

Des Barres – Atlantic Neptune – General Description

Chart of Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound, from The Atlantic Neptune

Author: J[oseph] F[rederick] W[allet] Des Barres (publisher) / [Samuel Holland, lead surveyor]
Title: *[untitled chart of Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound]*
Published: [London]; November 1, 1781
Description: Line engraving and etching on two sheets joined, 41.25”h x 29.25”w in all, original full wash color
Condition: Very light offset throughout, streak of watercolor in lower center, and occasional marginal tears, else clean and sound. About as good as one sees in charts from the Neptune.

This chart from Des Barres’ Atlantic Neptune was the most accurate contemporary chart of the region and remained so for the better part of 50 years. For their blend of accuracy and visual appeal, the charts of the Neptune have probably never been surpassed.

Description

The chart depicts the Buzzards Bay, Vineyard Sound and the surrounding land areas, including the Elizabeth Islands and the eastern half of Martha’s Vineyard. Extensive soundings are given as are numerous navigational aids and hazards. It also provides a great deal of terrestrial detail not available on any other printed map of the time, including roads, structures, and even property boundaries. A variety of symbols are employed to differentiate shoals, tidal zones, dunes, wetlands &c.

This example matches the final state of the chart identified by both Stevens and the National Maritime Museum, with the publication date altered from April 5, 1776 to November 1, 1781.

Historical context

Joseph Des Barres now receives the lion’s share of credit for the achievement of the Atlantic Neptune. In truth, he himself was responsible for the hydrographic survey of Nova Scotia that fills the first volume of the Neptune. And as compiler and publisher he was responsible for the extraordinary artistic quality of its charts and views.

However, many others played critical roles in conducting the original surveys. The most important was Samuel Holland, a Dutch-born surveyor and engineer who entered British service during the French and Indian War (1756-63). Following their victory, the British were faced with the mammoth task of administering and developing thousands of square miles of newly-acquired territory, most of which had never been adequately mapped.

...we find ourselves under the greatest difficulties arising from the want of exact surveys of those countries, many parts of which have never been surveyed at all, and others so imperfectly that the charts and maps thereof are not to be depended on.

For example, the standard nautical atlas for colonial waters was *The English Pilot. Fourth Book*, first published in 1689 and reissued for over 100 years. Unfortunately, “reissued” does not necessarily imply “updated;” many *English Pilot* charts were issued unchanged for decades, even long after superior alternatives were available. This did little for trade in general or mariners in particular, but did keep research and development costs down.

In response to this problem, Holland proposed “an accurate and just Survey... upon... a general scale and uniform plan” of North America east of the Mississippi. The survey would be based on geodetic controls—that is, with the locations of control points established by rigorous astronomical observation, and the intermediate areas pinpointed by means of triangulation. This followed the most advanced European practice, but would represent its first application in North America, and on a much grander scale than hitherto.

The Lord Commissioners approved Holland’s proposal, and in 1764 he was named Surveyor General of both the Province of Quebec and the Northern District of North America. Holland spent the next six years surveying Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton and other areas in and around the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Then from 1770-1774 he focused on the survey of the New England and New York coasts.

Of course, Holland didn’t work alone. He was more on the order of a principal investigator, overseeing a number of semi-autonomous teams through five deputies: Charles Blaskowitz, James Grant, George Sproule, Thomas Wheeler and Thomas Wright. All told, Holland probably had more than 50 men working under his direct supervision at any given time. It is not clear who conducted the surveys covered in the present chart, but it was probably either Blaskowitz or Sproule.

Ultimately, the project required gathering and integrating four types of data: Astronomical observations to establish geodetic control points, topographical surveys by means of triangulation, hydrographical observations (soundings, etc.) conducted by the Royal Navy, and artists’ renderings of coastal profiles to be used in recognition views.

The Atlantic Neptune

Holland’s finished surveys were sent back to England, where in 1774 Des Barres assumed responsibility for their publication. Given the unsettled times, the demand for charts was enormous, and Des Barres’ operation quickly grew to fill two townhouses and employ 20 assistants in compiling, drafting and correcting the charts. While it was usually made up to order and therefore had no standard contents, *The Atlantic Neptune* ultimately extended to five sections: Nova Scotia, New England, the River and Gulf of St. Lawrence (based on the work of James Cook), the coast south of New York, and American coastal views.

References

National Maritime Museum (UK) on-line catalogue of charts from *The Atlantic Neptune*, #HNS 88F (state 8); Stevens, *Catalog of the Henry Newton Stevens Collection of the Atlantic Neptune*, III:197-198 (state 6).

For background on Des Barres, Holland and the *Atlantic Neptune*, see Cumming, *British Maps of Colonial America*, pp.51-56; Harley et al., *Mapping the American Revolutionary War*, pp.25-8; and Machemer, "Headquartered at Piscataqua: Samuel Holland's Coastal and Inland Surveys, 1770-1774," *Historical New Hampshire vol. 57* nos. 1 &2, pp.4-25.

The Barre Publishing edition of *The Atlantic Neptune*

Author: Joseph Frederick Wallet Des Barres, Esq.
Title: *The Atlantic Neptune, Published for the Use of the Royal Navy of Great Britain...*
Published: Barre (Mass.), 1966
Description: 2 portfolios of 4 (all published). Each a blue buckram portfolio, ca. 35"h x 24"w with ties. Vol. 1 containing 24 loose printed sheets incl. title pages, charts, views and sailing directions; vol. 2 with 20 loose sheets incl. title page, charts and views.
Condition: Small, scattered specks of white paint on front board of vol. 1, some fraying to ties, otherwise excellent.
Price: \$2900 Inventory: BRM0480

The two New England volumes of the Barre Publishing Company's wonderful full-scale reproduction of *The Atlantic Neptune*. Produced at great (actually unsustainable) expense, this work is printed on luxurious rag paper from photogravures of Augustus Loring's copy of the *Neptune*, with each image colored by hand. The project was so expensive that it was abandoned midway in the late 1960s.

The first portfolio contains 24 printed sheets in all (plus one blank), comprising 2 title pages, 10 charts, 9 views, and 1 sheet of sailing directions. The second holds 20 sheets with 1 title page, 7 charts and 15 views. Many of the charts consist of two sheets (as in the originals), while the views are often printed more than one to a sheet.

Taken together, the charts provide complete coverage for the New England coastline, including among others large-scale charts of Narragansett Bay, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, Boston Harbor, the Cape Ann area, and Portland. Also present are a number of Des Barres' more spectacular town views, including two stunning images of Boston (one from the Harbor, the other from Dorchester).