

# Mapping Our Ancestors - Part I

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Old World Auctions

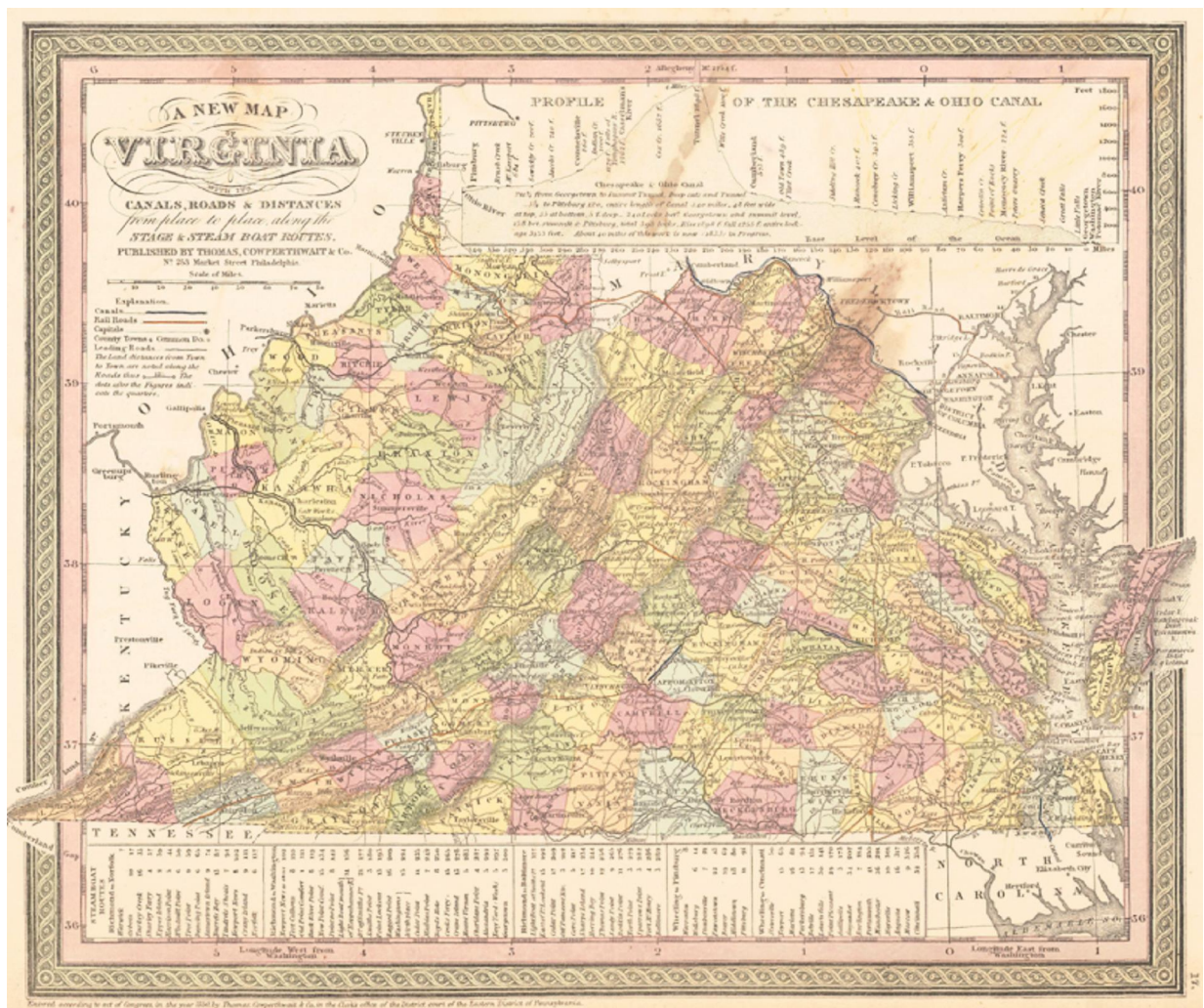
Genealogy has become a hot topic in the last decade, with a number of television shows, websites, and societies now dedicated to helping people uncover their family history. While many genealogists use birth and death certificates, census forms, passenger ship lists, military records, cemetery records, school records, and other documents to trace their ancestors, the use of maps in genealogical research is often overlooked. Yet maps offer a wealth of information about our ancestors, the way they lived, and where and how they migrated. Maps give us a visual understanding of our ancestors' towns, the interconnection of places around them, and the physical barriers they encountered. Maps can even help reinvigorate a search that has stalled due to missing court records, giving clues about where those records may have moved.

