

# MAPMAKING GUIDE:

## OLD OWL WELL





# Old Owl Well

As you crest a low ridge, you spy the crumbling ruins of an old watchtower standing amid the rugged hills. The place is so old that the walls are only mounds of rubble enclosing a courtyard of sorts, adjacent to the broken stump of an old tower. A colorful tent has been set up in the middle of the courtyard, but no one is in sight.

## Making a Map

Each of the following sections focuses on a specific step in the mapmaking process as it is described in this guide. I have designed this guide with the assumption that you already have a basic grasp of Photoshop. I personally do the vast majority of my work completely digitally, though many of the planning and sketching steps included here could be done on paper, then scanned in to be refined and colored afterwards.

I have attempted to include an appropriate level of detail for each step and the accompanying Photoshop tools and/or menus used. All of the brushes I use in this guide were made by Kyle Webster, which you can find on his site, many of them for free. I draw with a stylus on an Wacom Intuos tablet.

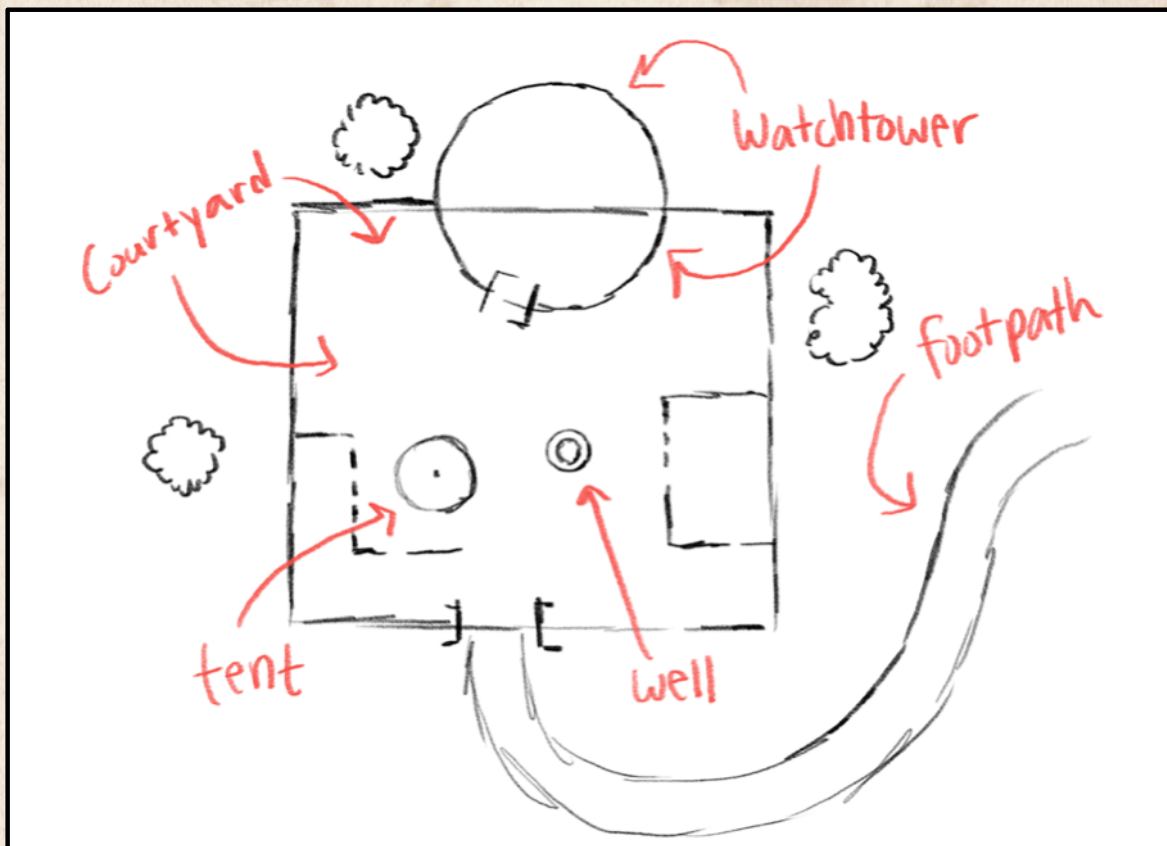
For this particular example, I will be working towards making a map for a side location from the Dungeons & Dragons module *Lost Mine of Phandelver*, which does not come with a map provided for this particular site. Therefore, in this case I will be working with a specific set of provided information and criteria concerning the area being mapped.

## 1. Getting a Lay of the Land

The first order of business is to organize our information and begin to understand what associated visuals might accompany that information. In the example here, I will be working from a limited set of provided information from the *Lost Mines of Phandelver*. This constrains me somewhat in wanting to make a map that supports that preexisting information. This might be the case for you if you're making a map for a location that players have already been to and/or are familiar with, but often you will likely have more freedom to decide what goes where and why, before it's "on the books."

Some of that information is quoted in the flavor text above, the information that LMoP suggests providing the players with as they approach. This information is certainly helpful, but from reading the rest of the DM context for this area, we can know that: there's a well providing water in the courtyard, there is a footpath leading up the hill, there are gaps significant enough in the walls for characters to enter in through, and that the tent is at least large enough to house a "comfortable traveling suite."

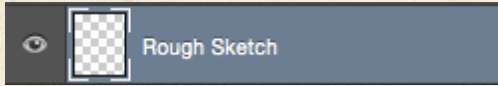
With that information on hand, I can begin to create a rough sketch of what *Old Owl Well* might look like. I make this entire sketch on its own layer, and typically favor the 'animator pencil' for early sketching like this. If desired, you can bring a grid in on a separate layer if you want a specific reference for how large you want things to be. Alternatively, any grid can be shrunk or enlarged later to fit your image. You can see in my example below that I've included all of the major information, but have added a few smaller details like trees, inner crumbling walls, and deciding where the entrance to the courtyard and watchtower might have been originally.



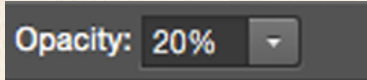


## 2. Refining your Sketch

Now that you have the beginnings of a visual representation of your map sketched, it's time to start refining it further. If drawing with pencil and paper, this can be as simple as moving from a small sketch to a larger piece or just partially erasing your original sketch as you add on more detail

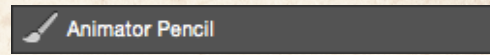


Digitally however, I am going to create a new layer for this 'refined sketch' and lower the opacity of the layer containing the 'rough sketch'. I usually make it as low as ~20% so that I can still see most of the information there, but also easily draw on top of it.



