

From left: Randall, Aurbach, and Hébert.



Maps in Our Lives

—by Richard R. Randall

For many years, the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping and the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress have promoted excellence in cartography and mapping through the annual ACSM-CaGIS Map Design Competition. Notices about the events are distributed not only by ACSM but also by other related organizations. Responding have been university students and cartographers in private corporations and in various institutions. The results have demonstrated the talents and dedication of many people to create cartographic products that illustrate a wide range of topics of interest to large segments of our population. Prizes are awarded for outstanding map design. All winning entries (and a number of runners-up) have been catalogued and are housed at the Geography and Map Division for viewing by interested parties. From October 2005 to October 2007, forty-seven items gathered during previous years, a set of plats and maps of George Washington's property in Virginia over the past 200 years, plus video explaining what GIS is, were featured in a display at the Geography and Map Division, entitled "Maps in Our Lives."

The exhibit caught my attention, and, as a member of the Cosmos Club, I decided to give a little talk about it at my club's geography and maps roundtable. Then, another member of the club, Laurence Aurbach, recommended that a tour be set up for members and friends of the club to visit the exhibit. I communicated with Dr. John Hébert, chief of the Geography and Map Division, and a schedule was developed and advertised in the club's newsletter. As a result, on January 13 of this year, a group of twenty-seven members and associates of the Cosmos Club viewed the exhibit. The items and related texts pertaining to surveying, geodesy, cartography, and geographic information systems were

displayed in a corridor adjacent to the entrance of the Geography and Map Division. Dr. Hébert described the purpose of the exhibit and answered questions about the featured maps.

He also escorted the group through the reading room of the Geography and Map Division where he showed us many other fascinating examples of maps that were accumulated over the years and now constitute the world's largest collection. The most outstanding is the original Waldseemüller map of 1507 that shows details of the then-known world in a series of 12 sheets. On April 30th, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, formally presented the map to the Library of Congress. Although the map had been purchased from its previous owner in Germany in 2003, the presentation was an official completion of the transfer.

Another map treasure was produced in 1540 by the residents of a place called Texcoco in Mexico, east of the current location of Mexico City. With remarkable definition, the map, which is printed on vegetative material called "amatl," features plots of land used for farming and other functions.

The visitors, some of whom have a special interest in historical cartography, were fascinated by Dr. Hébert's erudite and lively descriptions of the displayed maps, as well as those stored in the Division's reading room for the pleasure of the connoisseurs.

The Maps in Our Lives exhibit was the first since 1983 and serves as a valuable example of how maps have been and continue to be essential elements of society. The Cosmos Club's tour of the exhibit reminded members of another, "close-to-home" fact related to mapping; the founder of the club in 1878 was John Wesley Powell, whose work in mapping areas beyond the 100th meridian was of fundamental importance to our Nation.

The exhibit is scheduled to remain on display in the corridor of the Geography and Map Division until late October 2007. If you are planning a visit to Washington, D.C. and its historic sites, add the Maps in Our Lives exhibit at the Library of Congress' Geography and Map Division to your list. It's a fitting tribute to the surveying and mapping sciences in our country!

Dr. Richard R. Randall, a Washingtonian and long-time ACSM member, is a geographer/cartographer who for many years has worked with federal agencies—including the Geography and Maps Division—and Rand McNally & Co. He is also a member of the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., which hosts a geography and maps roundtable.