

# About Sanborn Maps

By Bret Heinemann

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps were originally produced for insurance underwriters who used them to determine risks and establish premiums. Besides bottle collectors and diggers, these maps are now used by individuals doing research for projects in archaeology, architectural studies, ethnic studies, geography, genealogy, history, hobbyists, preservation, and urban studies.

Because of the increasing need for fire insurance through the years as a result of growing populations in cities and towns, insurance underwriters needed a help in determining insurance rates and risks. Fire insurance maps provide a wealth of knowledge about the layout of cities block by block and building by building.

Some examples of early fire insurance maps include Richard Horwood's 1792-1799 map of London.

One of the earliest maps of San Francisco is S.J. Gower's 1851 map showing the extent of the fire damage. Most Sanborn maps in archives and collections are dated after 1884, because in the year 1884 the Library of Congress established new copyright deposit requirements. Today, Sanborn maps are produced mainly for large cities.

Since the original purpose of these maps was to be used by fire insurance companies, the maps need to be read and understood from that perspective to make the best use of them.

The layout of towns and cities block by block includes a description of buildings, streets and sidewalks, the location of gas and water pipes, fire hydrants, fire safety information, any out buildings, wells, cisterns, corrals, and even in some cases latrines and dumps.

Sanborn Maps use a code consisting of colors and symbols to represent a wealth of information. This information is found in the key in every map folio. New symbols would be added as technology changed through the years most symbols remained the same since the late 1800s.

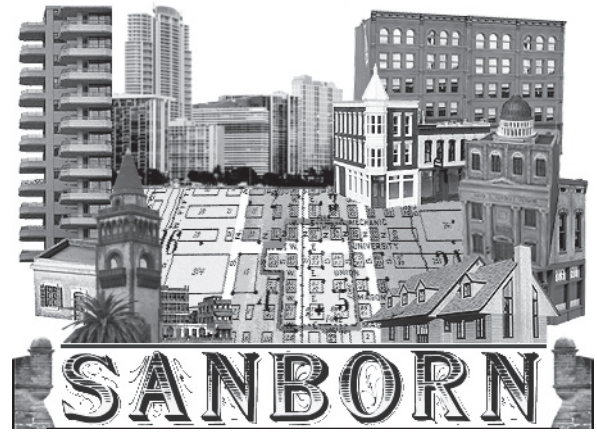
The scale used in Sanborn maps is usually one inch for 50 feet (1:600) on sheets 21 inches by 25 inches. There are, however, many maps which are scaled one inch to 100 feet (1:1200).

The information for the maps came from

court documents, real estate notes, and surveys. The maps include all the major parts of a city/town. It should be noted, though, that poor and sparsely populated areas are often omitted.

Sometimes ethnicity is noted on the maps, because the insurance companies regarded certain groups as higher risk. The maps, therefore may not have 100 percent of everything in a town, but they are an excellent record of what is displayed on them.

The different sections of a town are shown on separate pages. Larger towns and cities have an index map at the beginning



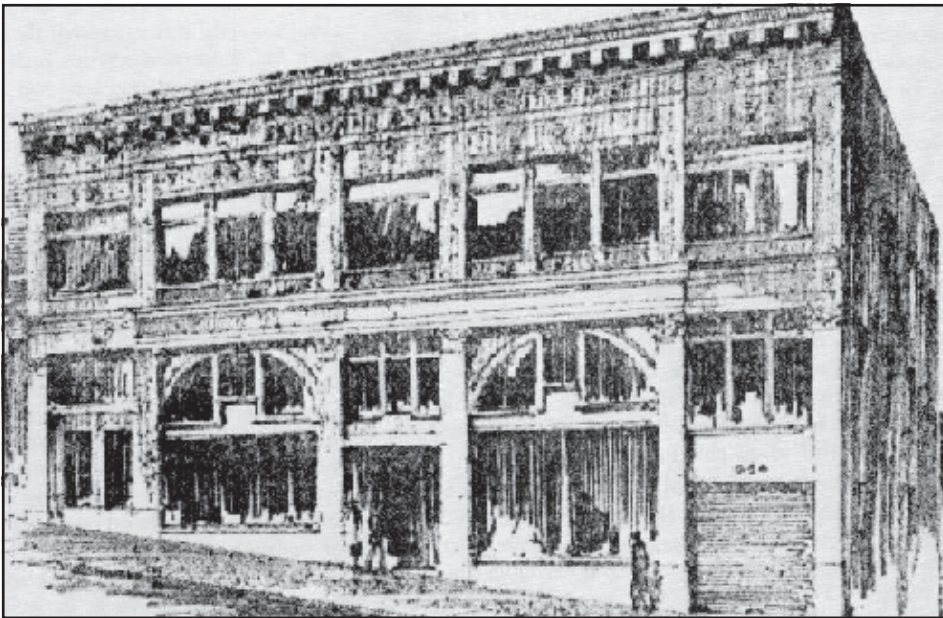
to show the overall community and identify the different sections contained on subsequent pages.

