

# Research Guide

## Using Sanborn Maps

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## Background

Sanborn Maps were used by planners, prior to the advent of the computer, to document housing and land use on a parcel-by-parcel, block-by-block basis. How far back they go depends on your locale.

They are useful not only for historical purposes, but also as a way to get a quick sketch map of a location, like a corner or a street block. One advantage they have over computer generate maps which might be available is that individual addresses are clearly labeled, as are individual non residential land uses.

Hard copies of Sanborn Maps for the city of Philadelphia are available in the Urban Archives, in the basement of Paley Library at Temple University. These are colorful and show an extraordinary level of detail including names of nonresidential land uses, trolley and rail lines, and more.

You can get at on-line Sanborn Maps for many cities around the country, and for Philadelphia, through the Paley Library database front end. You must have a valid TUID to access this database.

## An Example

In this case I was looking for the 2000 block of North Fifteenth Street in Philadelphia. Numbered streets are indexed according to how they are spelled, not according to numbers. So I would look for Fifteenth Street (North) among the “F” entries.

With your web browser open to the main Paley Library page, proceed as follows.

- Click on all databases
- Click on S
- Scroll to Sanborn Maps. You see a link for: **Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970**. Click on that.
- Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970 provides digital access to more than 660,000 large-scale maps of more than 12,000 American towns and cities.
- If you were to click on the database description you would see the following text:

Sanborn maps are valuable historical tools for urban specialists, social historians, architects, geographers, genealogists, local historians, planners, environmentalists and anyone who wants to learn about the history, growth, and development of American cities, towns, and neighborhoods. They are large-scale plans containing data that can be used to estimate the potential risk for urban structures. This includes information such as the outline of each building, the size, shape and construction materials, heights, and function of structures, location of windows and doors. The maps also give street names, street and sidewalk widths, property boundaries, building use, and house and block numbers.

Textual information on construction details (for example, steel beams or reinforced walls) is often given on the plans while shading indicates different building materials. Extensive information on

building use is given, ranging from symbols for generic terms such as stable, garage, and warehouse to names of owners of factories and details on what was manufactured in them. In the case of large factories or commercial buildings, even individual rooms and the uses to which they were put are recorded on the maps. Other features shown include pipelines, railroads, wells, dumps, and heavy machinery.

- After you have linked to the front end you have the option **Browse maps**. Click that.
- Next it will ask you to select a state. Do so. In this example, I picked Pennsylvania.
- Next it will ask you to select a city. Do so. In this example, Philadelphia County was selected.
- Then it will ask you to select a date. This is tricky. The Sanborn Maps were generated as the city grew. Further, not all existing streets were covered at one point in time. What you basically want to do is start with the latest date, see if you find the street block you seek in the index or directory. If not, then move backward in time until you find a volume that covers the street block you seek. If you move backward in time then you are sure that you have the latest map for that block.
- The first few pages or two of a volume, which always appear in the upper left of possible pages, list the streets alphabetically, and within name by hundred block, and cross reference the sheet number. The sheet number is the actual physical map page that was digitized, that you want to find. In this case I finally found the street I wanted in
  - Philadelphia 1916-1929, Volume 7, 1918, Sheet 666. Here is what the relevant portion of the index or directory page looked like.

		SHEET
73	Fifteenth, N.,.....	1200-1338 *613
	" " .....	1201-1339 *614
72	" " .....	1400-1542 *627
	" " .....	1401-1535 *628
71	" " .....	1600-1755 640
70	" " .....	1800-1949 652
69	" " .....	2000-2163 666
68	" " .....	2200-2359 680
67	Fletcher, W.,.....	2500-2537 673

It tells me that I want sheet 666.

- So I go to sheet 666 by selecting that sheet number at the bottom right where it says **jump to sheet #**
- Once I am at the sheet I want I can scroll around, magnify and diminish, and so on. I **cannot** browse over to the adjoining sheet.
- To save your sheet click on **download map** at the top of the sheet. The page then comes up in Adobe pdf form.
- Click on the **save icon** (the image of the antiquated floppy disk) and save your pdf file.

You can print this out with Adobe Acrobat or Adobe Reader.

- Use another graphic program, or adobe, to select portions of that page and insert it into a document, and/or to print it out.
- It is often a good idea to also look at adjoining sheets, because you may find some interesting features. In this case, just south of the target block was a large cemetery. That is now playing fields for Temple University, and a school.
- Pay attention on the sheet to features like the **north arrow** and the **distance scale**.
- The following pages show you all of sheet 666, the detail for the streetblock of interest, and the page for the adjoining sheet to the south, showing the cemetery.
- Because these are digitized black and white images of what are color coded maps, some details you may not be able to make out. For example at the southwest corner of the 2000 block on North 15<sup>th</sup> Street there is some variety of nonresidential landuse. Because it was a dark color on the digitized map, you cannot make out what it was. The best bet here, if the location is in Philadelphia, is to go to the Urban Archives (Basement, Paley), and ask a librarian to show you the original map.







