



**Barry Lawrence Ruderman  
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**This Map of the City of New York and Island of Manhattan as laid out by the Commissioners appointed by the Legislature April 3d. 1807 is Respectfully Dedicated to the Mayor, Alderman and Commonalty thereof By their most Obedient Servant Wm. Bridges City Surveyor**

**Stock#:** 47788  
**Map Maker:** Bridges  
  
**Date:** 1811 (1900)  
**Place:** New York  
**Color:** Color  
**Condition:** VG  
**Size:** 37 x 10 inches  
  
**Price:** SOLD



**Description:**

***The Commissioners Map***

Fine example of the Robert A. Welcke edition of the Commissioners Map, the most important map of New York published after the American Revolution, first published in 1811.

The Commissioners map covers the entire island of Manhattan, showing some buildings, topographical features and streams. The map is derived from a manuscript draft by John Randel, who was retained to create what would become the first official modern map of Manhattan.

Originally prepared for publication by William Bridges and engraved by Peter Maverick on 6 sheets in 1811, the Commissioners map is generally regarded as the most important map of the New York City published after the American Revolution. The size of the map was approximately 91 x 23 inches and is extremely rare. We are aware of no examples of the original Commissioners map appearing on the market in a dealer catalog or at auction.

As noted by the entry for the Welcke edition of the map described in *The Eno collection of New York City Views*, originally published in the *Bulletin of the New York Library*, May and June 1925, the Robert A. Welcke edition of the Commissioners Map was created by Welcke in 1900 and is the only collectable edition of the map available to collectors. It can be differentiated from the original by the size and the Welcke credit line at the bottom right, below the neatline (ROBERT A. WELCKE, PHOTO-LITH., 178 WILLIAM ST., N. Y. ). The dating given is based upon the entries in the Eno Collection and OCLC entry noted below.



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The Welcke edition of the Commissioners Map is extremely rare. OCLC locates only the example in the New York Historical Society. We were not able to confirm whether the NY Public Library still holds its copy of the Welcke edition described in its 1925 catalog entry.

#### **The Commissioners Map**

The Commissioners' Plan of 1811 was the original design for the streets of Manhattan above Houston Street, which put in place the rectangular grid plan of streets and lots that created the base planning for the modern plan of Manhattan. It has been called "the single most important document in New York City's development" (Augustyn & Cohen, pp.100-106), and the plan has been described as encompassing the "republican predilection for control and balance ... [and] distrust of nature" (Burrows and Wallace, pp.419-22). It was described by the Commission that created it as combining "beauty, order and convenience."

The plan originated when the Common Council of New York City, seeking to provide for the orderly development and sale of the land of Manhattan between 14th Street and Washington Heights, but unable to do so itself for reasons of local politics and objections from property owners, asked the New York State Legislature to step in. The legislature appointed a commission with sweeping powers in 1807, and their plan was present in 1811.

The Commissioners were Gouverneur Morris, a Founding Father of the United States, John Rutherfurd, a former United States Senator; and the state Surveyor General, Simeon De Witt. Their chief surveyor was John Randel Jr., who was 20 years old when he began the job.

The Commissioners' Plan is arguably the most famous use of the grid plan or "gridiron" and is considered by many historians to have been far-reaching and visionary. Since its earliest days, the plan has been criticized for its monotony and rigidity, in comparison with irregular street patterns of older cities, but in recent years has been viewed more favorably by urban planners.

There were a few interruptions in the grid for public spaces, such as the Grand Parade between 23rd Street and 33rd Street, which was the precursor to Madison Square Park, as well as four squares named Bloomingdale, Hamilton, Manhattan, and Harlem, a wholesale market complex, and a reservoir.

#### **The Mangin-Goercke Plan and Preparations For The Commissioners Map**



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Prior to the Commissions Plan, the Common Council had commissioned and then decertified a plan prepared by Casimir Goerck and Joseph-Francois Mangin, which had been commissioned in 1797 and completed in draft form in 1799. For a complete description of the Mangin-Goercke Plan, please read the following description: `{{ inventory_detail_link('44419ops') }}`

Magnin's plan, which was rejected by the Common Council, would form the basis for the future expansion of the city. In the "warning label" the Council caused to have placed on copies of Mangin's map was the statement that expansion of the city, such as shown on the map, was "subject to such future arrangements as the Corporation may deem best calculated to promote the health, introduce regularity, and conduce to the convenience of the City."