Each sheet/page of these maps is identified by a sheet number. City blocks are numbered also, and these numbers help when comparing towns and buildings of different maps produced over several years.

**KEY**

|           |            |      |   |                   |  |                |        |           |                    |            |                  |      |             |  |                                  |                                 |                      |                                |            |           |         |               |                      |                                  |                      |  |                                |  |   |                           |   |   |                |                          |             |                     |  |   |   |              |                |                   |                        |                |                       |                               |                              |                              |   |            |   |                       |                             |                       |                                |  |                  |                                       |                 |                 |        |        |   |  |   |                                 |                               |  |  |
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| TILE (AY) | Brick (CA) | ADOB | HEIGHT OF BUILDING IN FEET FROM GROUND TO ROOF LINE | NUMBER OF STORIES | TWO STORIES AND SHIRT TOP COMPOSITION ROOF | SHIRT TOP ROOF | (VEND) | BRICK 1ST | FRAME, BRICK LINED | D DWELLING | AMB AUTOM. FRONT | LOFT | (AS B. CL.) | NON COMBUSTIBLE ROOF COVERING OF METAL, SLATE, TILE OR ASBESTOS SHINGLES | SKYLIGHT LIGHTING TOP STORY ONLY | SKYLIGHT LIGHTING THREE STORIES | WIRED GLASS SKYLIGHT | FIRE WALL 48 INCHES ABOVE ROOF | WATER TANK | ENTRICKED | (C. B.) | (C. B. & BR.) | (C. B. & BR. CONSTN) | (C. B. & BR. CONSTN) (BR FACE D) | (C. B. & BR. CONSTN) | MAPS AND ROOFS - DOTS REPRESENT OPENINGS - STEMS INDICATE STORIES, COUNTING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, LOOKING TOWARD BUILDING. | Window opening in first story. | Window openings in second and third stories. | Window openings in second and fourth stories. | Windows with wired glass. | Windows with iron or tin clad shutters. | Window openings tenth to twenty-second stories. | Open elevator. | Frame enclosed elevator. | with traps. | self closing traps. | Concrete block enclosed elevator with traps. | Tile enclosed elevator with self closing traps. | Brick enclosed elev. with wired glass door. | Iron chimney | Brick chimney. | Ground elevation. | Vertical steam boiler. | Gasoline tank. | Open under connection | Siamese fire dept. connection | Single fire dept. connection | Reference to adjoining page. | Fire engine house, as shown on key map. | Fire pump. | Under page number refers to corresponding page of previous edition. | Automatic fire alarm. | Independent electric plant. | Automatic sprinklers. | Automatic chemical sprinklers. | Automatic sprinklers in part of building only. (NOTE UNDER SYMBOL INDICATES PROTECTED PORTION OF BUILDING) | Not sprinklered. | Outside vertical pipe on fire escape. | Fire alarm box. | Single hydrant. | Double | Triple | Quadruple hydrant of the "High Pressure Fire Service" | Fire alarm box of the "High Pressure Fire Service" | Water pipes of the High Pressure Fire Service and hydrants of the "High Pressure Fire Service" as shown on key map. | Water pipes and size in inches. | Water pipes of private supply | House numbers shown nearest to buildings are official or actually up on buildings. | Old house numbers shown furthest from buildings. |
|-----------|------------|------|---|-------------------|--|----------------|--------|-----------|--------------------|------------|------------------|------|-------------|--|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|------------|-----------|---------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|--|--------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------|---|---|----------------|--------------------------|-------------|---------------------|--|---|---|--------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---|------------|---|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--|------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------|--------|---|--|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|





Sanborn Map Company, Pacific Department, Publishing Plant and Office, San Francisco, Calif., 1926.



