

RECONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES USING SANBORN MAPS, CENSUS RECORDS AND CITY DIRECTORIES

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Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

Sanborn Maps were used by insurance agents to determine the risks of insuring specific buildings. Insurance agencies began creating the maps as early as 1846 for thousands of cities and towns. Originally, fire insurance maps documented more business districts than residential communities. By the 1950's, the Sanborn Map Company had mapped most of the communities in the United States with a population of 2,500 or more. These detailed maps show specific streets, addresses and lots. They also reflect the size, shape and construction of buildings and homes.

Census Records

The United States Federal Census counted individual people from every state, county, city and town. Taken every ten years, census records are available from 1790 – 1940 (excluding 1890). Census takers were instructed to canvass a neighborhood starting at one corner of a city block, and moving to the right to make a full city block. This method created a detailed view of a neighborhood in order by address.

City Directories

City directories have been around long before telephone books. Published as early as the 18th century, they were created for salesmen, merchants, and others interested in contacting residents of an areas. City directories provided an alphabetical listing of individuals, generally by head of household. They sometimes included names of spouses, marital status (widow), and the name of the employer. Published on an annual basis, these directories can work as a census substitute and also trace ancestors between census years.

Street and Avenue Directories (also known as Street and Avenue Guide, Street Directories, or Householders Guide) are a separate section usually located at the end of the city directory. This section lists properties by address. Streets are listed in alphabetical order with intersecting streets shown. Each building on the street is listed in house number order with the name of the occupant, homeowner, or tenant. Street directories are helpful in getting an idea of our ancestor's neighborhood.

Google Earth

Google Earth is a free software tool that allows one to pinpoint an ancestor's community in present day time. The software enables the user to view current and historical maps, streets, street views and buildings in 3D. It allows the user to overlay historical maps on top of current maps, add photographs and other genealogical information.

- I. Using Historical Maps
- II. Creating and Manipulating Overlays
- III. Compiling Information
- IV. Adding Photographs

Additional Sources

Personal address books

Newspapers

Property records (deeds, tax records ...)

Historic Photographs (check your library's photograph collections)

Tips

- Pay attention to the cross streets.
- Read all legends and columns. Know what each symbol means.
- Consider that the streets may have been renumbered or renamed.
- Check the newspapers.
 - Search by the address or neighborhood.
 - What if a murder occurred in your ancestor's neighborhood?
- Look at state censuses.
- Look for alternative resources.
 - "Suburbanite Economist," Quadrennial Real Estate Assessment, 31 July 1963

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