In 1806, the Council hired Ferdinand Hassler. Hassler, a Swiss mathematician and geodetic surveyor who was noted for his work on a topographic survey of Switzerland, who had immigrated to Philadelphia in 1805. In the spring of 1806, the Common Council commissioned Hassler to make an accurate map of Manhattan Island, which could be used as a basis for planning future development. He was scheduled to depart from Philadelphia in July, in time for at least part of the 1806 surveying season, but never appeared. Finally, in October, he sent his regrets: both he and his wife had taken ill on the day they intended to leave. Hassler soon received a federal appointment and would eventually head the first Coast Survey.

In March 1807, the state legislature appointed Gouverneur Morris, John Rutherfurd and Simeon De Witt, to serve as the Commissioners. The legislature gave the Commissioners "exclusive power to lay out streets, roads, and public squares, of such width, extent, and direction, as to them shall seem most conducive to public good, and to shut up, or direct to be shut up, any streets or parts thereof which have been heretofore laid out... [but] not accepted by the Common Council." The jurisdiction of the Commission was all of Manhattan north of Houston Street, and into the Hudson and East Rivers, 600 feet beyond the low water mark. They were given 4 years to have the island surveyed, and then to produce a map showing the placement of future streets.

At the meetings of the Commission, which were infrequent and usually not attended by all three men, their primary concern was what kind of layout the new area of the city should have, a rectilinear grid such as was used in Philadelphia; New Orleans; Savannah, Georgia; and Charleston, South Carolina, or a more complex system utilizing circles, arcs or other patterns, such as the plan Pierre Charles L'Enfant had used in laying out Washington, D.C. In the end, the Commission decided on the gridiron as being the most



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practical and cost-effective, as "straight-sided and right-angled houses are the most cheap to build and the most convenient to live in."

In order for the Commissioners to determine what the future of New York City's streets would be, they needed to know the precise location of the current streets, which meant that most of the four years they were given for their task would be taken up with surveying Manhattan island.

The Commission's first chief surveyor was Charles Frederick Loss. Unfortunately Loss did not appear to be a very competent surveyor, as several of his ventures had serious errors, which eventually resulted in his being relieved of his position in 1811. Loss exhibited the same lack of ability as the chief surveyor for the Commission, and finally the Commission made an agreement with Loss that he would do only the first task that had been assigned to him: to make a map of Manhattan island, and get accurate measurements for the location of certain streets which would provide a framework for the plan of future streets.

### **John Randel Jr.**

The Commissioners' replacement as chief engineer and surveyor, John Randel Jr., took over the position in June 1808. Randel had been apprenticed to De Witt, and when he became an assistant surveyor in De Witt's office, he interpreted the field reports of other surveyors to draft maps based on them, of land in the Adirondack Mountains and on the Oneida Reservation, mapped the Albany Turnpike between Albany and Schenectady and the Great Western Turnpike from Albany to Cooperstown, and surveyed property lots in Albany and in Central New York, particularly Oneida County.

In 1808, Randel surveyed the topography and ground cover of the land and the placement of natural features such as hills, rocks, swamps, marshes, streams, and ponds, as well as man-made features such as houses, barns, stables, fences, foot paths, cleared fields and gardens. He noted the locations of the three north-south roads that Goerck had laid down as part of his survey of the Common Lands. Goerck had not placed the lots and roads in the Common Lands in the context of the overall island, and this Randel did, thus allowing the Commissioners to know where, exactly, Goerck's Common Lands grid was. This was important, because it could serve as a template for a grid for the entire island, should the Commission decide to go in that direction.

Randel's survey of the entire island began in 1808 and was completed in 1810. He next prepared the drafts of the new grid without regard to the topography of the land. The three maps were large, almost



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nine feet in length when connected together. Commissioner Simeon De Witt said of Randel's work that it was made "with an accuracy not exceeded by any work of the kind in America."

**William Bridges**

There was a private controversy regarding the publication of the map of the Commissioners' Plan. Randel had started to prepare a map to go to the engraver, using his original papers, when he found out that the council had given William Bridges the right to do so. Bridges simply copied one of Randel's previously published maps, which were in the public domain, introducing errors as he did so. Bridges published and copyrighted the resulting map as a private venture, giving no credit to Randel.

The conflict between the two men did not come to a head until three years later, in 1814, when Randel starting advertising his own version of the Commissioners' Plan map, which he said was "more correct" than the previously published one.

Bridges, whose reputation both as a surveyor and as a man was far from clean, did not reply, perhaps because his wife was sick at the time, and died several months after Randel's second letter. Bridges himself died shortly after that, and Randel did not publish his map or have it engraved until 1821.

**Detailed Condition:**