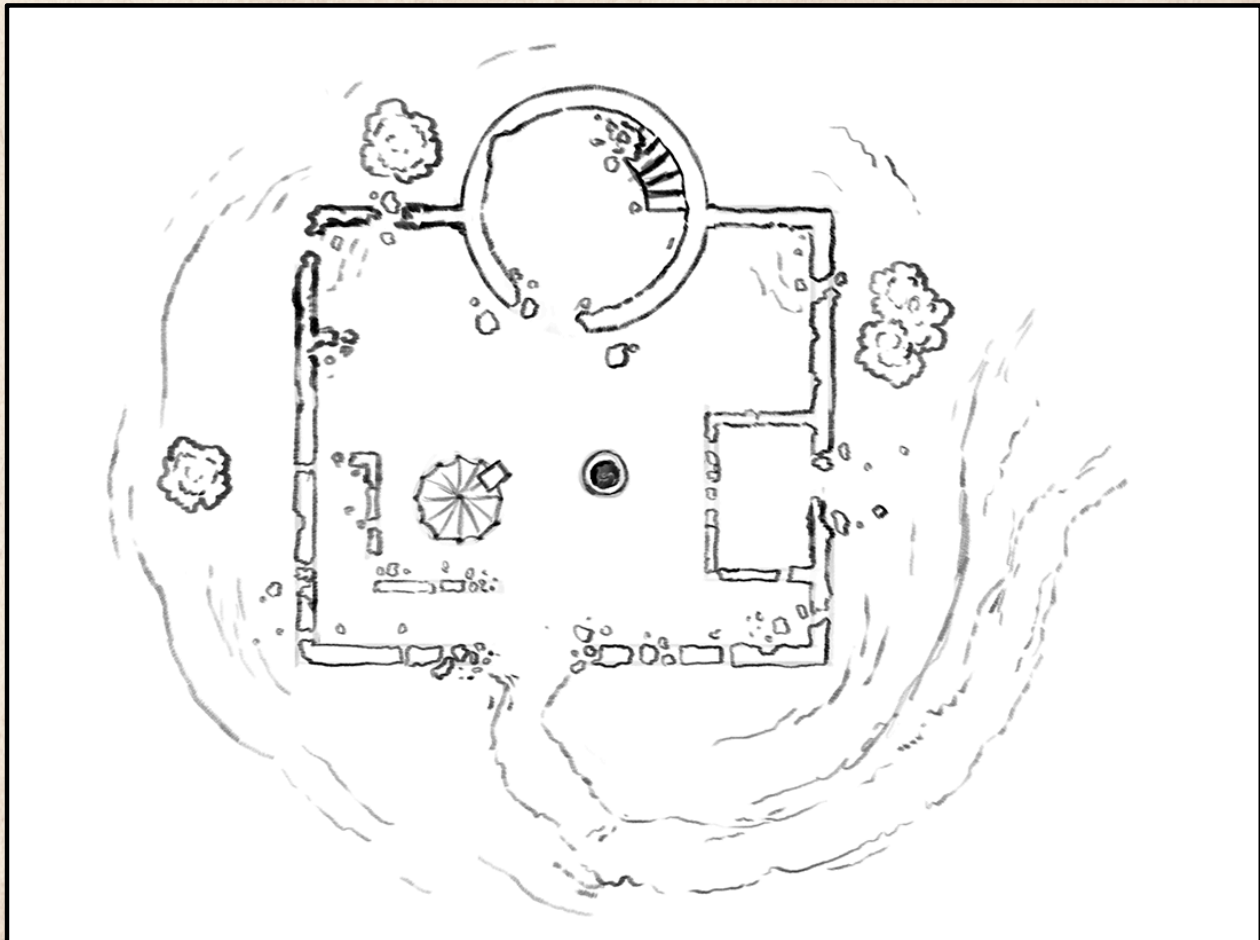
Drawing the new sketch on a separate layer allows us to manipulate and erase anything for this new sketch without having to worry about the rough sketch 'getting in the way' or unintentionally altering it. Keeping separate elements on different layers and keeping track of where they are and making sure you're working on the correct layer will be an important task throughout this process.

As I begin working on a refined sketch, I will likely continue drawing with the 'animator pencil' brush, but will shrink the brush size slightly so as to get a finer line out of it, something more appropriate for a detailed sketch. Eventually I may even get so far and comfortable with *this* version of the sketch that I actually turn off the visibility of the original layer altogether (by clicking on the 'eye' icon to the left of the layer title), in order to focus on the newest version of the map.



As *you* begin working at a higher level of detail, you may want to begin asking yourself questions about the area you're mapping as you work. Aspects to consider could include: the purpose of the structure or settlement you're drawing, the climate and location, how recently it was constructed, etc. Your answers to questions like these help to determine small details that end up existing visually in your map. Things like: wall thickness, layout of buildings or rooms, location and number of entrances, surrounding wilderness, etc.

You can see between my rough and refined sketches that I've added specific thicknesses of walls, little details like a crumbling staircase, stripes in the tent, crumbling walls and structures, and pushed the 'footpath' from a curvy road to a worn down track in the side of the hill.





### 3. Inking the Map

With a mostly finished sketch in place, the next step in my process is to create a cleaner, crisper version of that drawing. This is sometimes referred to as 'inking' a final line drawing over a sketchier underdrawing (even if it's all just pixels).

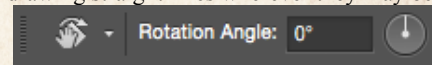
When I arrive at this step in my process I usually move from the 'animator pencil' brush and instead begin using a harder edged, inking brush. My personal go-to is the 'tech pen' brush, as it does fairly well at emulating the feeling of drawing with a technical ink pen. You should experiment with different kinds of inking brushes until you can decide on your own preference.

Once I've switched over to my inking brush, I will usually make the brush size for this step the smallest of the previous steps thus far. Again, creating (and labeling!) a separate layer for this inked drawing on top of the previous layers. I've made the 'rough sketch' layer invisible, and have now set the 'refined sketch' to low opacity, around ~20%.

