



For decades, most American paper (and later digital) maps had what was called 'the legend.' The legend had nothing to do with knights in shining armor or Crusades. Rather, map legends explained what the various symbols on the map represented, a kind of interpretative key.

◆ AI Overview

The **map legend** (also known as a **map key**) is a crucial cartographic tool. It acts as a visual guide that translates abstract shapes, colors, and line styles into readable geographic data, ensuring the user can accurately interpret the landscape or spatial information. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

The term shares a fascinating linguistic history with medieval stories of knights, saints, and heroic quests. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

The Linguistic Connection

- **Latin Roots:** The word "legend" comes from the Latin word *legere*, which means "to read".
- **"Things to be Read":** This evolved into the Medieval Latin word *legenda*, meaning "things to be read".
- **Early Meaning:** Originally, it referred strictly to written accounts or stories of saints' lives that were read aloud in church. Over time, this evolved to include mythical or historical epics that were worth reading and passing down. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

How the Meaning Shifted to Maps

- By the early 17th century, "legend" was also being used to describe written inscriptions on objects, such as the text stamped onto coins.
- By the early 1900s, cartographers borrowed the term to refer to the explanatory text and symbols printed on maps and charts.
- In essence, the legend is simply the **"text to be read"** to make the rest of the map legible. [[1](#), [2](#)]

What You Will Find in a Legend

Cartographers use legends because not all symbols are intuitive. A standard legend groups these elements into easily digestible categories: [[1](#), [2](#)]

- **Point Symbols:** Small shapes or icons that identify exact locations (e.g., a cross for a hospital, a star for a capital city, or a tent for a campsite). [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]
- **Line Symbols:** Various widths, colors, and styles (solid, dashed, dotted) that represent features like rivers, hiking trails, interstates, or political boundaries. [[1](#)]
- **Area/Polygon Symbols:** Shaded colors or patterns that designate specific regions (e.g., blue for water, green for a national park, or color ramps for elevation). [[1](#), [2](#)]

If you enjoy learning about the history of cartography, I can help you:

- Explore how **ancient maps** differ from modern navigational charts.
- Dive into the history of how **map scales** are calculated. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

Let me know how you'd like to proceed!

Google search for "For decades, most American paper (and later digital) maps had what was called 'the legend.' The legend had nothing to do with knights in shining armor or Crusades. Rather, map legends explained what the various symbols on the map represented, a kind of interpretative key|".

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10 sites

- View a legend—ArcGIS Online Help | Documentation
A legend shows the meaning of the symbols, colors, and styles used to represent geographic data on the...
- ArcGIS Online
- Glossary for Students | Bending Lines
key or legend. A map key, also called a legend, is the part of a map that explains what the symbols, colors ...
- Leventhal Map & Education Center
- U.S. Map Lesson 1 - Maps, Symbols and Legends - Grade 6+
The United States map legend shows symbols such as: * **Dot symbols** Represent the locations and population of cities * **Line sy...
- World Maps Online

Show all

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What You Will Find in a Legend

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