Although there is an abundance of information on maps to aid in genealogical research, the key is to determine which types of maps to use and where to find them. In general, the types of maps can be divided into two categories: commercially published maps and government issued maps. This article is the first in a two-part series on using maps in genealogical research, and will focus on commercially published maps. (And although many of us have families that currently or previously lived outside of the United States, this series will focus on using US-based map sources. Nevertheless, many of the same principals, techniques, and sources are still relevant for conducting research in other countries.)

Of course any genealogical research must begin with a list of family names, where they lived, and when they lived there. Once family records and court documents have been thoroughly reviewed, you can use maps to get a more comprehensive understanding of your ancestors' world and to verify information or fill in any missing gaps. The next step, however, is figuring out what question you are trying to answer. Do you want to know how or why your ancestor moved from one city to another? Do you want to locate missing court records? Do you want a better understanding of the neighborhood or town in which your family lived? Did your ancestor suddenly disappear from a town, and you want to identify where they may have moved? Once you have articulated your question, you can determine what type of map will reveal clues. The answers to these questions can be found on many commercially produced maps in the late eighteenth to twentieth centuries. These maps were published in atlases, emigrant guides, geography books, magazines, newspapers, and gazetteers, as well as separate pocket maps and broadsides. The types of commercially produced maps that are most useful in genealogical research are: county maps and atlases; emigrant, traveler and railroad maps; and fire insurance maps. Each of these types of maps offers different information and can help answer different questions that arise when investigating family histories.

## State and County Maps and Atlases

Throughout the history of the United States, the names and locations of cities, counties, and states have experienced numerous changes. Even if a family has lived on the same property for decades, over time that property may have been situated in multiple different counties or states depending on shifts in boundary lines. And even more commonly, the township in which the property was located may have been renamed one or more times over the years. Fortunately, American atlases document the place names and boundary lines of states and counties in a given year. These maps also typically identify the county seat, where records would have been held, and transportation routes, such as roads, railroads, rivers, and canals. The majority of these atlases were published between 1830-1890 and are one of the most useful resources for researching ancestors from that time period.



Thomas Cowperthwait & Co., *A New Map of Virginia with Its Canals, Roads & Distances from Place to Place, Along the Stage & Steam Boat Routes*, 1850. Image courtesy of Old World Auctions.

For instance, I was told that my great-great-grandfather, James Fairfax Payne, was born in Point Pleasant in Bland County, Virginia in 1848, but I couldn't locate his birth certificate. Looking at a map of Virginia published in 1850 by Thomas, Cowperthwait & Company's -- *A New Map of Virginia with Its Canals, Roads & Distances* -- I can see that Bland County did not exist at the time of his birth, but was created from parts of Tazewell, Giles, and Wythe Counties. This information would lead me to search for records in Parisburg, Wythville, and Jeffersonville, the county seats at the time. Since I also knew that my great-great-grandfather died in Alma in Robeson County, North Carolina, and that several of his children were born in Monroe in Union County, North Carolina, I could use the map of Virginia in conjunction with a map of North Carolina from the same time period to determine how he may have traveled from one place to another.



