

Using Sanborn Insurance Maps as a Primary Source

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Overview

Whether you are searching for physical evidence of a building long since demolished or contemporary insights pertaining to the economic evolution of a neighborhood, Sanborn Insurance maps are one of the best cartographic resources to utilize. The following lesson ideas will outline the history, description, and possible applications of these maps within a secondary-level social studies course.

Introduction

What if you could ask your students to go back in time and discover what their city or town looked like? You can with Sanborn Insurance maps. Originally created by insurance company executive D. A. Sanborn, these maps are available in microfilm, microfiche, and digital form in numerous collegiate, state, and national libraries and archives. From discovering what building materials and fire safety measures were used in the construction of a building, to learning about the function of a structure (e.g., was it a warehouse, a church, or a private dwelling), Sanborn Insurance maps are an invaluable primary source.

Historical Background of the Maps

Originally drawn in the 1870s to assist insurance underwriters in their assessment of the desirability to insure a property, these maps were first limited to larger urban centers. Eventually, from the latter 19th century until the 1970s, some 12,000 maps were added of cities and smaller communities across the United States, Canada, and Mexico (including some with populations as low as 2,000). Found also under the title of the "Sanborn-Perris Map Company" of Pelham, New York, the graphic detail of the maps in identifying everything from the heights of structures to the locations of elevators and doorways to street names soon proved to be a gold mine of historical information. Today, they are employed by such professionals as architectural historians interested in interpreting urban development. Genealogists have also discovered that these maps are excellent resources when looking for information about the homes and workplaces of their ancestors. From an environmental perspective, concerned citizens have found that these maps can be used to locate sites of potential environmental harm from undetected industrial sites.

Description of the Collection

Drawn to a scale of one inch to 50 feet (although some copies are drawn one inch to 100 feet), Sanborn Insurance maps are intricately drawn and labeled. Although having a map legend is beneficial in deciphering abbreviations, such as "D" or "dwg" for "dwelling" and "W" for "warehouse," one can generally interpret the features of the structures on the maps without too much difficulty. Some collections feature original sheets, which can also be found in color. The color coding also has its own significance for the function of the building. The maps, which began to be copyrighted and placed in the Library of Congress, feature over 700,000 individual sheets. Other collections are found in libraries and archives across the country. In Illinois, the most easily accessed collection is found at the Illinois State Library in Springfield (Illinois State Library, Gwendolyn Brooks Building, 300 S. 2nd Street, Springfield, IL 62701-1796; (217) 785-5600; www.cyberdriveillinois.com). Here, the maps are found in the format of the original sheets, microfilm, microfiche, and digitized versions (although digital access is limited). Other Sanborn Insurance map collections are found at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (for more information, see www.library.uiuc.edu/max/sanbornholdings.shtml). At this site, you will find a description of the collection, an index of the communities for which maps are held, and a legend of the abbreviations and graphics. Unfortunately, unless you are a student or employee of the university and have access codes to the website, you will not be able to access more of the digital sites for the maps. I found a similar situation to be true with the collection held at Northwestern University in Chicago. Chicago-area educators may want to seek out information about the use of Northwestern's collection before considering a trip downstate, however. Another

factor that Chicago educators need to be aware of is that sites in Chicago must be identified through street names, and suburban sites may not be included within the confines of Chicago maps but, rather, under the names of their communities. For someone looking for a comprehensive index of such maps, the book *Union List of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps Held by Institutions in the United States and Canada*, published in 1976, should be consulted. Websites related to the study and use of these maps will sometimes have indexes of this previous source. Specific copies of the actual maps can also be purchased on some websites.

Applications in Using These Maps

There are several ways in which these maps might be used in a social studies classroom. In a lesson revealing changes over time, the maps can reveal new patterns of construction, the changing function of structures, and technological advancements in building materials. For instance, by comparing buildings in the same block over a number of different years, students can discover when new types of lighting and heating sources were introduced (e.g., gas to electricity). I have used maps of Monmouth, Illinois, ranging from 1886, 1892, 1898, 1907, 1913, and 1924 to challenge my students to trace factors such as when residential neighborhoods began to be overtaken by commercial development, when commercial buildings changed owners and introduced new types of products for sale, and when electricity became a more common form of lighting in people's homes and in area businesses. It was equally eye opening to see how the introduction of the car and the reduction in the use of horses and carriages changed the makeup of blocks and individual structures (e.g., carriage houses became garages) and what new types of businesses were necessary for automobile operation (specifically, the introduction of the gas station). I further required students to take note of how the names of streets changed over time and to speculate on the causes of the change. We found that city leaders decided to alter street names from the names of founders and Civil War heroes to numbers and alphabetical sequenced names in order to provide a better location of street addresses. Another application for the maps would be to concentrate on a particular home or business of a given owner in a given specific period as a case study. Examining the dimensions, building materials, technology, and usage of structures (e.g., carriage houses) surrounding a Victorian home in the late 19th century could assist students in a research project about a leading citizen and/or family within their community. Moreover, as indicated in the previous idea, the examination of a dwelling over a variety of years could uncover the growing prosperity (or perhaps decline) of the financial fortunes of the people featured in this biographical study. Finally, these maps could be juxtapositioned with known photographs of dwellings or businesses in a given time period to identify architectural features and their functions (e.g., a new addition is now revealed as an elevator). Moreover, maps could be juxtapositioned with the popular panoramic view drawings of the 19th century to identify which structures are more accurately drawn to reveal the prosperity of a town or city.

Conclusion

Social studies teachers are always looking for some new approach or resource to energize their students. Sanborn Insurance maps are the type of primary source that can fulfill this quest for increasing student interest. Whether one wishes to concentrate on sites here in Illinois and, more specifically, their community, or branch out into such areas of analysis as the effects of increased immigration on the evolution of neighborhoods in large urban settings like Boston or New York City, these maps are most beneficial. Given that these maps can now be accessed either in the original format—through microfilm copies available for free through their local libraries—or in a digitally reconstructed format for access over the Internet, teachers and students have multiple entry points for analysis in whatever manner is most instructive and best fits into their time frame and budget.