence of the “old Mormon Ft.” Interestingly, the Johnson map, dated to 1867, shows the newest portion of Nevada in some detail including major rivers, mining districts, the tiny Mormon towns of St. Thomas, St. Joseph, and Callville, but does not show them as existing within Lincoln County (established 1866) but rather, within one long portion of Nye County.

Conversely, Asher & Adams’ California and Nevada map (figure 6) from 1872 shows only the southern portion of the two states, with the Nevada portion showing small areas of Nye and Lincoln County. Ironically, that portion of Lincoln County shown on the map features very little of the southern Nevada landscape. The Colorado, Muddy and Virgin Rivers appear along with the towns of West Point, Overton, and St. Thomas, but the cartographer did not consider Las Vegas significant enough to be marked on the map. Even the Rio Vegas, while marked on the map, is not labeled as such.
As Nevada and Arizona played tug of war for this small, but valuable portion of land, the abandoned Mormon settlement near the Las Vegas Creek began to flourish again after Octavius Decatur Gass, a miner from nearby El Dorado Canyon, took it over in 1865. Gass and his two partners reconstructed the damaged buildings and plowed the abandoned fields in preparation for new cultivation. Although other settlers moved to the area in the late 1860s, many soon moved away or sold to Gass, and by the late 1870s, the Las Vegas Ranch was the most notable and successful in the Las Vegas Valley. In addition to an array of grains and vegetables, the ranch contained acres of fruit orchards, and was home to cattle, horses and dairy cows. (Paher, 1971)

By 1879, financial difficulties led Gass to mortgage his 640-acre Las Vegas Ranch (and the 160-acre Spring Ranch as well) for $5000 in gold coin to Archibald Stewart, a rancher from nearby Bristol, north of Pioche. When he defaulted the next year, Stewart acquired both properties, but it was not until April 1882 that Stewart brought his family to the Las Vegas Ranch. (Roske, 1986)
A detailed inset in County and Township Map of Utah and Nevada from 1881 (figure 7) shows the mountainous topography of the Lincoln-county area that had been left out of earlier maps. Las Vegas is shown nestled in a clearly marked “Vegas Valley” between the Spring Mountains and Vegas Range. To the south of Las Vegas are unmarked mountain ranges, as well as the Sugar Loaf Peak, Little Peak and Conical Peak. Just east of Las Vegas, the Muddy Range is shown bordering the Virgin and Muddy Rivers on whose banks lay the once prosperous Mormon farming towns of Overton, St. Thomas and St. Joseph.

As Stewart took control of the Las Vegas Ranch in 1881, Lincoln County was in the midst of a U.S. General Land Office (GLO) survey project intended to inventory all federal land holdings. Land surveyed during the project could then be conveyed to the state and individuals (through homestead entry), with the Lincoln County surveys establishing control for all subsequent land records in the area. In addition to providing homestead information via section, township and range numbers, the surveys provided valuable topographical and geographical information by showing the location of mountains, washes, rivers, wagon roads and types of vegetation to a greater degree than other contemporary maps of southern Nevada.
Of the two sets of maps originally produced by the GLO (precursor to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management), one was retained by the GLO, and the other given to the State Land Registrar’s Office in Nevada. The state later conveyed this set to Lincoln County where they were used by the Lincoln County Assessor to prepare the tax rolls. Those maps pertaining to lands held by Clark County were later transferred from the Lincoln County Assessor to the Clark County Assessor, and it is these copies that are currently housed in UNLV Special Collections. (Corbett, 2004)

A page from the volume featuring the surveyed land in townships 20 and 21 (figure 8) marks the area surrounding the Stewart ranch property that would later become the city of Las Vegas. Clearly marked on the portion representing Township No. 20, South Range No. 61 are landscape features such as the Vegas Springs, and the Vegas Creek which ran through the Las Vegas Ranch, as well as the Salt Lake Road, and the road to El Dorado [Canyon], a nearby mining community. The “house” noted on this page is more than likely the ranch house located on the Stewart property.

It was in 1884, while living in this house, that Helen Stewart received the news that changed her life forever, when scarcely two years after he had brought his family to Las Vegas, her husband was gunned down at the neighboring Kiel Ranch. Left a widow with four young children and one on the way, Stewart tried unsuccessfully to sell the ranch in the years after his death. So, in the storied tradition of the nineteenth century-pioneer woman, she stayed on, and with the help of ranch hands, continued to run the ranch for almost twenty years. Its location near the Las Vegas Creek and the availability of fruits, vegetables and meats, as well as Stewart’s hospitality, made the ranch a welcome respite for travelers. (Roske, 1986)
By 1900, the Stewart Ranch's prime location (along with its proximity to water and timber) within the Las Vegas Valley had also made it attractive to the two companies vying for the chance to build the first railroad line into southern Nevada. Although the Oregon Short Line was the first to option the property for sale in June 1901, it was Senator William Clark of Montana whose San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake line successfully secured the ranch property (and springs) for $55,000 in October 1902. (Roske, 1986)

