tribal, State, and Federal partners to improve and deliver topographic information for the Nation.

The readily accessible, consistent geographic framework of The National Map enables users to pursue place-based analyses of diverse types of information, to monitor changes and detect trends, and to discover relations between seemingly independent phenomena and processes. Publicly available geographic information from The National Map is used for a multitude of purposes in science, business, land management, education, and emergency response. When enhanced and extended, geographic information from The National Map forms the basis for a wealth of commercial products. See http://nationalmap.gov.

The USGS, the lead Federal civil mapping agency, continues to be responsible for ensuring the availability of complete, consistent, and current base geographic information. The authoritative accuracy of this information effectively serves the Nation by providing a common starting point of geographic knowledge for government, industry, and public uses. After 125 years, the national mapping mission of the USGS remains as vital as ever to the American people in the 21st century.

U.S. Department of the Interior
U.S. Geological Survey
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The Explorer and the Maps

A Union artillery officer in the Civil War, Powell lost his right arm at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. He became a national hero in 1869 when his party successfully navigated, and mapped, the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon.

As USGS Director from 1881-94, Powell’s championing of one geodetic system and one topographic system marked the continuing importance of what is still today a core function of Federal mapping: the development of consistent national standards. Powell’s understanding that more detailed mapping would be required by future generations eventually led to the nearly national (save Alaska) 1:24,000-scale topographic map series. The large-scale standard topographic series was essentially completed for the conterminous United States in 1991. Approximately 33 million person hours and $1.6 billion were invested in this national effort, a remarkable engineering feat. The 57,000 topographic quadrangles were printed with many of the same techniques described by Powell in 1885.
The complex geography of the entire United States is vividly portrayed by more than 57,000 U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) topographic maps. Charting every river, lake, and wetland; every valley, mountain, and plain; each city and railroad, village and stream, these maps have become a signature product of the USGS because the public has found them to be a thorough, yet accessible tool for closely reading the sweep of the Nation’s land.

Mapping the breadth of the Nation in such meticulous detail has been a demanding challenge for USGS mapmakers since 1884. For 125 years, this ambitious goal has spurred USGS cartographers to invent new instruments, devise new methods, and apply the most modern technology to improve the accuracy, utility, and efficient production of geographic information. Innovations by the USGS in topographic mapping, in geographic information systems (GIS), and in the public provision of maps, images, and digital geographic data have helped advance the United States as a leader in today's geographic information industry.

For more information about the history of topographic mapping at the USGS, please visit http://nationalmap.gov/ustopo/history.