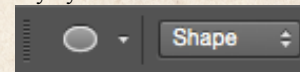
Methodically similar to the previous step, I'll use my refined sketch as a set of guidelines by which I can draw on top of and create the third and cleanest set of lines for my map.

While drawing organic material (trees, grassy hillside, fields, etc.) I will draw free hand, working to emulate the natural 'imperfections' you would see in reality.

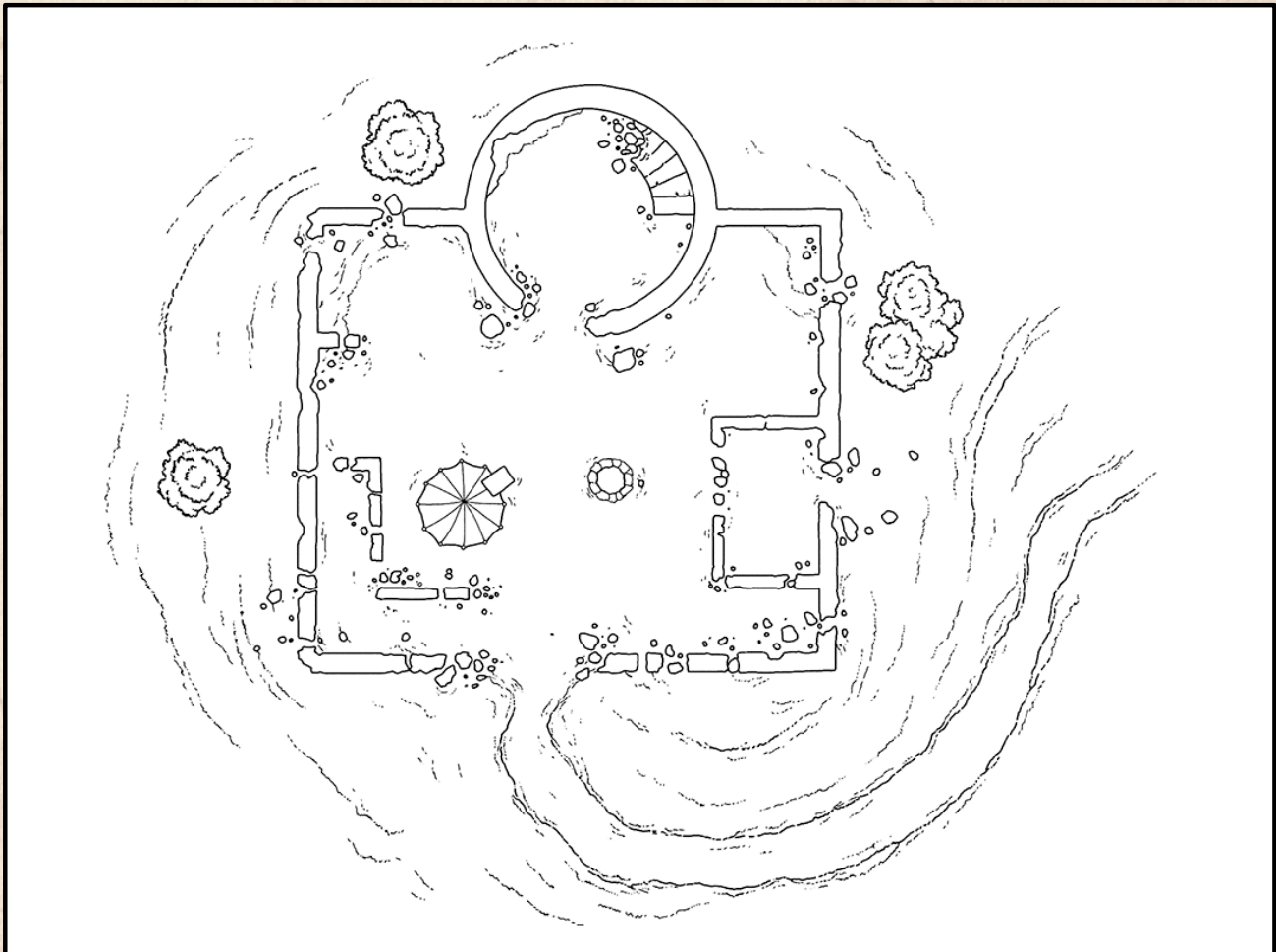
When trying to create perfectly edged buildings, walls, or towers I will occasionally use a handy trick of holding down the 'shift' key while drawing. This locks your brush stroke to perfectly vertical and horizontal lines, as if you were drawing along the edge of a ruler. Combining this shift key and the Rotate tool means you can rotate the drawing around as needed, drawing straight lines wherever they may occur.



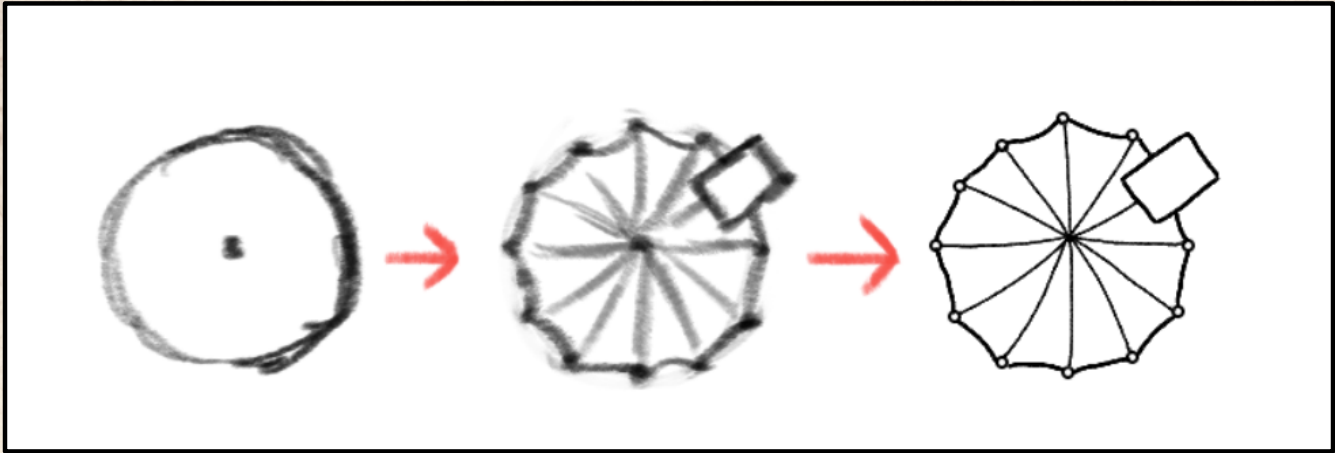
Similarly, I might utilize the Shape tool to create perfectly round or oval shapes (towers, wells, etc.) on a separate layer, then use that as a tool to trace over if I'm having difficulty drawing a satisfyingly perfect circle. Note that I personally never choose to actually incorporate the shape(s) directly into the drawing as I feel that it lacks some of that hand drawn quality by itself.



