



## NOTES FROM THE FIELD: MAPPING HISTORY WITH SANBORN MAPS

BY HALLEY FEHNER

For a historian, a good map can be a gold mine of valuable information. Beyond road names or topographical features, maps can show the historical arrangements of buildings, property owners, and even the location of a specific furnace in an industrial plant. Few maps do this better than Sanborn fire insurance maps, which depict the commercial, industrial, and residential sections of more than 12,000 American cities and towns from ca. 1867 to 1970.

Fire insurance maps were developed in the United States in the mid-19th century in response to the insurance industry's need to assess fire risks. Underwriters had previously inspected properties themselves, but as cities expanded, this system became impractical. As a result, several companies, among them the D. A. Sanborn National Insurance Diagram Bureau, began creating maps designed to assist insurance agents. By 1902, the newly renamed Sanborn Map Co. had monopolized the industry, making "Sanborn map" synonymous with "fire insurance map."

The Sanborn Map Co. prepared its maps with an army of surveyors traveling from town to town, literally working from strangers' backyards (although surveyors were told to contact the police station first, stories abound of surveyors being thrown in jail, attacked by dogs, or reported as spies). Relying heavily on their "Surveyors' Manual," surveyors recorded careful notes and diagrams that were then developed into intricately drawn, hand-colored maps that have become invaluable to historians.

For some towns, the Sanborn Map Co. prepared new maps as often as every five years, making them one of our best sources for showing change over time at specific sites. Sanborn maps tell the careful observer everything from which way the prevailing wind blows to the location of historical waste pits. Sanborn maps are important to site-specific research, allowing historians to approxi-

mate when a particular building was torn down or how many oil tanks were on a site in a particular year. Sanborn maps can also be used for broader, investigative research: by looking through a range of maps in a particular region, historians can track the progression of a specific industry, identify economic development, and even gain new insight into social change.

Sanborn maps have their limitations, however, and those unfamiliar with them may make some false assumptions when using them as a resource. Here are a few of the common "myths" about Sanborn maps:

**Myth: Only towns of a certain size were mapped.** While major cities were certainly covered by Sanborn surveyors, even tiny villages show up among the Sanborn annals. In fact, small towns were sometimes mapped *more* frequently than large cities. Syracuse, New York, for example, received no Sanborn updates at all between 1892 and 1910, while Manlius, a nearby village of about 1,000 residents, was mapped four times. One reason for this historical discrepancy may simply be that mapping a major city was time-consuming

*(Continued on page 3)*



Photo courtesy Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

*Sanborn Map of the Theater District in New York City, 1911. Magnifying glass inset added to show detail.*

## SAFEGUARDING THE PAST: PLANNING A COMPANY ARCHIVES

Developing an archival program can be a daunting task—especially when the concept of "archives" is often equated with "storing old files." However, in an era of information overload and employee turnover, companies can have a distinct competitive advantage if they efficiently maintain institutional knowledge in an archives.

### Why have a corporate archives?

A functioning corporate archives can be a valuable resource for managers, prod-

uct developers, marketing staff, in-house counsel, and PR professionals. Materials documenting the business and policies of the corporation are easily located, allowing future managers and staff to capitalize on lessons learned and to envision how it might go forward. Important assets are preserved, such as product samples and design documents. Legal documents are systematically retained and made accessible only to those who are authorized to review them.

Many corporations, such as Levi Strauss, Coca-Cola, and Disney, use their history as a marketing and PR tool.

### Generate company buy-in

Corporate archival projects will not succeed without a project champion and strong support within the organization. As you promote your project within the organization, you may find that other

*(Continued on page 2)*



## CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL EVENTS

The 150th anniversary of the first major battles of the Civil War is taking place this year, and many state and local organizations are hosting special commemorative events. Here are just a few upcoming highlights:

September 16-18: Missouri State Parks and Big River Ranch will be presenting the 150th Anniversary re-enactment of the Battle of Lexington at the Battle of Lexington State Historic Site.

September 24-25: Leesylvania State Park in Woodbridge, Virginia, will commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Potomac River Blockade with live demonstrations and camp reenactments. Events are planned for Dumfries, Virginia, as well.

September 30-October 2: The U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, will host a living history event called "Civil War 150: Entering Winter Camp," with drilling competitions, demonstrations, and other activities.

For a more complete listing of events and other information, please visit <http://www.civilwar.org/150th-anniversary>.

## SAFEGUARDING THE PAST: PLANNING A COMPANY ARCHIVES

*(Continued from page 1)*

staff members are interested in starting an archives or have already taken steps to do so. Gathering consensus will help build momentum.

### Start with clear objectives

Set specific goals for the archives. Successful archival programs are aligned with a company's business objectives, not storage needs. Determine what will be maintained and why. Aside from legal or regulatory compliance needs, each company has its own mission. How will the company archives serve to support this mission?

