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Map of the United States with the Contiguous British & Spanish Possessions Compiled from the latest & best authorities by John Melish . . . 6th day of June, 1816

Stock#: 61842
Map Maker: Melish

Date: 1816
Place: Philadelphia
Color: Outline Color
Condition: VG
Size: 57 x 36 inches

Price: SOLD



Description:

The Visual Embodiment of Thomas Jefferson's Vision of American Manifest Destiny -- First Appearance of Alabama Territory

Melish's map is generally regarded as the single most important and influential map of America published in the 19th Century and is rivaled only by John Mitchell's map of North America (1755) as the single most influential map in American History. Moreover, the historical significance of the Melish map transcends the realm of cartography, as the map is one of the most iconographically important American works of visual culture created during the first half of the 19th Century.

Notably, the map employs color-coding (green) to imply that American territory extends to the Pacific and to embrace all of the coast from the 38th parallel (today's Marin County, California) north up to beyond the 49th parallel (past modern day Vancouver, British Columbia). Much of the Great Plains, including areas outside of the Louisiana Purchase generally thought to be Spanish (soon to be Mexican) or British (Hudson's Bay Company) territory, are also shown to be part of the United States.

The present example is Ristow's 7th of the Melish map, the first edition with the designation "Mississippi Territory" to show Mississippi and Alabama Territory.

Just as Mitchell's map influenced boundary disputes and treaties in North America for nearly a century after its publication, the Melish map similarly became the essential source map for the 19th Century. It has been described by several commentators as the visual embodiment of Manifest Destiny to an American public searching for a graphic depiction of America's territorial acquisitions from coast-to-coast in the early 19th Century.

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Following the Louisiana Purchase, Americans turned their attention westward to the great expanse of land from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. While the overland explorations of Meriwether Lewis & William Clark to the Pacific (1804-5) and Zebulon Pike to the Rockies (1806-7) provided early regional snapshots of previously unknown regions of the West, it was left to Melish to integrate these works, along with Aaron Arrowsmith's *A New Map of Mexico* (London, 1810) and other available sources, into the first comprehensive general map of a transcontinental United States.

Described by Thomas Jefferson as "a luminous view of the comparative possessions of different powers in our America," Melish's map was the first indigenous attempt to map the United States from coast to coast. Jefferson, one of the architects of what would later be termed as "Manifest Destiny", was known to gift the map to European courtiers in an effort to impress upon them the transcontinental nature of America's ambitions.

John Melish (1771-1822) was a Scottish merchant who moved to Philadelphia in 1811, becoming a professional mapmaker. While his cartographic career barely lasted a decade, due to the groundbreaking nature of his work, Melish was inarguably one of the most consequential American mapmakers. Prior to making his map of the United States, Melish produced a number of highly acclaimed regional maps, along with his rare *Military & Topographical Atlas of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1813, expanded 1815), considered to be the finest cartographic publication relating to the War of 1812.

However, it would be the present map of the United States that would become his masterpiece. So popular was the map, and so eager were Melish and his associates to ensure that the map was as 'up to date' as possible, it was reissued in 25 known states between 1816 and 1823. The most notable advance in the later states of the map is the addition of an extra plate at the bottom, which added coverage of Cuba, Jamaica, the Virgin Islands, the remainder of the Gulf Coast and the Yucatan Peninsula to the map. Melish's map, in its various editions, faithfully recorded the changing geography of the U.S., as various boundary disputes, treaties and explorations extended both the geographical territory of the U.S. and a young nation's knowledge of its own dominions.

Historical Context

While today, many may assume that the western progress of America would naturally extend from 'sea to sea,' in 1816 this was far from a safe assumption. At that time, the United States had no fixed presence on the West Coast, as its first and only outpost on the Pacific, Fort Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia River (erected in 1811), had been sold to the British in 1813. In spite of the great achievements of the Lewis & Clark Expedition and other American explorers, the British presence throughout the Pacific Northwest far outstripped the activities of the Americans.

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Moreover, California was still technically under the rule of Spain, and even though the Mexican Revolution (underway since 1810) would eventually see the region become a part of an independent Mexico (in 1821), in 1816, the concept of future U.S. hegemony over California was not a serious notion. As such, the Melish map was nothing short of a bold oracle, proclaiming American ambitions before events on the ground made such aspirations possible. While Melish was born and raised in Scotland, more than any other contemporary mapmaker, he was acutely attuned to the aspirational sentiments of his adopted country.

Melish's present map was groundbreaking, even audacious, in its vision, however, the expansionist conceptions it showcased were based on the serious, if ill-defined, objectives of prominent figures in the U.S. Government. While the notion of 'Manifest Destiny' was many years away from being coined, the actions of President Thomas Jefferson (in office, 1801-1809), implicitly opened up the possibility of the United States controlling at least the bulk of the North American continent, extending from sea-to-sea.

Jefferson authorized the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. In 1804, he dispatched Lewis & Clark on their successful overland mission to the West Coast expressly to lay a transcontinental American claim extending to the Pacific. While the United States failed to conquer British Canada during the War of 1812 (1812-1815), the fact that it successfully survived the juggernaut of the Royal Navy in the latter stages of the conflict emboldened both the American Republic's sense of security and identity. Never again would the sovereignty of the United States be seriously threatened by a foreign power.

Not long after Melish produced his first editions of the map, geo-political events moved quickly to show that the expansionist rhetoric of the map was not merely optimistic or fanciful. The Anglo-American Convention of 1818 extended the U.S.-Canadian border westwards along the 49th parallel from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains. Within the same treaty, the British and Americans agreed to jointly occupy the Oregon Country (which included the entire Pacific Northwest between California and Russian Alaska) until such a time as the two nations could agree to divide the region between them. This held out the promise that the U.S. would someday gain exclusive control of at least a part of the Northwest, such that America would extend from sea-to-sea.

That same year, the Americans reacquired Fort Astoria from the British, so returning a fixed U.S. presence to the Pacific. In 1819, the U.S. and Spain (which was on the cusp of loosing its New World Empire), signed the Adams-Onís Treaty, by which the U.S. gained Florida and it was agreed that the northern border of California would follow the 42nd parallel (so implying that the U.S. had sovereignty over what is now Oregon). Notably, a copy of the Melish map was used by diplomats to demarcate the new boundary line, the first of many such usages of the Melish map to define boundaries and/or resolve boundary conflicts.

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In the early 1820s, President James Monroe (in office, 1817-25) articulated the Monroe Doctrine, which asserted that European powers should make no further incursions into the Americas, and that the U.S. should be the defender of that principle. These events formed the underpinnings of the American quest for westward expansion that culminated in the U.S. annexation of Texas (1845), the acquisition of southern Oregon territory (comprising the future states of Oregon and Washington), in 1846, and the acquisition of the entire Southwest (including California), following the Mexican-American War in 1848.

The Rarity of the Map

The present example of Melish's map of the United States is a very rare early state, being the 7th state of 25 known states. Melish reportedly issued only 100 copies of each state. Moreover, the survival rate of these maps is quite low, as examples were often tacked onto walls, exposed to water and sun damage and prone to heavy use.

This is one of the earliest states of the map we have ever offered for sale.

Detailed Condition:
Dissected and laid on linen, with original covers. Minor soiling, offsetting and foxing.