In instances like this map, I've used both of these 'tricks' to help along the way, but have at times chosen to draw portions of the wall free hand in an attempt to adhere to some of that 'crumbling' quality described in the module.







## The Refining Progress

I've included this small diagram here as a detail shot to reiterate and demonstrate the detail work that is accomplished through the process of continually refining your drawing. Sometimes it can be difficult to see for yourself the improvement that is made through what can be at times a repetitive process, but I believe seeing each version side-by-side like this helps that process seem more fruitful.

And of course, this is just the way that I arrive at the way I do it *right now*. There's a huge range of ways to arrive at images like this, whether it be through using different kinds of brushes, preferring a rougher aesthetic, or even working on paper and then scanning that in instead. Hopefully getting a brief picture of how I choose to work and maybe even trying it out yourself might be helpful in pushing you towards your own direction (or at least making your own maps!).

This process of arriving at a crisp, clean set of 'inked' lines is similar to how comics artists and animators often think about their work, although our current version is missing a fairly crucial set of additional elements: color.

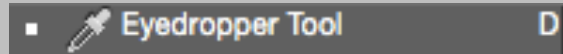


## Creating a Color Palette

When beginning to think about color, it is every bit as important to consider the context of the location of your map as it was for when we began drawing. Details like the time of day you want this location depicted, the season it's currently in, the climate of the environment, everything down to the particular species of trees and what color you'd like them to be can all be helpful modifiers in understand which colors you want to be using.

Of course, color is one of the aspects of mapmaking that is both representational while simultaneously existing as something an artist can modify to serve a particular mood or implicit narrative. Balancing that line between deciding *just how much* to tell a story or to instead let the map exist as a pragmatic tool will be an important decision for every mapmaker.

Feel free to spend time searching for images of real world representations of the kind of area you're looking to map out, or even illustrations from other artists. Slow down and look at the array of colors being used. Capitalizing on the 'Eyedropper' tool will let you grab colors from any part of these photo references once brought into Photoshop, transforming anything you can find into a potential premade palette:



In this case I knew I would be making an accessory to a preexisting Dungeons & Dragons module and hoped to make an image that would fit in amongst the already excellent resources provided. Consequently, I went out and grabbed a couple of images from the module made by the immaculate Mike Schley, a talented artist responsible for the maps found in *Lost Mine of Phandelver* and many other adventures.

You can see in the example palette to the left here how I might scour across some of those images and grab a few key colors to use as a base coat when I begin coloring a map. Of course relying on resources can be helpful throughout the process, but don't forget you can always go 'off the books' too! Clicking on the Foreground and Background colors in the bottom left of the Photoshop workspace can let you see not only the color you're currently painting with, but a huge assortment of the rest of the color family associated with it:



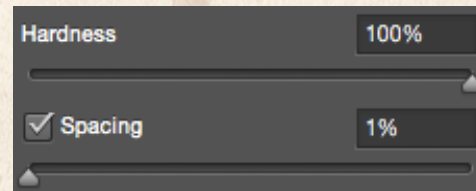


## 4. Applying Color

Now that we have a completed line drawing to work with, we can begin adding some color to the map to further add life to it. There are plenty of instances where for whatever reason you may not want to or have time to add color, but even using some black & white tones or textures to delineate different areas of a map can help increase the readability of your layout.

I'll often have specific brushes in mind to use *later* on in the color process, but when I first begin I use a flat, simple-shaped default brush to apply an even layer of color. This step of 'blocking out shapes' by applying colors in only relevant areas helps to make the more painterly steps easier and more efficient afterwards.