If a new block number is assigned to a block on a new edition of a map, then the old block number would be placed in parentheses next to the new one.

Instead of drawing an entirely new map, many fire insurance maps were updated. This was done with pasted on corrections and notes. The date(s) of the update is usually in a corrections box. In a large set of maps the correction box is usually at the beginning of a volume.

Streets are described by name and by a block numbers identified on either side. Information on the width of streets and sidewalks are also given.

Relevant fire safety information is indicated such as the location of fire hydrants, water mains, gas mains, electric lines, and other utilities.

Building materials are identified by a color code. Green or gray indicates a fireproof or adobe construction. Blue indicates a stone or concrete structure. Red indicates a brick structure. Gray indicates an iron structure. Yellow indicates a wood frame structure. Brick or stone veneers are also noted by colors, and buildings with mixed construction materials are labeled blue and have notation as to their materials on the drawing itself.

Information relating to the height of buildings, chimneys, stove pipes, any skylights, doors, windows, fire escapes, the thickness of walls, garages, elevators, sprinkler systems, asbestos shingles, and building height are all commonly noted on building drawings as well.

Buildings are identified as to what type of business or primary function. For example, churches, hotels, offices, residences (houses, apartments, & boarding houses), saloons, schools, stores, and theatres. Some common abbreviations for types of buildings are: the letter D for a dwelling, F for a flat, S for a store, A for an auto garage, and Apts for apartments.

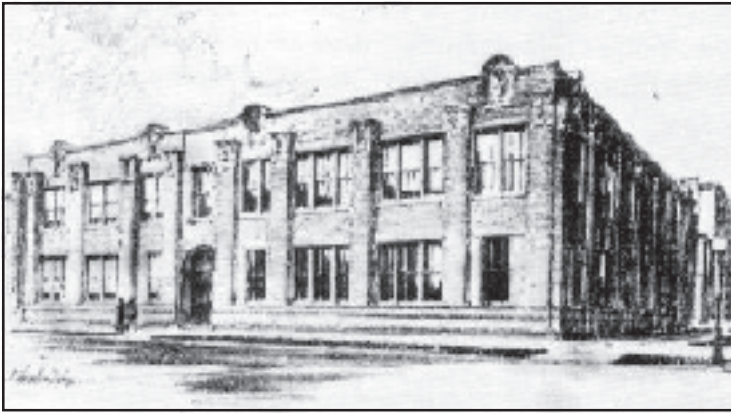
**SOME LOCATIONS OF FIRE INSURANCE MAPS**

A good first place to start is a local library. Here one can find out information