As construction of the SP, LA & SL railroad line into the Las Vegas Valley began in summer 1904, a crude tent settlement quickly grew just west of the Las Vegas Ranch. As the tracks reached Las Vegas and train service was established in late October of that year, engineer J.T. McWilliams, owner of the tent settlement, officially registered his town site at the Lincoln County courthouse in Pioche. With the rapid growth of the McWilliams' Las Vegas Townsite on the west side of the railroad tracks (figure 9), it was left to the railroad to establish its own town site just east of the tracks. (Paher, 1971) Competition between the two sites ensued, and although the McWilliams' Townsite was the first to include businesses such as a bank, general stores, drug stores, furniture stores, and blacksmiths, it eventually could not compete with Clark's Las Vegas Townsite for one very important reason: water. The railroad owned the water rights to the Stewart Ranch and McWilliams had to make do with whatever wells he and other residents could dig on the property. Many of the buildings on the McWilliams' Townsite were later destroyed by fire in September 1905. (Moehring & Green, 2005)
After much publicity and preparation, the SP, LA & SL offered the lots in “Clark’s Las Vegas Townsite,” initially slated for sale by application, at auction on May 15, 1905, owing to the overwhelming number of interested parties. The blistering hot day saw over a thousand bidders (many from Los Angeles) vying for the choicest lots in the town site. And while not all of the 1200 lots on offer sold that day, most generally view the day as the birth of the city of Las Vegas. (Moehring & Green, 2005)

An official map of Clark’s Las Vegas town site (figure 10) notarized on May 8, 1905 just seven days prior to the auction, shows the layout of the forty city blocks as platted by the Las Vegas Land and Water Company, a subsidiary of the SP, LA & SL Railroad. The proximity of the Las Vegas Creek to the town site (running through the map in the northwest corner) is obvious; not so obvious to the casual observer is the fact that all liquor sales were limited to Block 16 (neatly laid out on First Street between Ogden and Stewart Streets) which soon led to its rather unsavory reputation as the “red light district” of early Las Vegas.

Figure 10
Las Vegas and the SP, LA & SL Railroad are also reflected in a map of the California and Nevada deserts printed by the Los Angeles Sunday Times in 1905 just prior to the founding of the town site (figure 11). Compiled by mining engineer G.E. Bailey under the auspices of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the map was designed as a guide for miners and prospectors and emphasized the location of springs, watering holes and desert roads in the southern California and southern Nevada deserts. The verso of the map features a series of articles under the headline “The Desert – Its Water Supply, Resources and Present Development” which focus on the mining prospects of the area along with water and railroad concerns. Las Vegas is only mentioned tangentially due to its connection with the SP, LA & SL railroad, but one article notes that the southern end of Nevada is “…now attracting the attention of thousands far and near.” Its appeal to miners notwithstanding, maps such as this one undoubtedly served to attract settlers to Las Vegas in its early days.

As settlers flocked to Las Vegas after the May 1905 auction, the population of the southern portion of Lincoln County expanded rapidly. In addition to Las Vegas, other highly populated areas included the mining towns of Goodsprings and Searchlight and the agricultural settlements in the Moapa and Virgin Valleys. Pioche, the county seat located in the northern part of the 18,576 square mile county, seemed far removed from the booming south, and people were beginning to take notice. Initially, the question centered on removal of the county courthouse at Pioche to a southern location, but there
was soon a growing movement that favored county division for both financial and practical reasons of governance, with the county seat to be located at Las Vegas. Although there was resistance and acrimonious debate from parties both north and south, county division appeared inevitable, especially from the state standpoint, and in February 1909, Nevada Governor Denver S. Dickerson signed the bill that created Clark County (named for the Senator who had brought the railroad to Las Vegas). It wasn't until two years later, however, that Las Vegas was officially incorporated by state legislation that called for the election of a mayor and four city commissioners. (Paier, 1972)

One of the earliest maps held in UNLV Special Collections to reflect this change is the Nevada page from the 1912 edition of a Rand McNally commercial atlas (figure 12) which shows the newly created Clark County with Las Vegas centrally located as its county seat. Founded in 1856, Rand McNally was already one of the oldest and most respected names in map making at this time and their attention to detail with regard to topographical features is obvious. The importance of Las Vegas, barely seven years old, can be seen in the fact that it is listed on the side of the map as one of the state's "Principal Cities." An index on the verso of the map, which lists Nevada cities and their corresponding populations in 1910, gives Las Vegas' population as 1,275, nearly four times the size of Searchlight (387), the next most populous city in Clark County at the time.
Early Las Vegas certainly gave little indication of its promising future as a resort city; its promise in those early days was centered on its value as railroad center (it was also the only icing station for the railroad between Salt Lake and San Bernardino), and its plentiful water supply, much of it from artesian wells sunk throughout the city. In fact, in those early days, the city’s agricultural potential was widely promoted in newspapers and Chamber of Commerce publications. Boosters proclaimed that not only the water supply, but also the soil and climate were ideal for most of the crops grown in Southern California. (Chamber of Commerce, 1913)

