

A Brief History of Sanborn Maps

Tracing the development and growth of cities and towns has been a popular study in recent years. Maps of various years are very helpful tools in doing this, especially if these maps show the nature of buildings. One set of maps that contain detailed, accurate information and buildings in U.S. cities and towns are the so-called Sanborn Maps that were produced by the Sanborn Map Company of Pelham, New York.¹ Sanborn maps were created for approximately 12,000 towns and cities in the United States from 1867 to 1970.² Since these maps were designed to assist fire insurance agents in determining the degree of hazard associated with a particular property, they show in a uniform scale the size, shape, and construction of dwellings, commercial buildings, and factories as well as fire walls, locations of windows and doors, sprinkler systems and types of roofs. The maps also showed the locations of water mains, giving their dimensions, and of fire alarm boxes and hydrants. Sanborn maps are thus an unrivaled source of information about the structure and use of buildings in American cities and towns.³

The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. has in its Sanborn collection some fifty thousand editions of fire insurance maps comprising an estimated seven hundred thousand individual sheets, with most of them prepared since 1883.⁴ Since most of these maps were acquired by the Library through copyright deposit, the Library had two sets of these maps. Recently, the Library Congress gave each state one set that could be placed somewhere in that state for public use. The New York State set of Sanborn maps is in the New York Public Library.⁵

Mapping for insurance purposes had existed for a century prior to the emergence of the Sanborn Company, first beginning in London in the late 18th century. In the decades following the end of the Civil War, fire insurance mapping grew rapidly, mirroring the flourish of growth in this county, the rebuilding of the South and the massive westward expansion. Factors such as the Homestead Act, railroad construction, the Industrial Revolution and massive immigration into the United States all fostered huge population growths, urbanization, and heightened demand for mapping.⁶ The Sanborn Company would emerge as the largest provider of maps that local fire insurance companies would buy to help these local companies determine what to charge for fire insurance policies they issued.

Daniel Alfred Sanborn, a young surveyor from Somerville, Massachusetts, was hired in 1866 by the Aetna Insurance Company to prepare insurance maps for several cities in Tennessee. Prior to his Aetna work, he conducted surveys and compiled an atlas of the city of Boston titled *Insurance Map of Boston*, Volume 1, 1867. The success of his Boston atlas and his Aetna work led him to realize the importance of detailed and specialized maps for the fire insurance industry. In 1867 he established the D.A. Sanborn National insurance Diagram Bureau in New York City. From this modest beginning grew the specialized company that compiled and published maps for the fire insurance industry for more than a hundred years. The company had different name changes until in 1902 the name was shortened to the Sanborn Map Company.⁷

In its peak years of business, the company had as many as three hundred employees in the field gathering the detailed information and more than four hundred in the main office and publishing plant in Pelham, New York, and in secondary production centers in Chicago and San Francisco. Sanborn mapmakers worked anonymously in that their names never appeared on the maps they produced.⁸

To ensure uniform standards of accuracy and presentation on its maps, the Sanborn Company in 1905 published a *Surveyors' Manual for the Exclusive Use and Guidance of Employees*. The introduction to this manual says that Sanborn maps “are made for the purpose of showing at a glance the character of the fire insurance risks of all buildings. Our customers depend on the accuracy of our publications, and rely upon the information supplied, incurring large financial risks without making personal examinations of the properties.” The manual included more than a hundred pages of precise instructions, including sample maps and a comprehensive symbol key.⁹

The Sanborn Maps were drawn at the scale of 50 feet to an inch, on sheets 21 by 25 inches, which were cross-ruled in one-inch squares. The field workers would make use of information available at local government offices, but measured up the territory with tapelines. Because of new construction, fire, demolition, etc., it was necessary for the Sanborn Company to issue a revised map about every ten years. The company also provided paste-on correction slips that an insurance company could buy and paste onto its existing map until a new edition came out. A February 1937 *Fortune Magazine* article stated that “Sanborn maps describe the houses on every street in more than 13,000 U.S. towns and cities...[and] cost anywhere from \$12 to \$5200 [per map] depending on the technical difficulties involved in making them up.” Sanborn maps were lithographically printed. With the aid of waxed paper stencils, Sanborn employees colored the maps by hand. The maps were issued as unbound sheets for towns and cities with maps of under a hundred sheets. Bound volumes, each with approximately one hundred plates, were published for large cities. Thirty-nine volumes were required for New York City. Around 1920 the company introduced a loose-leaf atlas format which made it possible to replace outdated plates without reprinting an entire volume.¹⁰