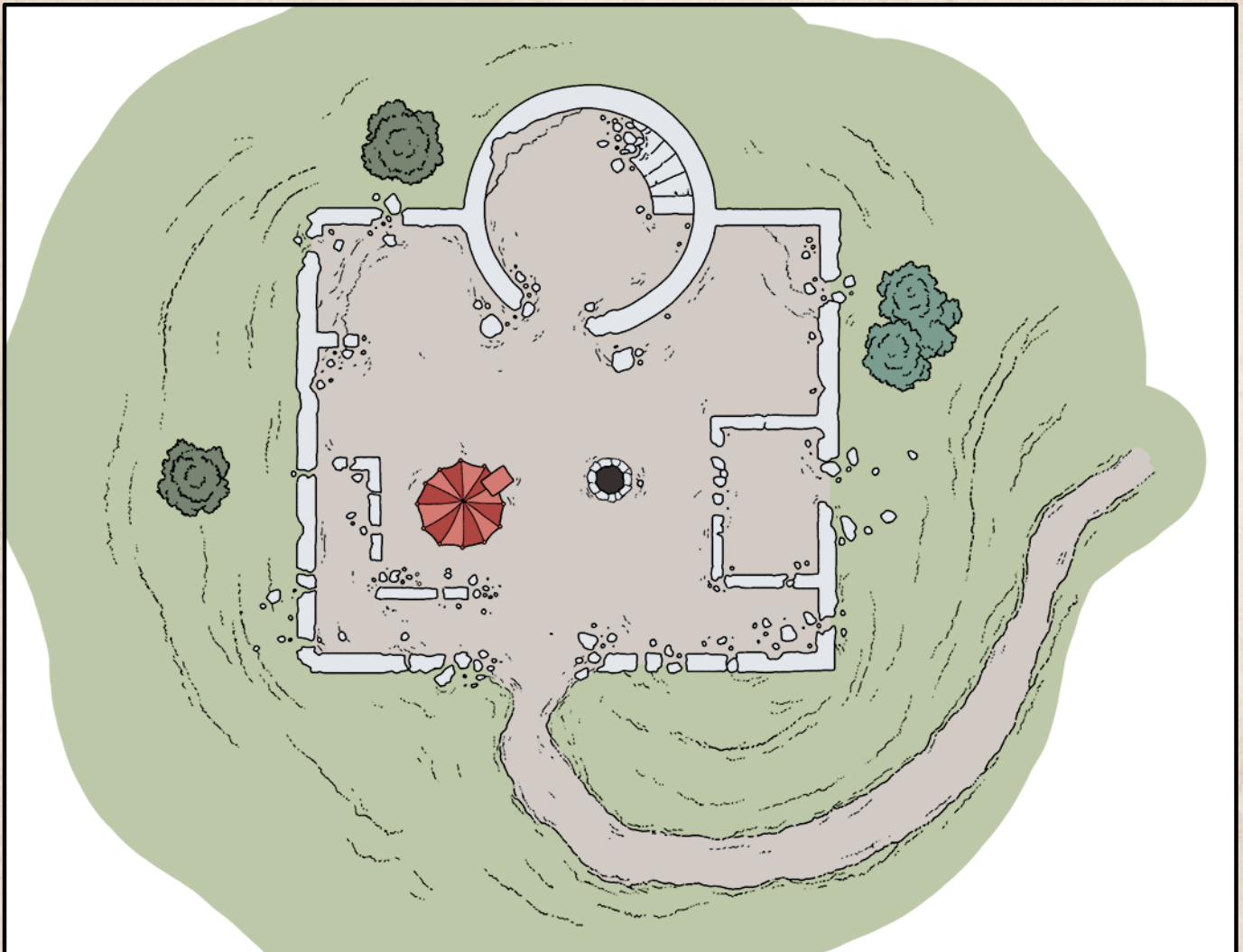
After selecting a default brush shape, I'll use the 'brush window' to make sure the hardness of the brush is set to 100% and that the spacing is set to 1%. This ensures that the brush is perfectly smooth and that I'm only placing pixels where I intend to. Later on we'll be able to 'lock' this layer and actually paint perfectly within where the pixels already are without going 'outside the lines', saving us time in the long run.



With a brush chosen and my colors already picked out previously, I just need to make sure that I again make a new layer before I start putting down color. The only difference this time being that I want this new layer to be *underneath* the finished line drawing, not on top of it.

I personally try and have a couple of different layers with varying sets of colors on each one. By this I mean that no adjacent colors are ever on the same layer. So my 'dirt' color and my 'grass' color are both on different layers, supporting what I know will be my next step of locking the layers and painting within them. Having those colors 'not touching each other' is simply there just to make that process easier.

Other than that, once you have your colors picked out, your brush settings chosen, and your layers organized this step is a fairly straightforward; just color inside the shapes!





## 4. Shading & Contextualizing

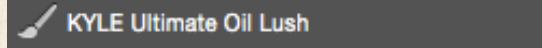
With most of the colors now blocked into flat shapes beneath the line drawing, I can finally begin actually ‘painting’ into those colors to add depth, texture, lighting, etc.

For this step we won’t actually need to create a new layer, but instead work within our preexisting color layers from the previous step. For each set of colors, I’ll need to first select its corresponding layer, then choose to ‘lock transparent pixels’ by clicking the leftmost button near the top of the layers menu:



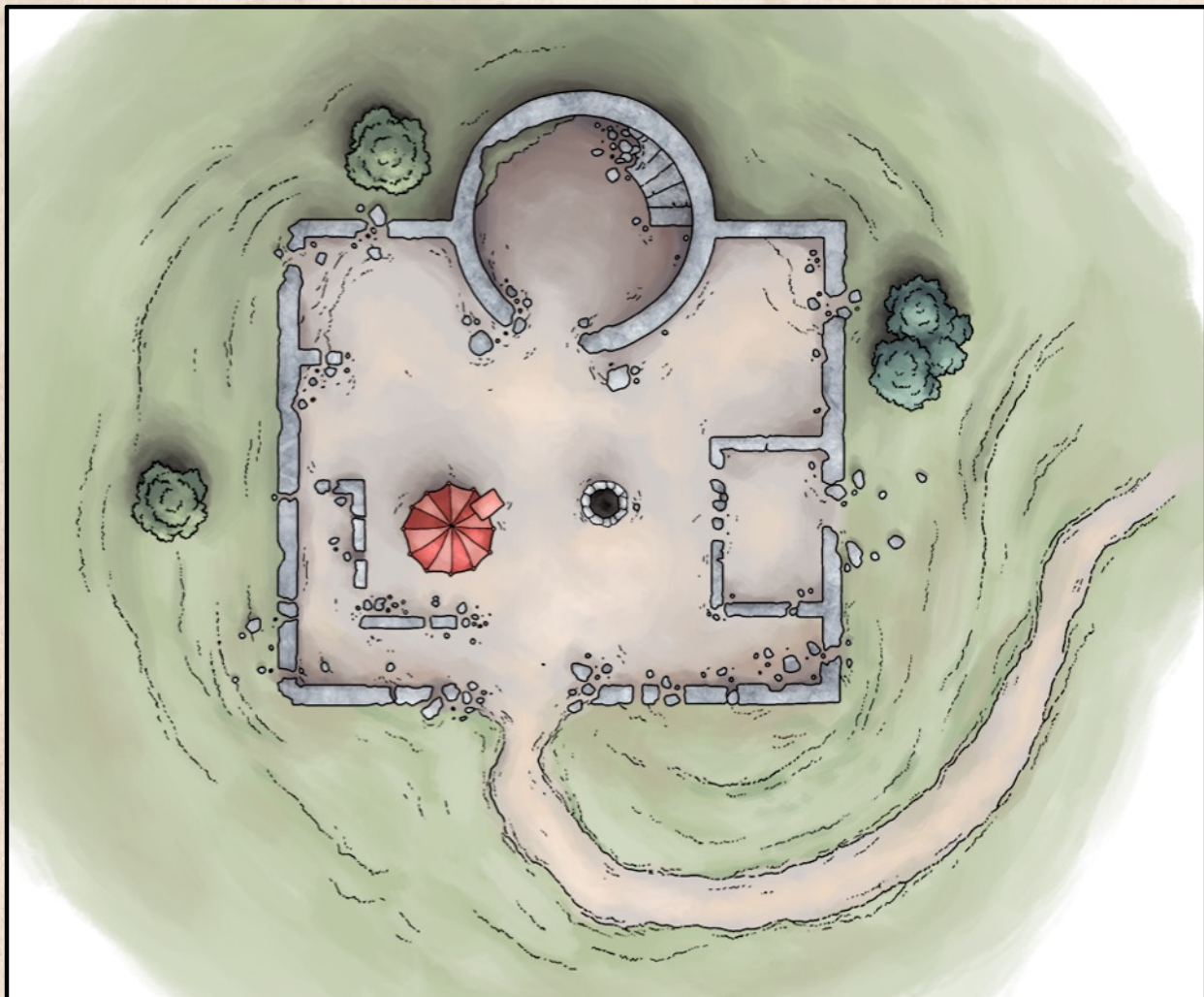
Doing so will ‘lock’ those colors in place within the layer, allowing you to lay down additional color within the boundaries of the pixels that are already there without ‘painting outside the lines’. This allows us to work a little more quickly and without the hesitancy of trying to recreate the same perfect edge over and over again.