In general, what the company "does" should be documented in the archives. For example, a manufacturing company should retain product and packaging samples, design materials, and product marketing brochures. The archives should document the organization's management, workers, unions, and customers by collecting management directives and correspondence, strategic plans, position descriptions, salary scales, payroll records, union Memoranda of Understanding (MOU), employee newsletters, event images, oral histories, and records documenting interactions with customers. Artifacts, such as samples of employee awards, party favors, and promotional items, have historical value and should be preserved in an archives.

Once you have sketched out your goals and objectives, create a clear, focused collection policy for determining what to keep and—just as important—what not

to keep. If you have a records management program, coordinate your archival plans with this program to insure that you identify and retain records of enduring value in the archives.

Most companies instinctively save documents that might have historical value or legal importance, but without guidelines the tendency can be to save everything. One of the first big challenges of implementing a program will be to review the backlog of material already "archived" and weed out items that can safely be discarded. According to the Society of American Archivists, most business archives should be comprised of less than 3 percent of all company records.<sup>1</sup>

### Address logistical issues

However the archives is constituted, there are some practical considerations for maintenance:

- Where will you store the archives?  
Archival materials should be stored in a climate-controlled space using acid-free storage materials and equipment, with security against fire, water damage, etc.
- How will you control and manage access to the archives?  
Be sure to set up and enforce policies and procedures for the retrieval, use, and access to records. Who should have access to the collection (whole or in part) and how you will manage access? What finding aids will be available and how will they be accessed?
- How will you keep your program going?  
A corporate archives program can often build upon the framework of an

effective records management program. If your corporation does not have a records management program in place, consider creating both so that you have an integrated plan for systematically preserving and disposing of documents moving forward.

In our experience, many corporate archives are achieved as a result of a multi-step process. Consider reaching out to professionals who can help. Professional archivists can help you think through a collection policy, prioritize tasks, and advise you how to allocate resources more efficiently. At History Associates, our archivists can help, whether you need an independent assessment to support a business case or hands-on assistance in implementing your plan.

### Other Recommended Resources

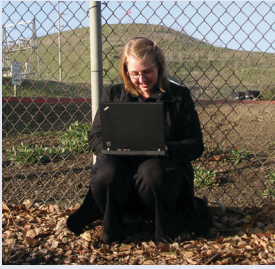
Society of American Archivists  
([www.archivists.org](http://www.archivists.org))  
Academy of Certified Archivists  
([www.certifiedarchivists.org](http://www.certifiedarchivists.org))  
ARMA International ([www.arma.org](http://www.arma.org))  
Council of State Archivists ([www.statearchivists.org/connections/archivalassns.htm](http://www.statearchivists.org/connections/archivalassns.htm))

*For more information, contact archivist/records manager Abigail L. Dixon, C.A. She works on a variety of archives and records management projects for History Associates' office in Brea, California. Contact her at (714) 529-3953 or e-mail at [adixon@historyassociates.com](mailto:adixon@historyassociates.com).*

<sup>1</sup> Society of American Archivists (SAA). (n.d.). "Business Archives in North America: Invest in Your Future, Understand Your Past." Retrieved August 4, 2011 from SAA website: <http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/bas/busArchives%202.asp>.



We have an app for that! History Associates collaborated with the Civil War Trust to create two "Battle Apps" for touring Civil War battlefields. Check out the iPhone App Store for tours of Devil's Den and Little Round Top sites at Gettysburg, or the Battle of Fredericksburg.



## STAFF HIGHLIGHTS: CARLY SWAIM

Historian Carly Swaim has worked on diverse research topics, from slavery in the U.S. to the histories of former industrial sites. She is currently researching for several WWI and WWII cemetery visitors' centers in Europe, where she's compiling personal accounts on soldiers buried there. A lifelong fan of military history, Carly grew up outside Washington, D.C., and fondly recalls family trips to the area's museums. Colleagues know Carly as the historian who is always traveling. Research assignments have taken her all over the world, from San Francisco to the outskirts of London.

## MAPPING HISTORY WITH SANBORN MAPS

(Continued from page 1)

and expensive. Whatever the explanation, Sanborn surveys were not determined by population, but rather by the demands of the insurance industry.

**Myth: Every Sanborn map of an area is similar.** While two different repositories may have a 1928 Sanborn map of Brooklyn, it is possible that one atlas may show a vacant lot where the other shows a shopping center. This is because during economic difficulties in the 1920s, the Sanborn Map Co. began updating maps by pasting correction slips on top of existing maps, rather than printing an entirely new map. For some cities, as many as 50 or 60 rounds of corrections were made during the next few decades. Over the years, pages grew heavy with correction slips, making it impossible to tell which slips were added in which years. Among the Sanborn maps and atlases that exist in repositories today, some have been "corrected" while others have not. History Associates has found that local repositories are particularly likely to have the "corrected" version of the maps.

