



## TIME AND SPACE: INTERPRETING HISTORY THROUGH GIS MAPPING

By **ANDREW SIMPSON**

GIS mapping is a powerful way to make history come to life. Combining geographic information system (GIS) data with historical information, may serve to:

- Present historical evidence in its precise geographical context,
- Visually convey geographic changes over time, or
- Tell engaging stories from a geo-historical perspective.

Visually illustrating change over time in this way is especially helpful when trying to convey complex information. Our historians frequently gather information that documents a range of activities that happened in a specific place over time. Describing our documentary findings in a traditional narrative may be cumbersome and can obscure important points. By linking this information to the relevant geographical features we “show” not just “tell” what happened where and when.

For example, we help lawyers involved in environmental cleanup cases to locate entities that once occupied a polluted site and quickly identify their likelihood of being a source of contamination. We have plotted the detailed information found in historical parcel descriptions onto current maps to help lawyers more easily see changes in boundaries, the relationships between parcels and owners, and timeframes when certain activities were documented on a site.

The process of GIS mapping is fairly

straightforward, although not necessarily easy. It often starts with locating relevant GIS data from state or county government sources. This data might include information on roads, railroads, sewer lines, land/lot parcels, waterways, or other elements. Historians then use GIS mapping software to add additional attributes and import them into the map—as long as the information is keyed to the same geographically referenced data. For historical maps, features

can be “georeferenced”—or plotted with their specific coordinates—so that coastlines, roadways, and buildings are accurately layered over current maps. Other relevant information such as current or historical aerial photographs can also be layered in. Specific areas of interest can be highlighted by using stylistic options, such as shading or color coding. Layers can easily be turned on and off or adjusted for transparency in order to see how the landscape has changed over time.

Once we have embedded all the data, we can disseminate the information in a number of ways, from a simple graphic file, to a layered PDF, to interactive maps. Interactive maps allow the viewer to delve further into any additional data embedded in the map when a certain feature is selected. For instance, by clicking on a specific parcel, a popup window could display the parcel number, a photo of a factory that used to be on the site, a list of known residents at the location, operational descriptions excerpted from an historical document, and so on.

The main limitations to this type of work to date have been the quality of GIS data available for a specific region, and the availability of digitized, high-resolution historical maps. The good news is that both of these data sets are becoming more widely available. The U.S. government has launched a web portal ([www.geo.data.gov/](http://www.geo.data.gov/))

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Photos courtesy Google® Earth and the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

*GIS mapping can overlay any historical data onto maps or aerial photographs, such as a 1911 Sanborn map over Times Square today, with further sample parcel info pinned to the geographic location.*

## PRIVACY: THE ARCHIVIST'S DILEMMA

Owners and custodians of archives collections often find themselves on the horns of a dilemma: the collections exist for researchers to use, yet they may contain information that should remain private. How then, does an archivist resolve this conflict so that the interests of the repository, the records creators, and the researcher are le-

gally and appropriately served?

Respecting individual privacy while also granting reasonable access can be difficult. For example, imagine an archivist processing the manuscript collection of a prominent medical researcher. The collection might well include patient records, letters of reference, grant applications, and

letters from potential patients. While laws exist to curtail access to some of the material, these same items may represent valuable information for future researchers. For instance, how should the archivist handle a letter requesting medical advice sent to the researcher from a now-famous movie star?

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Photo DN-0008963, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago History Museum. Two men examining Cook County Hospital documents stacked in a room, 1911.

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There are numerous laws that govern the privacy of information, including Title II of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which protects medical records that contain health information where individuals can be identified. Legal concerns surrounding privacy in U.S. archives also revolve around the Family Educational Records Protection Act (FERPA), the 1974 Privacy Act, and others. The Society of American Archivists developed a Code of Ethics to guide archivists' decision-making. The Code requires archivists to acknowledge that privacy is sanctioned by law and that archivists should "establish procedures and policies to protect the interests of the donors, individuals, groups, and institutions whose public and private lives and activities are recorded in their holdings."

However, the above example of a famous person asking for medical advice is a grey area. Does the request constitute a "medical record"? If not, does it require privacy protection for other reasons? Legal and ethical requirements can be met in a number of ways with the ultimate decision often left to the processing archivist. In every instance requiring a judgment call, the archivist must consider legal requirements—with the aid of legal counsel if necessary—ethical guidelines, donor agreements, and the organization's mission to arrive at the best solution. Among the options available are: making the letter public; restricting the letter, thereby deferring access to the document for a specified

period—usually once the donor or subject of the record has died; redacting those portions of the letter that reveal personal information; and, although unlikely in this scenario, deciding not to preserve the item in the archive at all.

One way that archivists make consistent decisions about privacy is to include a flow chart in their processing manual. Such a chart details how sensitive materials should be processed, whether they should be restricted, and if so, for how long. The chart can also describe the different types of materials that are typically included in the collections and whether each type should have physical access restricted, and how long any restriction should be. As with any archival policy, the flow chart and processing manual should be developed and approved

through appropriate organizational channels.