You’ll want to experiment with different kinds of more painterly brush types until you can settle on a couple that seem to your liking. Kyle Webster produces a huge variety of brushes designed to emulate real, physical materials and effects. For most of the maps I make I tend to work with brushes that appear like oil paint, giving me plenty of workability and smoothness, but still leaving remnants of that painterly aesthetic behind. For the Owl Well Map I primarily used the ‘Oil Lush’ brush from Kyle’s ‘Ultimate’ pack:



While painting, you’ll want access to a ‘palette’ of the colors you used in the previous step. In addition, you’ll want to experiment with using darker and/or more saturated colors for shadows or details. You can see in my example that I’ve chosen an approximate direction for light to be coming from and have altered the values for where shadows and light would be falling to accommodate that illusion.

This guide is not intended to also be a color theory introduction, but I would encourage you to try a variety of approaches, especially within a program like Photoshop where things like color balance and saturation can be easily manipulated.





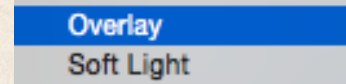
## 5. Adding Texture

The next, and almost final, step is completely optional. It's entirely possible that you may feel comfortable with the amount of contrast and texturing brought about in your map from hand painting alone. Often when I'm working on a larger scale map (an entire city, region, etc.) I won't bother with adding on more texture as there is already plenty of information occurring without the extra visual noise.

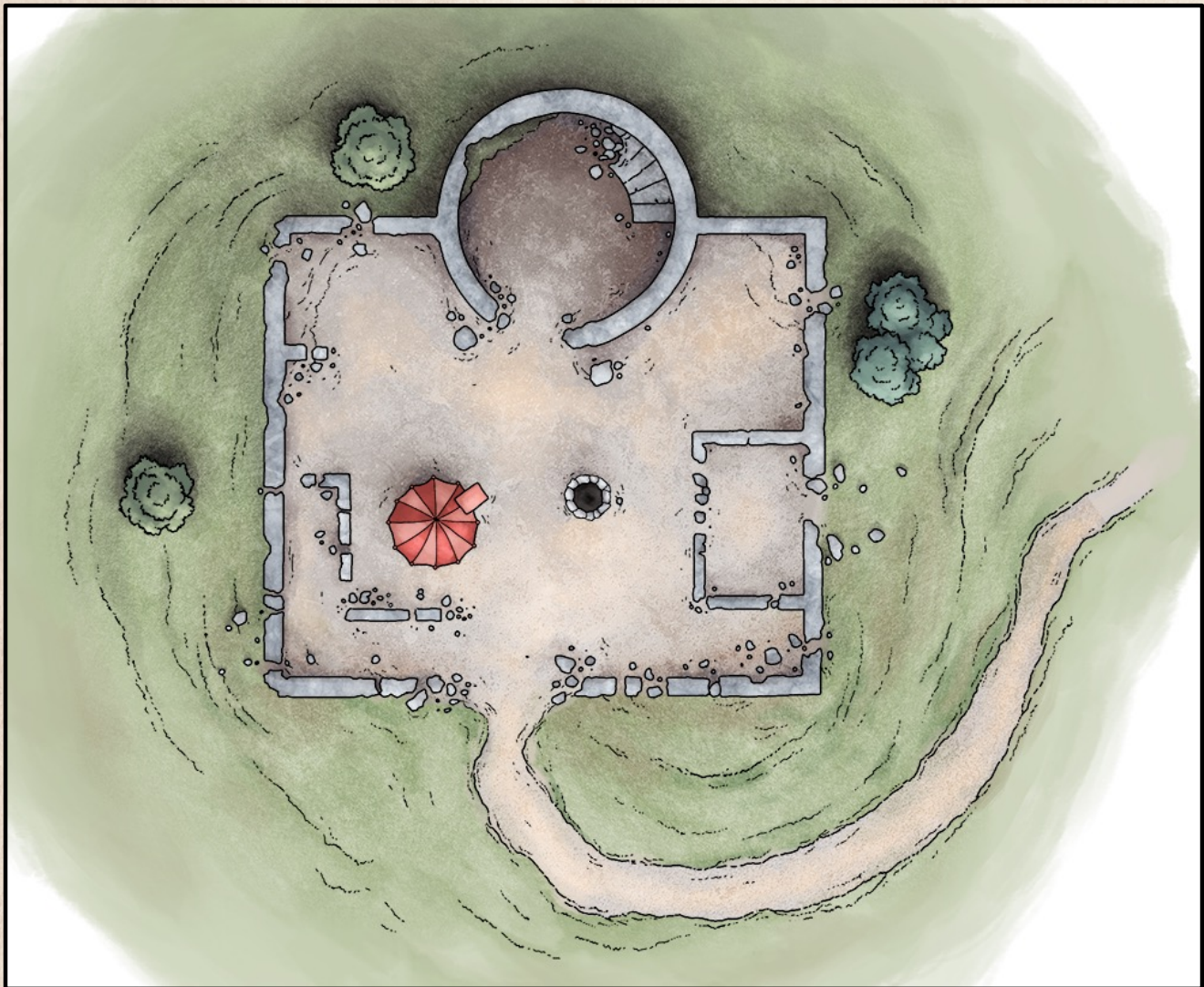
But in this instance, when making a smaller-scale, personal map for a single building or smaller area I will find it helpful to move past just painting in color and actually infusing some appropriated textures onto the map.

