

Mapping through History, History Through Mapping

Ezra Haber Glenn

MAPA Chapter Librarian/Planning Historian

Introduction: Back before ESRI (and even before McHarg...)

When I was an intern working in the City of Somerville Planning Department, I remember sneaking back to the attic to check out the City's old collection of hand-drawn and manually updated Sanborn fire insurance maps. The books—folio size, decrepitly bound, musty-smelling—were beautiful masterpieces, each page a labor of love, or at least a sobering harbinger of a very different time.

Old maps have always fascinated me, from the wildly imaginative medieval *Mapa Mundi* to the rationally-regular quadrants of the USGS system. They also help us remember the (once obvious) relationship between data and maps: in the days before GIS, geographic data was something to be surveyed, not downloaded, and changes and updates represented real time spent interacting with one's data. These maps remind us to be grateful for our professional inheritance: we stand on the shoulders of giants, planners who diligently created and intimately understood the data they worked with.

In this short article I will describe three common types of land use maps from the pre-GIS era. Each description also indicates where planners today can access these historic maps in digital form.

Sanborn Maps: they did it by hand

These maps were produced for over 100 years, starting in 1867, to document land uses and building types in many of our nation's cities. The maps were used primarily by fire insurance companies to assess risk (hence some wonderful detail related to construction materials, means of egress, flammable storage, etc.). The ones I've encountered were mostly hand-drawn and hand-colored, with one truly amazing feature: they were updated from time to time to reflect changes by physically cutting and pasting slips of paper directly onto the maps. For some locations the update slips could be three or more layers deep. Thus, to trace the history of a particular site, one need only (carefully!) peel back the layers to learn, for example, that what is now a playground was once a fire-station, and before that a smelting factory, before that a lumber yard, before that an enclosed feed lot.

Now available on-line for many communities (for a fee, typically paid by the local library), check out sanborn.umi.com. Unfortunately, these digitized maps are

only available in black & white (they are scanned in from older b&w microfilm, not from the original color maps).

USGS Maps: they did it on foot (and mule and canoe...)

Starting in 1879, field workers from the US Geological Survey covered nearly every inch of our then-growing country to survey and map it. Instituting a regular system of mapping standards, the survey produced an astonishingly regular and consistent map set of an incredibly varied and wild land. (The Survey's most popular map set—the 7.5 minute 1:24,000 scale topographic maps—includes over 55,000 maps and took over 50 years to complete).

These maps played a crucial role in helping our country's nascent profession of land use and environmental planning get a handle on the its subject matter. The bureau's second director, John Wesley Powell, was instrumental in arguing for the creation of these maps and the use of them to bring about wiser land use policy towards the "arid lands" of the American West. (For real fun, read the journals his explorations of the Colorado and Green rivers: carrying 19th-century surveyors tools, this Civil-War amputee scurries and shimmies his way to the measurements he needs.)

Today USGS are continually updated and available in a variety of printed and digital forms. For a glimpse of the original maps in their hand-colored (and faded) glory, visit the on-line collection of New Hampshire's Dimond Library at docs.unh.edu/nhtopos/nhtopos.htm (New England only). The USGS published a great history of their department last years as well, available on-line at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/2004/1274>.

Panoramic Maps: before we had axionemetrix bells and whistles

A third category of historical map—one in which the cartography blends easily into artwork—is the panoramic map. Dating from the late 1800s and early 1900s, these maps typically depict a town center, a harbor, a river vista, or even an industrial area, viewed from above at an angle (as if from a high peak or balloon ride). These maps can be more or less stylized, but typically attempt to represent the lay of the land as a photograph (or perhaps a lithograph) might have looked, showing roads, buildings, topography, and natural features to a projected scale. What's amazing, of course, is that they are hand drawn, and done so without the aid of the cartographer actually being located at the (often impossible) point of view.

All the complex and complicated formulas and projections now done by computer and measured in gigawhatevers were done by hand and mind, and done both accurately and beautifully. Decades and centuries from

now, when most of our laser-printed and foam-cored GIS maps are nothing more than land-fill, panoramic maps will still provide beautiful windows to the past.

To view some, visit the Library of Congress's Panormaic Map collection—over 1,500 in all—at memory.loc.gov/ammem/pmhtml/panhome.html. The site also has links to many other historic maps.

Postscript: In conducting the research for this article, I was surprised to learned that D. A. Sanborn, father of the Sanborn map, actually got his start in Somerville, Massachusetts. Perhaps somewhere, in those musty hand-drawn maps (or their digitized representations on c.d. in City Hall) we can locate a wood-frame 2-1/2 story house where he got his start in the years following the Civil War.

The Massachusetts Tree Wardens' & Foresters' Association Planning Session

by Chantell Wead

The Massachusetts Tree Wardens' & Foresters' Association was established in 1913 and is the oldest protection agency of its kind in the United States. To mark the milestone of their upcoming 100th birthday the MTWFA wished to define its future through a ten-year growth and development outline and a detailed five-year plan of action. On June 8, 2005 the Massachusetts Tree Wardens' & Foresters' Association (MTWFA) met for a full-day planning session to review their mission, objectives, purpose, and goals. The meeting was attended by the Executive Board, President Marc R. Welch of MTWFA; Eric Seaborn, Acting Urban Forestry Coordinator for Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR); Roger Hammond, Director of Public Works and Tree Warden of the Town of Grafton; a representative from the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission; and, the speaker coordinator Larry Morrison.

The first subject addressed was the budget; looking at each avenue of income and spending habits. A strong point of interest was the a reliance on a Federal grant and the "what if" scenario of what would happen if that grant was no longer available. Where else could they look for funding

sources? Perhaps they could look for other sources in membership and other grants.

The next matter of concern was membership. Active members reaching the number 353, but only 2/3 of that number attend meetings. MTWFA looking for ways to increase membership either by implementing new strategies or expanding already currant outreach programs. Some current outreach methods include having regular and corporate membership, web page access, a company directory and referrals by phone. Overall, MTWFA wants to ensure it is reaching out to the public adequately by making sure people know they are an important resource to the community.

Another area of concern was the influence and relevance MTWFA has among the communities in Massachusetts. The underlining feeling at the planning session was that a lot of communities don't take the Tree Warden position seriously and often give the position to unqualified persons. It wants to look for ways to increase influence in a positive light among the communities. One important way they could do that is work on the message they are sending to the masses. What should its mission statement be now versus what it was 100 years ago? What were the issues then and what are they now? Are some of the questions posed during the planning session for a new revised mission statement and purpose?

Over a hundred years ago, Tree Wardens came into existence for the protection of trees and the threat of deforestation because of farming. Trees were important then for offering shade and curbing erosion. Today trees are important for those very same reasons with the added benefits of helping with noise and air pollution. Furthermore, we are still dealing with the threat of deforestation, not through farming as it was 100 years ago, but rather the danger of over development. MTWFA hopes to have more constructive influence in helping communities plan with green infrastructure in mind, having trees on the roadside with smaller roads to help slow down traffic, to beautify the area, provide shade and help with radiated heat from the pavement, and help as well with noise and air pollution.

The MTWFA is optimistic that they can revise there mission statement, purpose, and goals to embody the issues of today and incorporate them with the MTWFA's goal, which is the care and preservation of trees. They look further still to reaffirm their role in the communities by working interchangeable with other associations that have a similar message of concern for the environment. Being the oldest protection agency in the United States, MTWFA is determined to ensure its legacy by continuing vital work and taking on today's issues head on.