It is probable that J.T. McWilliams’ map of the “Las Vegas Valley Showing Artesian Wells” (figure 13) from 1920 may have been used as a means to promote agricultural settlement in the area. Just below the title are the captions “Las Vegas and its Valley – An Empire in its self” and the even more telling slogan -- “Take care of 10 acres in Clark County and 10 acres in Clark County will take care of you.” Scattered throughout the map are symbols representing pumping and flowing wells, as well as shading designating cultivated land in the Las Vegas Valley. Also of interest are the large tracts of “Carey Act” land marked “open” that are strewn throughout the southern portion of the map; Highway 91, the future Las Vegas Strip, is noted on the map as the “Federal Aid Highway.” In addition, property ownership is detailed on the map, providing an interesting glimpse into who the city’s (and surrounding valley’s) largest landowners were just fifteen years after its founding. One other curious detail is that the map’s creator, land surveyor J.T. McWilliams, continues to mark his settlement as the “Original Town of Las Vegas” while Clark’s Las Vegas town site is marked as “Clark’s LV Town Site.” A minor detail, but one that might have led potential settlers to believe that his was the legitimate town site!
Agriculture and the railroad continued to be the mainstays of life in the Las Vegas Valley throughout the 1920s, but there appeared to be little else to sustain the desert city. A devastating railroad strike in 1922 led the Union Pacific (it had bought out the SPLA &SL in 1921) to move its repair shops to nearby Caliente, causing hundreds of Las Vegas residents to lose their jobs. Still, there were some signs of progress -- Fremont Street, the city’s main thoroughfare, was paved in 1925, airmail service was introduced at Rockwell Field in 1926, and state engineers were prompted by Las Vegas officials to transform the Arrowhead Trail route between Las Vegas and Salt Lake City into Federal highway U.S. 91. (Roske, 1986)

As important as these events were to the development of Las Vegas, they were easily overshadowed by a far more significant event – the Boulder Canyon project. The Colorado River had long been a source of both despair and hope in the arid Southwest. While its treacherous rapids daunted explorers, its waters made cultivation possible in the desert, but too often it overflowed its banks and caused destructive flooding, as was the case in California’s Imperial Valley in 1906. It would take many years of failed plans and negotiations (both individually and collectively) on the part of the seven states of the Colorado River basin before Congress passed the Boulder Canyon Act (Swing-Johnson Bill) in December 1928. It authorized the Secretary of the Interior to build and operate a dam at either Boulder Canyon or Black Canyon (the latter site was chosen because of the stability of the canyon walls) to provide water stabilization, water storage, flood control, general river regulation, irrigation, silt control, electrical power, and a domestic water supply. (Stevens, 1988)

The Dam’s construction spawned the creation of Boulder City to house the dam workers and their families, far from the temptations of gambling and alcohol in nearby Las Vegas. Yet the Dam also brought new life to Las Vegas, bringing workers to spend their money, and new residents and tourists to the city and its outlying areas, thereby protecting it from the worst effects of the Great Depression.

C.D. Baker’s 1929 city map of Las Vegas (figure 14) provides a contemporary glimpse of the city as it looked during the period just after the Boulder Canyon Act was passed, and just prior to the Dam’s construction. Baker, who was later elected mayor of Las Vegas, was an engineer who had surveyed much of the city of Las Vegas. His map provides a detailed look at land ownership in the city and outlying areas, enabling one to trace the city’s housing developments and how they were added to the original Clark’s town site. Expanses of undeveloped land with names like the Boulder Canyon Land & Development Co. and the Colorado River Exploration Co. Ltd. show how the Dam’s construction zone spread far beyond the walls of Black Canyon. The map was most likely designed to attract property buyers to Las Vegas, as it features the location of artesian wells and natural springs, and contains an inset showing the general location of Las Vegas relative to its distance to nearby cities such as Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. The inset also shows the location of both Boulder Canyon, and Black Canyon which it notes is the “actual Dam site.”
A topographical map of the Boulder Canyon Project in the vicinity of Boulder Dam produced by the US Bureau of Reclamation in 1940 (figure 15) shows the vast differences in the landscape surrounding Las Vegas shortly after the dam was completed in 1935. Most notable, of course, is the appearance of Lake Mead, formed after the creation of the Dam, and responsible for the submersion and disappearance of St. Thomas and Kaolin, two small Mormon farming towns located near the Virgin River. That portion of the map showing the Las Vegas Valley according to township and range, features railroad lines and highways, power and telephone lines, and marks the location of the Las Vegas Airport (which later became the US Army Air Corps Gunnery range and then Nellis Air Force Base). It is also notable that the Las Vegas Ranch is still featured prominently on this portion of map, as are the location of a number of valley springs, both demonstrating the continued importance of the area’s agricultural roots.

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