I have spent time previously searching for applicable texture photographs (e.g. "high resolution grass texture", etc.) for any number of instances like dirt, treetops, grass, brick roads, roof tiles, and whatever else might become necessary.

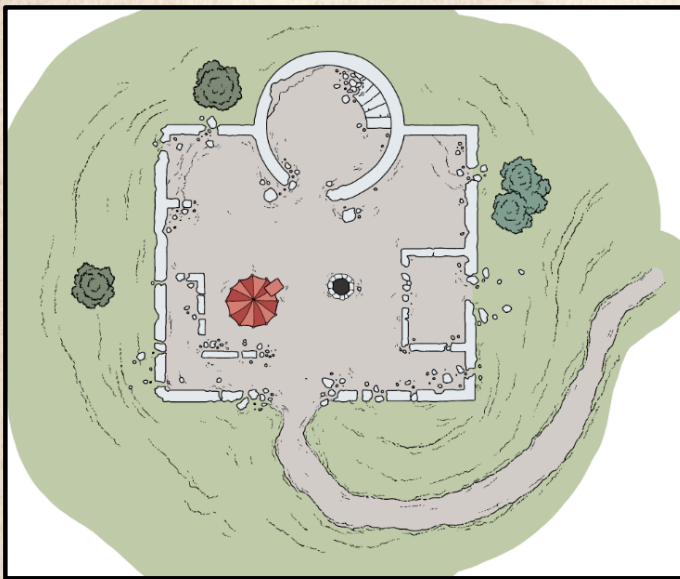
In the image here I've brought in a texture for the dirt of the footpath and courtyard, as well as one for the surrounding grassy hillside. Once you find a texture for your own map, you'll simply want to copy + paste it into your work area as a new layer, preferably immediately above the color layer that you're trying to add texture to. Then, with the texture layer selected, click on the blending mode tab at the top of the layer window, which should be set to 'normal' currently. From there you can select a variety of options that will change the way that the texture interacts with the color beneath it. I personally prefer using the overlay option:



You will likely need to do some cropping in on the texture to match with the shape of the color you're looking to add texture to. This can be done fairly easily with use of the erasure tool.



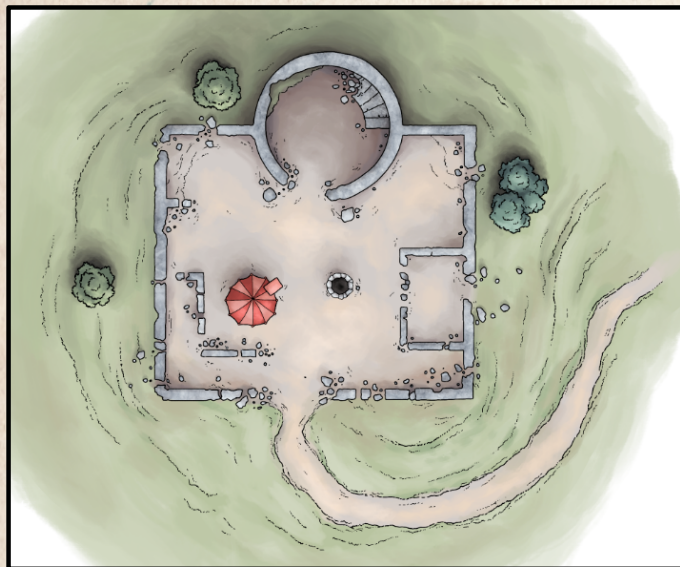




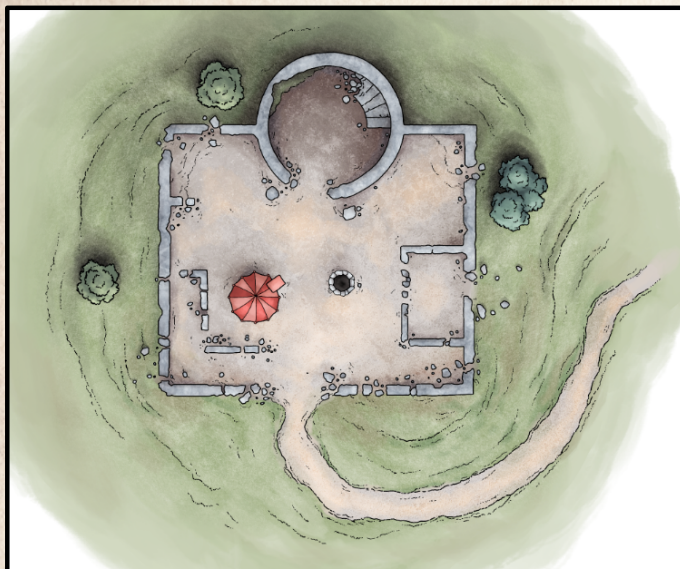
## The Coloring Progress

As with the drawing refining process, I thought it might be helpful to again place some of these step-by-step images adjacent to each other to be able to more easily see the layers as they build upon one another throughout.

The **first image** we can clearly see how the colors are intended to help begin to block out the shapes more clearly than the lines can on their own. The final layer of lines is clean enough from our repetitive refining that it's not *too* hard to parse through that information fairly quickly on its own, but the infusion of color from here on out helps to make that read even easier. The goal here is to create a map that feeds functional and narrative information as easily as possible, not set up legibility obstacles from the beginning.



The **second image** has our first layer of color as it is 'painted' on with our 'Oil Lush' brush, not just flatly applied to fill in white space. When comparing this image with the first we can clearly see the immediate sense of light, depth, and space that is communicated with this addition as opposed to when the colors are simply flat. It could be argued that a degree of functional readability is lost with this addition of more complicated color, but I believe that loss is overwhelmingly made up for by the additional context and sense of story provided as a result.



The **third image** bares the evidence of the additional texture layers as they've been stacked on top for additional visual noise and interest. At this scale we can see how that texture on the 'overlay' setting helps to increase the contrast between some of the highlights and shadows, but more importantly, adds a realistic sense of 'grittiness' to the map. This is certainly something that may not be everyone's preferred aesthetic (it's not something I necessarily use every time myself), but in the case of this smaller scale map I believe it suits it well.





