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# Recreating Your Ancestor's World

*Learn how to combine maps, city directories, census records and more to visualize your ancestor's world. Understanding their environment will help you to understand them.*

## MAPS

Examining maps of the times and places when and where your ancestor lived can give you a bird's eye view of their day-to-day physical environment.

**Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps** – these maps were created for insurance agents to use to assess the inherent fire-risk associated with a particular structure so they could determine whether to insure a given property, and what the premium calculation might be. Genealogists can use them to answer many questions:

- What was the construction of my ancestor's and other buildings? (wood, brick, number of stories, setbacks, outbuildings, etc.)
- What business, etc. were nearby? What did that sound like? Smell like?
- How far would your ancestor travel to go to church, school, shopping, etc?
- How did the community develop? Use these maps over time to see buildings expand or change, and new ones added

Accessing these maps:

- Library of Congress - https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/
- Some public libraries offer access to ProQuest's "Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970" database, for free, from home, with a library card. These are black and white maps, but may have items not in the LOC collection
- Check county, state and university libraries as well as archives for the original paper books of maps

For deeper understanding of these maps:

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- LOC Sanborn Maps "About This Collection" - https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection/
- LOC Sanborn Articles and Essays – "Introduction to the Collection," "Sanborn Samplers," and "Sanborn Time Series"

**County and State Maps** – these maps can help you understand the density of an area, and locate roads, railroads, and waterways. You can also discover churches and perhaps businesses your ancestor may have frequented.

- Historic Map Works - http://www.historicmapworks.com/ - some maps have a georeference feature at the bottom allowing you to overlay historic map on a modern map
- David Rumsey Map Collection - https://www.davidrumsey.com/ - also has some georeferenced overlays
- Old Maps Online - https://www.oldmapsonline.org/
- Library of Congress Map collection - https://www.loc.gov/collections
    - Railroad Maps, 1828-1900
    - Panoramic Maps / Bird's eye views
    - Cities and Towns
    - and more… explore!

## CITY DIRECTORIES

Use city directories to learn more about what business, churches, schools, social clubs, and more existed in your ancestor's time.

- Advertisements show shopping and entertainment businesses in your ancestor's time and place.
- Most directories have a civic section, which covers schools, churches, and benevolent associations.
- You can see what the newspapers were, and when they were published.
- Be sure also to investigate the named city directory to see if it contains information on the "suburbs" and small towns nearby. What kinds of businesses did they have? Where was the closest doctor?
- Look in the classified business listings section for companies employing the trade that was shown for your ancestor on the census – how many tinners or tanners businesses were there in that time and place – you'll likely find your ancestor's potential employers.

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- Peruse the categories of businesses. In 2022 we still have attorneys and banks, but few silversmiths, and even fewer hoop skirt manufacturers. Let your imagination run with thoughts of their products and the people who wore them.

Combine what you discover in city directories with local maps. Plot the schools, churches and employers in your ancestor's neighborhood. Even if the maps you find only show black rectangles for businesses, business addresses in city directories can help you fill in the maps.

**Resources:**

- *Ancestry*, US City Directories- https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469/
- *Archive.org* – search for "City Directory" and name of state
- *GoogleBooks* – same search strategies as for *Archive.org*
- *Don's List* - http://www.donslist.net/
- *Linkpendium* www.linkpendium.com – pick your state and county and scroll to "Directories" section for links
- *Online Historical Directories* - https://sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectorysite

## CENSUS RECORDS

"Fly over" your ancestor's census enumeration district – look at 10 pages or more before and after your ancestor. Focus on birthplaces, languages, occupations, real and personal property, literacy, home ownership for all the community. What would that look, sound and feel like?

Look at household sizes – large or small? Are there multiple households sharing the same address? To get a sense of density, try to determine the size of the enumeration district and the number of people in it. Check out Steve Morse's One-page site at https://stevemorse.org/census/index.html to find the enumeration district size, and compare that with the number of people and households to get a sense of density.

Non-population schedules provide clues about the community. Some examples:

- 1850 Social Statistics schedules provide info on taxes, schools (number of teachers, pupils, etc), libraries (how many books), newspapers (names, character, publication frequency, circulation), religion (no. of churches, size, value)
- 1860 Social Statistics schedule includes details about pauperism, crime (number of criminal convictions, and whether native or foreign)
- Agricultural schedules show crops grown in the area
- Manufacturing schedules include average monthly cost of labor

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For more information see: www.archives.gov/research/census/nonpopulation. Also, check out state census for non-population statistics and schedules.

## COUNTY HISTORIES

A large number of county histories were published around the US 1876 centennial celebrations, and with many more following until the start of World War I. These books covered many topics including geology, education, climate, church histories, newspapers, township histories and roads, canals and railroads.

**Resources:**

- *Archive.org* – search for "county history" and name of state or county
- *GoogleBooks* – same search strategies as for *Archive.org*
- *Hathi Trust* – same search strategies
- *Online County Histories* - https://www.genealogybranches.com/countyhistories.html
- Filby, William P., *A Bibliography of American County Histories* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1985). (Available to borrow on Archive.org)
- Linda Stufflebean's list - https://emptybranchesonthefamilytree.com/county-histories/

## NEWSPAPERS

Genealogists often limit newspaper searches to their ancestor's name. Instead, read them like a local. When was the county fair? What prizes were offered for what activities – baking, wine, quilts, hens, parsnips? Might great-grandpa have bet on trotting horses? Was there a regular baseball game on Sunday afternoon, and who was the town's chief rival or standout star? Was there a William Tell picnic or a St. Patrick's Day parade? How frequently did the local court sit, and did those times give rise to other activities? Was there an amusement park? Camping resorts for summer fun? Holiday dances? A New Year's masquerade ball?

Read advertisements. Shopping. Hotels. Stage coach or trains, and to where for how much? You've seen your ancestor's gravestone – was it made locally and by whom? Was there a local doctor or dentist who advertised? Clothing, housewares and tools – what could they buy, where and for how much? What did $35 of rent get them?

Websites current as of 28 August 2023

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