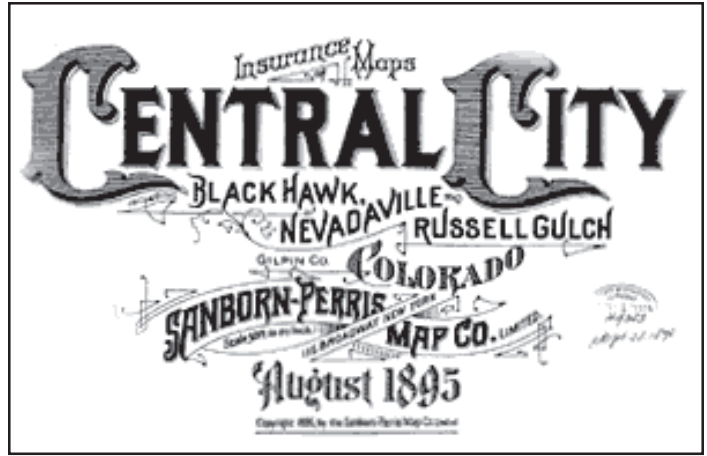
## KEY

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>WINDOWS L23 WITH WIRED GLASS</p> <p>NUMBER OF STORIES<br/>SHINGLE ROOF</p> <p>COMPOSITION RF<br/>SLATE OR TIN RF</p> <p>STEAM BOILER</p> <p>COUNTING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT LOOKING TOWARD BUILDING</p> <p>DOT REPRESENTS OPENING</p> <p>STABLE (C.B.) - CONCRETE BLOCK</p> <p>BUILDINGS COLORED</p> <p>INDICATE RELATIVE HEIGHTS</p> <p>+</p> | <p>FIRE WALL 6 IN. ABV ROOF</p> <p>METAL CORNICE</p> <p>FIRE WALL 12 IN. ABV ROOF</p> <p>WOOD CORNICE</p> <p>FIRE WALL 18 IN. ABV ROOF</p> <p>FRAME PARTITION</p> <p>OPENING WITH IRON DOOR</p> <p>" " "STANDARD" IRON DOOR</p> <p>WINDOWS &amp; IRON SHUTTERS</p> <p>WINDOW 1ST STORY</p> <p>WINDOWS 1ST &amp; 3RD STORIES</p> <p>" 2ND &amp; 4TH "</p> <p>RED BRICK</p> <p>BLUE STONE</p> <p>GRAY IRON</p> <p>BROWN FIRE PROOF</p> <p>AUTOMATIC SPRINKLERS</p> <p>AS SHOWN ON KEY MAP</p> |
|---|---|

ALTERNATE STREET NUMBERS ARE ACTUAL  
CONSECUTIVE STREET NOS ARE ARBITRARY



Sanborn Map Company, Central District, Chicago, Ill., 1926.



on interlibrary loan contact your local library or company library about eligibility to borrow them through the interlibrary loan. Information needed is the city, date(s) and volume numbers. In regards to copying maps, individuals are responsible for observing copyright laws. The Center for Research Libraries in Chicago holds microfilm of all Sanborn fire insurance maps in the Library of Congress (up through 1970).

**EDR Sanborn Maps**

Environmental Data Resources, Inc.  
3530 Post Road  
Southport, CT 06890  
800-352-0050

EDR owns a large and complete collection of Sanborn fire insurance maps and holds the copyrights to Sanborn maps. This original Sanborn collection has been digitized and can be searched through EDR's Website: [www.edrnet.com/reports/historical.html](http://www.edrnet.com/reports/historical.html).

In addition to the Sanborn maps, EDR

has historical topographic maps and historical aerial photographs.

**Chadwyck-Healey Inc.**

1101 King St. Suite 380  
Alexandria, VA 22314

Chadwyck-Healey has microfilm copies of Sanborn maps available to academic and public libraries.

**Proquest**

(800) 752-0515

ProQuest Digital Sanborn Maps — Splash Page

This is an online subscription service for academic and public libraries. Their website is <http://sanborn.umi.com>.

**Vlad Shkurkin**

6025 Rose Arbor Avenue  
San Pablo, CA 94806-4147  
(510) 232-7742  
24hr Fax: (510) 236-7050  
E-mail: [shkurkin@ix.netcom.com](mailto:shkurkin@ix.netcom.com)

Shkurkin has microfilm, facsimiles, and photocopies of selected western U.S. maps available for towns and cities in: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado (western), Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington (Seattle/urban King County), and Wyoming.

**WESTERN STATES**

**University of California, Berkeley Sanborn Maps**

The following U.C. Berkeley website has information on Sanborn maps and obtaining maps at U.C. Berkeley.

Their website is [www.lib.berkeley.edu](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu)

or specifically at [www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/sanborn.html](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/sanborn.html)

U.C. Berkeley students, faculty, and staff have priority over others, especially during busy periods of time.