## 6. Text & Legends

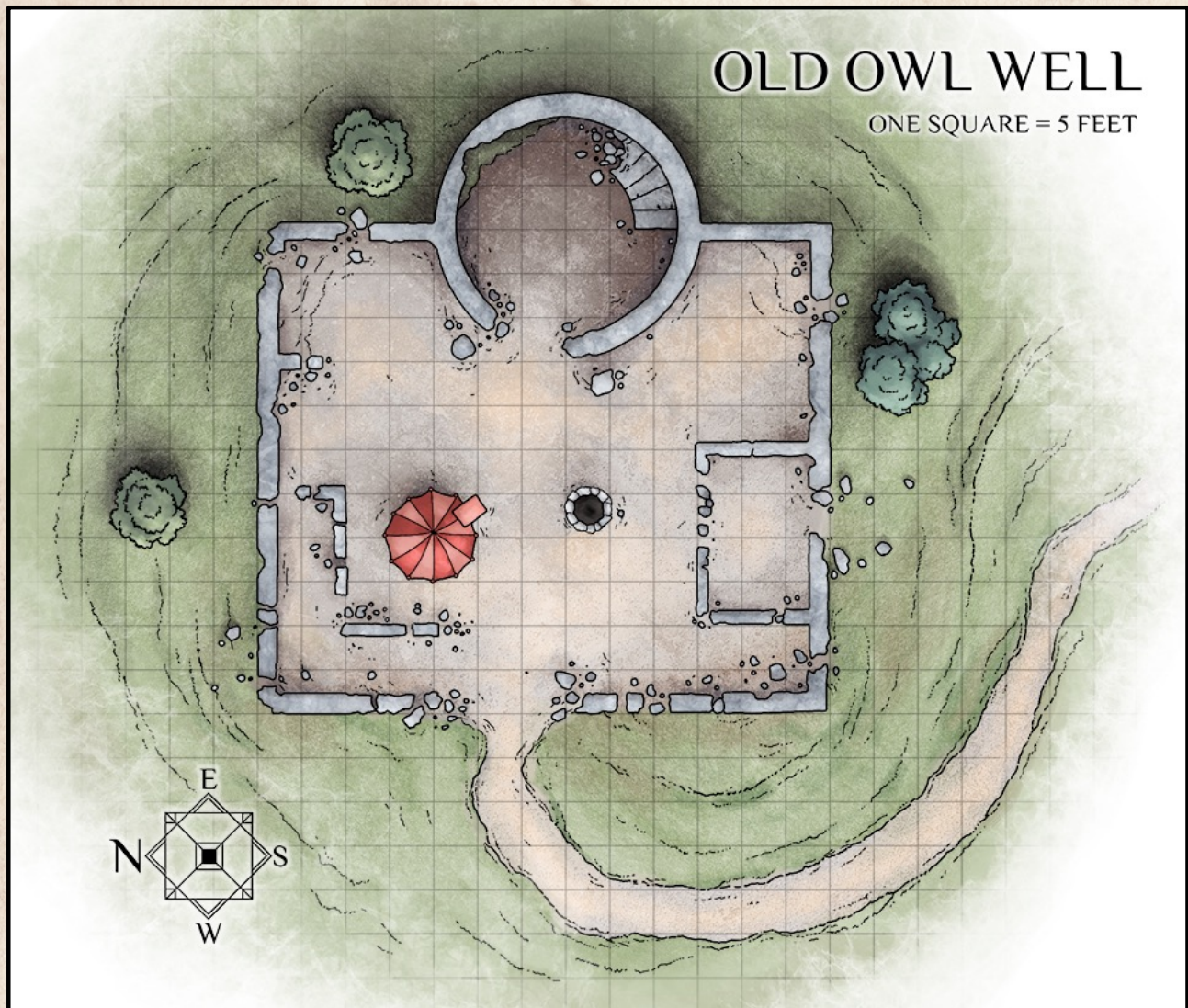
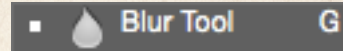
The very last step of making our map is to... make it a map. Oftentimes you may be just making a map for your own reference or to be able to put an image in front of your players, but if you want to be able to share your map and/or have it be useable by others then additions like these make this information more immediately readable.

If you're including a grid, you'll want to shrink or enlarge it to fit your desired scale if you haven't already. In my maps I will erase the lines of the grid where there are structures already there. You can see below that the grid doesn't overlap on top of the walls of the courtyard, or the well, trees, etc. This not only helps to keep the grid readable, but reinforces the illusion of those elements 'sitting on top of' a ground and/or grid. Finally, I'll set the opacity of the grid to 50% and the blending mode to 'multiply' to make sure that it doesn't overpower the actual map information.

For most of the text in my maps, I'll use the 'Yellow Magician' font, a personal favorite. Whether it's a title, ledger, or compass, you'll likely want to adapt the pixels to make them more 'readable' on complex backgrounds:



This can be accomplished by erasing or lightening the color beneath that information, but I like to add a subtle, blurred outline instead. To do this, you'll want to make a copy of the layer you're outlining, select the bottom copy layer, then go to Edit > Stroke and from there you can decide the color and thickness of the outline. At that point you can use combinations of opacity changes, choosing blending options, or avenues like the 'Blur' tool to further edit this outline.





## Thank You!

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This is the first mapmaking guide that I've made to release to the Dungeons & Dragons community and I hope that you found it helpful, enlightening and/or motivational. My aim is to help equip other Dungeon Masters and tabletop enthusiasts with the means to fully realize the potential their own maps can take on with their own creativity and effort.

I'll be hoping to make additional mapmaking guides in the future for varying scales and types of maps, but in the meantime if you found this guide as helpful as I intended, or if you appreciated the artwork used here you can support me through my Patreon page at:

<https://www.patreon.com/venatusmaps>

Alternatively, if you just want to see more maps like the one I made for this guide, I release lower resolution versions of those maps for free on a delayed schedule on the companion blog at:

<https://venatusmaps.tumblr.com>

Lastly, if you'd like to send me suggestions, ideas for maps to do in the future, or point out any errors you might have spotted in this guide, feel free to reach me directly at:

[venatusmaps@gmail.com](mailto:venatusmaps@gmail.com)

