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.
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
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. 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

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. Berkley website has information on Sanborn maps and obtaining maps at U.C. Berkley.

Their website is www.lib.berkeley.edu

or specifically at www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/sanborn.html

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

The Sanborn maps at U.C. Berkley 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

The San Jose Public Library has digital Sanborn maps in the California room. The
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; U.S. Mail: Lewis Mitcham, 935 S. Webster St., Lakewood, CO 80226-4527; Website: 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 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.www.lib.utah.edu or 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 or http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/sanborn/details.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

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

October, 1883

December, 1890

June, 1913

January, 1930
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:

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.

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

Bret Heinemann
P.O. Box 291
Atascadero, CA 93423