The Sanborn maps at U.C. Berkeley are in three locations:

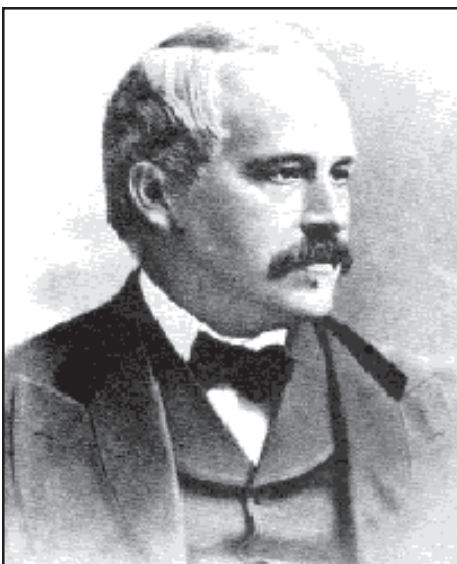
1. The Bancroft Library which has originals.
2. Map Room which has photocopies and microforms.
3. University Archives which has originals of U.C. Berkeley and surroundings.

The Map Room has a self-service microfilm and microfiche reader printers that operates with a VendaCard or cash. The Library Photographic Service (Doe Library) can make photostats, slides, and photographs. Self-service photocopying of original maps in The Bancroft Library and the University Archives is not permitted. Users are responsible for observing copyright laws.

**Stanford**

Checklist of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps in Branner Library  
Branner Earth Sciences Library and Map Collections.  
[www.sul.stanford.edu](http://www.sul.stanford.edu)

The San Jose Public Library has digital Sanborn maps in the California room. The



D.A. Sanborn





library online version of the Sanborn maps is browsable and viewable using using Adobe Acrobat reader. Their website is <http://www.sjpl.lib.ca.us> or <http://www.sjlibrary.org>.

Sanborn map information is also available from: E-mail: [seleniteman@comcast.net](mailto:seleniteman@comcast.net); U.S. Mail: Lewis Mitcham, 935 S. Webster St., Lakewood, CO 80226-4527; Website: [www.utahice.com/sanborn/ND.htm](http://www.utahice.com/sanborn/ND.htm). (The "ND" stands for North Dakota and can be replaced by the two letter code of the state for which you are searching information.)

**OHIO**

Digital Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps have been licensed for use by Ohio citizens by the Ohio Public Library Information Network. These Sanborn Maps were digitized from microfilm copies by Chadwyck-Healey a Bell & Howell Information and Learning company. This company owns the copyright to these digital files. The website is

[www.oplin.lib.oh.us](http://www.oplin.lib.oh.us) or <http://oplin.lib.oh.us/products/SanbornMaps/index.cfm>.

**UTAH**

To browse or search the Sanborn maps of Utah cities and towns go to [www.lib.utah.edu](http://www.lib.utah.edu) or [www.lib.utah.edu/digital/sanborn](http://www.lib.utah.edu/digital/sanborn).

**VIRGINIA**

The University of Virginia Library holds a complete microfilm collection of all Virginia cities and towns that were mapped by the Sanborn Map Company from 1885-1970. The Library also holds a pair of original map books for the City of Charlottesville, for 1907 and 1920. The website is: [www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu) or <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/sanborndetails.html>.

The following is a listing of institutions which have holdings of Sanborn fire insurance maps:

The Geographic Operations Branch,

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Jeffersonville, Indiana

Alabama Dept. of Archives and History,

Montgomery Birmingham Public Library

Alaska State Library, Juneau

Arizona State University, Tempe

University of Arizona, Tucson

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

University of California Berkley,

Bancroft Library, University of California

Santa Cruz, McHenry Library, California

Polytechnic State University, San Luis

Obispo California State University Fresno

Henry Madden Library California State

University Northridge

Western History Dept., Denver Public

Library State Historical Society of

Colorado, Denver

Connecticut State Library, Hartford

University of Connecticut Library

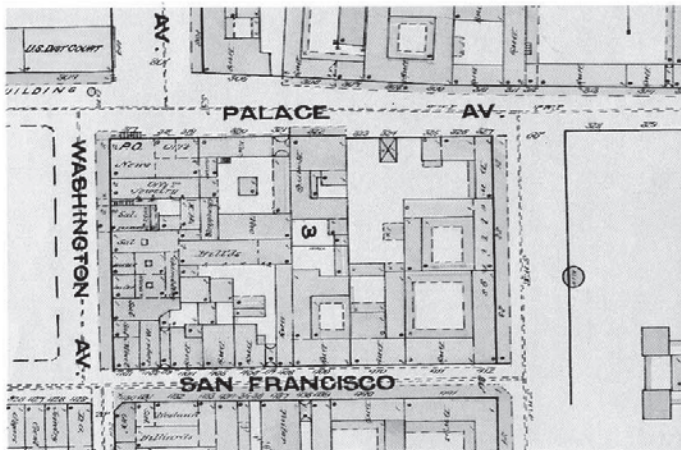
Historical Society of Delaware,

Wilmington

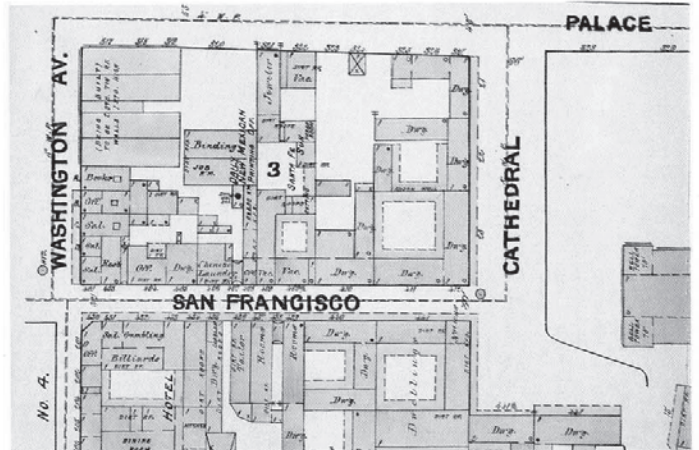
Florida Collection Miami-Dade Public

Library, Miami R.M. Strozier Library,

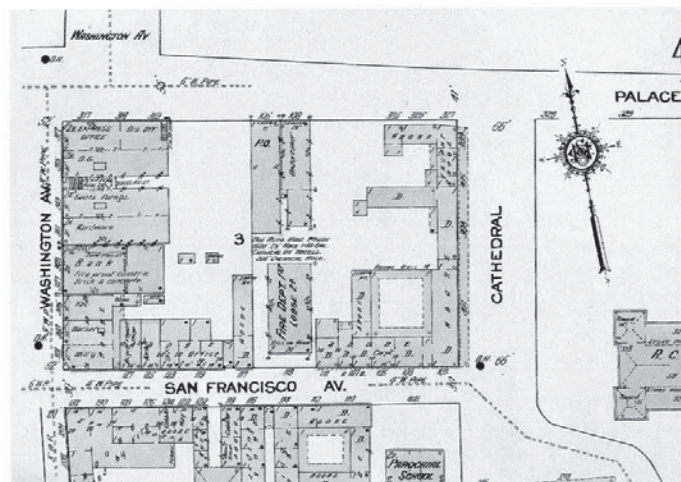
Florida State University, Tallahassee



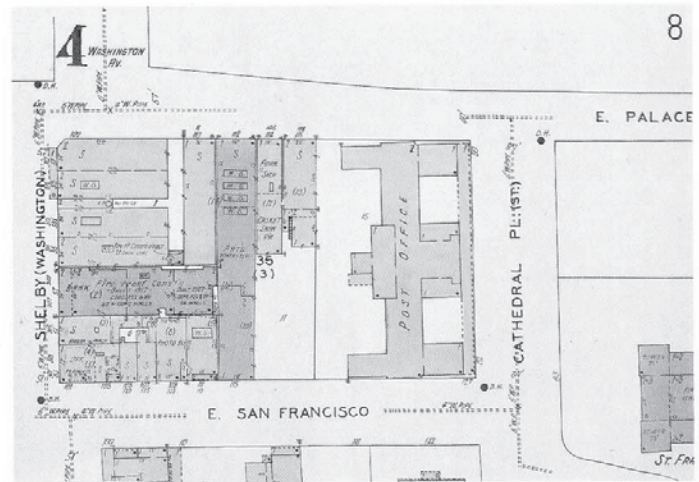
October, 1883



December, 1890



June, 1913



January, 1930

Four sections of Sanborn maps showing the same block in Santa Fe, N.Mex., illustrating the changes over periods of time.