**Myth: Sanborn maps were only used by the fire insurance industry.** Although insurance companies were the main consumers, city planners, government and municipal agencies, banks, and public utilities also purchased Sanborn maps and atlases. Occasionally, the Sanborn Map Co. even made specialized maps for private companies. In 1952, *Business Week* reported that the Sanborn Map Co. was working on a project to show Safeway food stores where to expand. In the early 1940s, the U.S. Census Bureau purchased 1,840 volumes of Sanborn atlases and maps to serve as the cartographic base for their statistical and sampling surveys. This collection was transferred to the Library of Congress in 1967, where it remains as the largest publicly accessible collection of Sanborns in the country.

Creative research can uncover a wealth of information in records that were intended to serve a different purpose, and historians often find valuable information from unexpected sources like the Sanborn maps. However, it is equally important to understand the context of that resource to ensure an accurate interpretation of the information once it is found.

*Historian Halley Fehner has researched local site histories, historic land use, and the*

*environmental history of war-era defense contractors. She also performs image research for museums and contributes to the development of interpretive plans. Contact her at 301-279-9697 or e-mail hfehner@historyassociates.com.*

Meet us in person! We will be exhibiting at the DRI Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., in October. If you plan to attend, let us know at [astrong@historyassociates.com](mailto:astrong@historyassociates.com) if you'd like to meet at the show.

## THE BEST CLIENTS IN HISTORY

### MATTEL

began work to identify and catalog historical materials and develop reference documents.

### NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

completed surveys at twenty-seven park sites across the U.S. and its territories and submitted plans for processing and cataloging archival material held at these sites.

### PEOPLE FOR THE AMERICAN WAY

began an archival survey project to review and weed records.

### SEC HISTORICAL SOCIETY

continued work conducting oral history interviews and recently began research for a new gallery in their virtual museum on the history of financial regulation at [www.sechistorical.org](http://www.sechistorical.org).

### UNIVERSAL AVIONICS

concluding the research and writing of a 30th anniversary history book.

### LITIGATION RESEARCH

provided expert witness testimony in Louisiana, South Carolina, and West Virginia – continued to research and analyze documents in federal, state, and local records repositories in California, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Washington, and Washington, D.C.



For thirty years, clients have turned to History Associates to tell their stories, preserve and manage their records, and answer their historical questions.

**Histories**  
Books, websites, and oral history projects

**Exhibits**  
Multimedia content development, image and artifact research, and scriptwriting

**Interpretive Planning**  
Planning, research, writing, and mapping for any historic site

### Historical Research

Research and analysis for litigation, regulatory compliance, and public relations

### Archival Services

Appraisal, organization, description, and management of historical materials

### Records Management

Records inventories, surveys, files management, and retention schedules

History Associates serves clients nationwide and around the world.

Copyright © 2011 • History Associates Incorporated



# TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF SCHOOL COLORS

It's back to school time! Do you know these American colleges from their school colors?

- A. This school's original colors in 1872 were rose pink and pea green but were changed to a single official color in 1890 when students complained.
- B. Legend has it that this school's official colors of royal purple and old gold were determined when the football team cleared out a store of Mardi Gras ribbons before a game in 1893.
- C. The school's colors of navy blue and gold were adjusted in 1949 to a lighter, "powderkeg blue" and gold because the new coach thought they'd look better on the field.

E-mail your answers along with your contact information to Anne Strong at [astrong@historyassociates.com](mailto:astrong@historyassociates.com). Correct responses will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card!



Photo courtesy Fletcher6, Wikimedia Commons.

*Restored orange 1939 Dodge school bus at Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. Later that year, the federal government mandated the adoption of a specific "school bus yellow" for safety reasons.*

Congratulations to Mark Evans of Tessella Inc. He was the winner of the Winter 2010 Test Your Knowledge Quiz. He correctly answered the following: A) MTV, B) *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and C) Bloomberg Business News.

*Get HAIpoints by e-mail! Sign up at [www.historyassociates.com/haipointsnewsletter](http://www.historyassociates.com/haipointsnewsletter).*

HISTORY ASSOCIATES INC.  
300 N. STONESTREET AVE.  
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND 20850  
T 301.279.9697  
F 301.279.9224  
[WWW.HISTORYASSOCIATES.COM](http://WWW.HISTORYASSOCIATES.COM)

THE BEST COMPANY IN HISTORY®  
**History Associates**  
INC.



PRST STD  
AUTO  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Terra Alta, WV  
Permit No. 46