

Girls, Globes, and Geography:

How Westtown School Was at the Forefront of Geography Education

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In the years following the American Revolution, the study of geography and mapmaking became increasingly important to people living in the newly-formed United States. National and state borders were changing and expanding, and the need for accurate maps increased along with these border changes.

Visual maps were one way Americans were able to redefine the ever-changing boundaries between the wilderness, settled lands, and growing cities. In addition, with their newly-acquired freedoms and liberties, more people were able to purchase and own land. Understanding and reading maps was a useful skill for these landowners.

Through maps, they could understand the boundaries of their own property, visualize the location of roads and rivers, and measure the distance to markets near and far. For some Americans, maps became a source of pride in their expansive and growing nation, a physical symbol of strength and unity. Historians tell us that these maps helped to establish a sense of national "place" during the post-Revolutionary years. By the

early 1800s, it became apparent that children should be taught geography and mapmaking. Westward continental expansion, the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, and the publication of Lewis and Clark's travels and explorations all added to the growing appeal of geography as an important and necessary school subject for young scholars. Newspaper articles and advertisements described the necessity of training children to read maps and understand national and world geography.

One advertisement for a geography textbook also signaled a new direction in education, noting the book was designed for use by both young boys and girls. By including young girls as part of the book's audience, the author helped pave the way for a generation of girls to embark on a study of geography and its companion studies of astronomy and mapmaking.

Like young girls elsewhere in the country, some Quaker girls attending the Westtown Boarding School in our township during the early 1800s studied geography. However, their



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Collection of Westtown School

coursework also included a heavy focus on needlework — an essential skill for women of that age. (Note: It is unclear what the process was, but only a select group of girls were allowed to study geography in the earliest days of the school's history.)

Because of the importance placed upon improving their needle skills, girls at Westtown during this period were spending about one-third of their class time in the sewing room. As a girl's sewing skills improved, she could advance from simple darning exercises to projects requiring greater attention to detail, one of which was the creation of terrestrial and celestial globes.

The globes, silk-covered spheres measuring about 4" to 6" in diameter, were produced from about 1804 to 1844. The silk covering forms a canvas for these globes. On the terrestrial globes, continents and bodies of water are hand painted and labeled, handwork done by the female students who created these globes. Lines of latitude and longitude are carefully stitched out with silk threads. Celestial globes, created with the same fabric and threads, show the stars and constellations as they appear in the sky over different parts of the world.

Creating this type of globe was not a project to be taken lightly. Rachel Cope, a student at Westtown School in 1816, wrote a letter to her parents about the globe she was about to make. She felt the undertaking would give her "a great deal of trouble" but would ultimately "strengthen [her] own memory,

respecting the supposed shape of our earth, and the manner in which it moves," according to Helen Hole's book *Westtown Through the Years 1799-1942*. Rachel's description of these globes indicates a basic understanding of geography and astronomy, concepts most likely learned outside the sewing room and in a geography class.

The reason for making the globes is unknown, but may have included learning geography, advanced sewing skills, how to use a globe, or some combination of all these concepts. Certainly the detailed continental outlines and carefully marked outlines of latitude and longitude reveal a level of proficiency in creating and drawing maps to scale, a skill being taught to some of the girls at Westtown. Constructing these personal globes may have provided an additional benefit to the school: until about 1815, globes were generally imported from Europe at great expense. These hand-crafted silk globes, some mounted on wooden stands, may have helped alleviate the need to purchase classroom globes for teaching. Some have survived and are in the Westtown School and Chester County Historical Society collections. Whatever the reason behind their production, making globes during the early 1800s coincided with the growing national demand for geographic studies in schools. At Westtown, geographic terms and concepts would be reinforced in the minds of young Quaker girls while they focused on improving their stitching skills.