University of Georgia, Athens  
 Hawaii State Archives, Honolulu  
 Waterhouse Map Room, Pacific Scientific Research Center, Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu  
 University of Idaho, Moscow  
 University of Illinois at Urbana, Champaign  
 Indiana State Library, Indianapolis  
 Indiana University, Geography & Map Library, Bloomington  
 University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.  
 Grout Museum of History and Science, Waterloo  
 Kansas State Historical Society Archives Division University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence  
 University of Kentucky, Lexington  
 Louisiana State University and Agriculture and Mechanical College, Baton Rouge  
 Maine Historical Society, Portland  
 Bangor Public Library Building & Inspection Office, Bangor City Hall  
 University of Maryland, Geography Department, College Park  
 Massachusetts State Library Insurance Library Association of Boston  
 Detroit Public Library State Archives of Michigan, Lansing  
 Clark Historical Library, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant  
 Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul  
 University of Missouri, Columbia  
 St. Louis Public Library  
 Montana Historical Society, Helena  
 Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln  
 Nevada State Historical Society, Reno  
 New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord  
 New Jersey Historical Society, Newark  
 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque  
 Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo  
 New York Public Library, Map Division  
 North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh  
 University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill  
 Ohio Historical Society Archives Library, Columbus  
 Kent State University, Kent  
 University of Oklahoma,

Norman  
 Oregon State University, Corvallis  
 Oregon Historical Society, Portland  
 Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
 Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia  
 City Planning Commission  
 Rhode Island Historical Society,  
 Providence  
 Brown University, Providence  
 South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia  
 South Dakota State Archives, Pierre  
 Tennessee State Library, Nashville  
 Chattanooga Public Library  
 Dallas Public Library  
 Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City  
 Gus W. Bailey Library, University of Vermont, Burlington  
 Virginia State Library, Richmond  
 Virginia Historical Society, Richmond  
 Seattle Public Library University of Washington, Seattle  
 State Historical Society of Wisconsin  
 West Virginia University Library, Morgantown  
 Coe Library, University of Wyoming, Laramie  
 Vancouver City Archives, Canada  
 Vancouver Public Library, Canada  
 Victoria City Archives, Canada  
 Special Collections Div., Historical Columbia, Vancouver,  
 Canada  
 University of British McMaster

University, Hamilton, Alberta

The following books contain names of institutions which have collections of older maps of cities and towns in the United States and some listings for Canada.

#### For More Information:

*Catalogue of Sanborn Atlases at California State University, Northridge*, Gary W. Rees and Mary Hoerber (Occasional Paper No.1) Z6028.42 copyright 1973.

*Union List of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps Held by Institutions in the United States and Canada*. Volume 1, Alabama to Missouri, R. Philip Hoelin. Z6026.17H63 Occasional paper Western Association of Map Libraries No. 2.

*Union List of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps Held by Institutions in the United States and Canada*. Volume 2, Montana to Wyoming, Canada and Mexico, William S. Peterson-Hunt and Evelyn L. Woodruff. Occasional paper Western Association of Maps No.3.

*Fire Insurance Plans in the National Map Collection [Canada], 1977*.

*Description and Utilization of the Sanborn Map*. Sanborn Map Company, 1949, 1960.

*Description and Utilization of the New Reduced Size Sanborn Map*. Sanborn Map Company, "U.S. Fire Insurance Maps, 1852-1968" W. W. Ristow Surveying and Mapping 30 (1970): 19-41 Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress (July 1968):194-217. Reprint: 1970.

*Fire Insurance Maps in the Library of Congress: Plans of North American Cities and Towns Produced by the Sanborn Map Company: a Checklist*. 1981.

There are excerpts from Fire Insurance Maps in the Library of Congress: A checklist compiled by the Reference and Bibliography Section, Geography and Map Division available for viewing at: [www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html).

There is another article about Sanborn maps at: [www.ancestry.com/library/view/columns/eastman/4039.asp](http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/columns/eastman/4039.asp).

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