Archivists know that there may be no one right answer, or there may be more than one right answer, to protecting privacy in archives. At History Associates, we serve a wide variety of clients and are mindful of the fact that each organization has its own concerns. Our archivists routinely work with clients to explore the options within the context of legal requirements, professional standards, and the typical approaches used by similar organizations to arrive at solutions that are best for them.

*History Associates archivists Greg Pike, CA, and Erica Haakensen also contributed to this article. Alexandra Krensky is an archivist at History Associates, where she is currently performing archival processing, arrangement, and description services for the National Park Service. Contact her at 301-279-9697 or by e-mail at [akrensky@historyassociates.com](mailto:akrensky@historyassociates.com).*



## THANK YOU!

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## STAFF HIGHLIGHTS: JOE NEUMANN

Archivist and records manager Joseph Neumann has always loved history, but he didn't want to just study it from the sidelines. After receiving his bachelor's degree in European history from Brandeis University and a MLS from the University of Maryland—College Park, he sought out a career that offered a "hands on" application of his training. History Associates proved to be a perfect fit. Over the past four-plus years, he has conducted a wide variety of projects, from rehousing fragile historical materials for the Library of Congress to conducting document and artifact inventories for members of the U.S. House and Senate. "I've discovered that I really enjoy the interaction," he noted. "We're trained in theoretical best practices, but then there's the other side. I enjoy working with clients—being in their offices, learning about the culture, and talking through the problem with them. I like to take that understanding, mash it up with the industry best practices, and come up with the best solution for that client."

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geoportals) designed to foster information sharing and provide access to geospatial data and services. Major map digitizing projects are also underway to preserve older maps and to make them more widely available. Since 1995, the Library of Congress has been digitizing its massive collection of over 5.6 million maps, atlases, and other cartographic materials. A small but growing portion of this material has been converted to digital format and is available online. Similarly, the New York Public Library has scanned nearly 9,000 maps in its map collections and has begun working to index the collections to Google Earth. Similar projects are happening worldwide.

Although availability of GIS data and intuitive software will make it easier to create GIS-based presentations, just having the tools will not automatically make the map any easier to understand. The contextual knowledge and interpretative skills of the trained historian are essential in producing cartographic presentations that are not only accurate, but convey the information so it is properly interpreted.

At History Associates, we have used GIS mapping to help visualize the evolution and ownership of large industrial sites, to show moving battle lines for several theaters of war in World War II, and to illustrate how changes in and along a waterway related to historic land use. As the technology improves, we continue to discover new ways to use this powerful tool to help others not just conceptualize, but see the events that happened in one specific place over time.

*Historian Andrew Simpson conducts a variety of historical, museum, and litigation research projects for History Associates clients. He can be reached at 301-279-9697 or by e-mail at [asimpson@historyassociates.com](mailto:asimpson@historyassociates.com).*

## THE BEST CLIENTS IN HISTORY

### C-SPAN

completed an archival survey and assessment of historical records, photographs, and memorabilia.

### SCOTTSDALE INSURANCE COMPANY

completed the research, writing, and publication of an illustrated history book.

### THE MARITIME ADMINISTRATION

continued work to inventory and catalog all of its heritage assets at the campus of the United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) in Kings Point, NY.

### THE MOB MUSEUM IN DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS

continued research and acquisition of additional high-resolution images for exhibits at the museum.

### THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

continued work to arrange and catalog museum archives at park sites located across the United States and its territories.

### U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

completed the research and writing of a ten-year history update for the USACE-Fort Worth District, from 2000-2011.

### LITIGATION RESEARCH

continued to research and analyze documents in federal, state, and local records repositories in California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and Wisconsin.



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# TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF VICE PRESIDENTIAL TRIVIA

1. This man became the first VP to accede to the presidency upon the incumbent's death. He also became the first president not to run for a second term.
2. When VP James Sherman died in office, this president did not replace him and ran for reelection with a dead man on the ticket.
3. This VP was famously quoted in the press at the time as saying the job wasn't worth "a bucket of warm spit." (He actually didn't say "spit" but something a bit more harsh.)

E-mail your answers along with your contact information to Anne Strong at [astrong@historyassociates.com](mailto:astrong@historyassociates.com) by October 5, 2012. Correct responses will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card!



Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress.

*Caption: "Too bl\_ \_dy small for Uncle Joe."  
Political cartoon published in the New York Herald on June 15, 1904, just before the Republican Convention. House Speaker Joseph Gurney Cannon ("Uncle Joe") famously opposed a political movement toward making him a candidate for Vice President on the ticket with Theodore Roosevelt, with whom he often clashed.*

Congratulations to Stephen Marz, CA, State Archivist for the State of Delaware, winner of the Spring 2012 Test Your Knowledge Quiz. For past quiz questions and answers, visit [www.historyassociates.com/haipointsnewsletter](http://www.historyassociates.com/haipointsnewsletter).

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