Sanborn Map volumes were organized as follows: First there was a decorative title page and an index of streets and addresses, a “specials” index with the names of churches, schools, businesses, etc., and a master index indicating the entirety of the mapped area and the sheet numbers for each large-scale map (usually depicting four to six blocks) and general information such as population, economy and prevailing wind direction. The maps included outlines of each building and outbuilding, the location of windows and doors, street names, street and sidewalk widths, property boundaries, fire walls, natural features (rivers, canals, etc.), railroad corridors, building use (sometimes even particular room uses), house and block number, as well as the composition of building materials including the framing, flooring, and roofing materials, the strength of the local fire department, indications of sprinkler systems, locations of fire hydrants, location of water and gas mains and even the names of most public buildings, churches and companies.¹¹

There were great demands for these Sanborn maps in the building boom following World War One. The Great Depression and World War II caused a decline in demand. Following World War II, the Sanborn Company never enjoyed the demand for its maps that it had prior to the Depression. In recent years, municipal governments—not insurance companies—have been the main purchasers of Sanborn maps. At its peak of production before World War II, the company employed seven hundred people, but today employs only forty-two.

Today Sanborn maps are found primarily in the archives and special collection of town halls and public and university libraries, and remain a vital resource for people in many different fields. Historical research is the most obvious of uses, with the maps facilitating the study of urban growth and decline patterns, and for research into the evolution of specific buildings, sites and districts. Genealogists use the maps to locate residences and workplaces of ancestors.

Planners use the maps to study historic urban planning designs. Historic preservationists utilize the maps to understand the significance and historical evolution of buildings, including their historic uses and building materials in conservation and rehabilitations efforts. Demographers and urban geographers utilize the maps to study patterns of growth and migrations of populations.¹²

In terms of Sanborn maps for towns in Seneca County, the following can be said¹³:

Community	Date of Map	# of Sheets	Where Available Locally
Waterloo	July 1886	9	
	Dec 1893	11	
	Apr 1904	12	
	Mar 1911	19	
	Oct 1918	18	
	Oct 1918-Sep 1948	18	
Interlaken	Dec 1904	4	
	Dec 1910	5	
	Dec 1930	5	
	Dec 1930	5	
Ovid	Oct 1887	2	
	May 1898	4 (includes Willard)	
	Jan 1906	4 (includes Willard)	
	Jul 1911	5 (includes Willard)	
	July 1911-Oct 1934	5 (includes Willard)	
Romulus	Sep 1924	1	
	Sep 1924	1	
Seneca Falls	Aug 1881	6	SF Historical Society
	Jul 1886	8	SF Historical Society (missing sheet #7)
	Jan 1892	8	
	Feb 1897	8	
	Dec 1904	10	
	Feb 1911	24	SF Historical Society
	Jun 1916	19	
	Dec 1925	20	SF Historical Society
	Dec 1925-Dec 1944	20	SF Historical Society

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- ¹ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>
- ² <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Sanborn-Maps>
- ³ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>
- ⁴ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>
- ⁵ Information supplied by Gary Fitzpatrick on January 19, 2010, at a program at the Town of Ulysses Historical Society in Trumansburg, NY.
- ⁶ <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Sanborn-Maps>
- ⁷ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>
- ⁸ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>
- ⁹ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>
- ¹¹ <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Sanborn-Maps>
- ¹² <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Sanborn-Maps>
- ¹³ <http://www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/sanborn/city.php?City=Waterloo&State=New%20York>