John McDuffie, *Map of Robeson County N.C. 1884 Made from Actual Surveys, 1884.* Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

Maps and atlases of individual counties can also be found, and these include details that can paint a clear picture of an ancestor's surroundings. County maps show smaller roads and trails, townships and their boundaries, plats of land, landowner names, cemeteries, government buildings (i.e., court houses), churches, and local businesses. County atlases often also include maps of individual townships, which show the

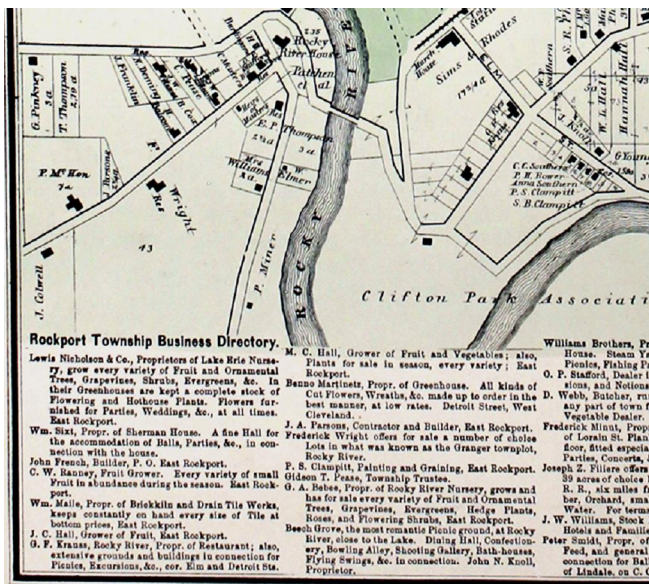
individual streets and buildings in the town, along with the names of the businesses and property owners. As luck would have it, the North Carolina State Archives has a manuscript map of Robeson County from 1884, which was 14 years before my great-great-grandfather's death. Although the map doesn't name the town of Alma, I knew the town was along the western border of the county. Property owners are named throughout the map, and the name "Mc.Rae" appeared numerous times along the western border. James Fairfax Payne married Emily MacRae in 1874. In fact, to this day most of my relatives have the middle name of Fairfax or MacRae (including my father and my brother). So now I had even figured out why my great-great-grandfather traveled from Point Pleasant, Virginia, to Alma, North Carolina -- to be close to his wife's family.



**BEVERLY MANOR.**

NAME.	Date of settlement.	Nativity.	Postoffice.	Occupation.
Lewis Harman.....	1845	Virginia.....	Giant's Mills.....	Farmer and stock-raiser.
R. S. Harnsberger.....	1838	Virginia.....	Staunton.....	Farmer and stock-raiser.
W. W. Lyon.....	1879	England.....	Staunton.....	Farming and market gardening.
C. J. Colner.....	1847	Augusta county, Va.....	Swoope.....	Farmer and stock-dealer.
S. L. Cook.....	1844	Augusta county, Va.....	Swoope.....	Farmer and stock-raiser.
W. F. Summerson.....	1847	Augusta county, Va.....	Swoope.....	Farming and stock-dealer.
John M. Brown.....	1830	Augusta county, Va.....	Swoope.....	Farmer and stock-grower.
Jacob Bowman.....	1835	Augusta county, Va.....	Arbor Hill.....	Farming and milling.
Capt. E. A. Falcher.....	1865	Henrico county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Farmer and distillery.
Hugh F. Lyle.....	1876	Rockbridge county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Manufacture of plows.
Arch Kinney.....	1838	Augusta county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Farmer.
Robert Cochran.....	1836	Augusta county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Farmer and stock-keeper.
Mrs. T. K. Menefee.....	1872	Botetourt county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Farming.
C. T. Palmer.....	1862	Rockingham county, Va.....	Arbor Hill.....	Merchant and farmer.
D. W. Speck.....	1857	Augusta county, Va.....	Arbor Hill.....	Farming.
W. H. Green.....	1876	Ireland.....	Staunton.....	Farming.
George G. Hanger.....	1864	Augusta county, Va.....	Arbor Hill.....	F'm'r, saw-mill & steam thresher.
Rev. C. F. Fry.....	1824	Augusta county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Farm'r & missionary colporteur.
John Towberman.....	1824	Augusta county, Va.....	Mint Spring.....	Farmer and stock-grower.
David Henkel.....	1862	Rockingham county, Va.....	Mint Spring.....	Merchant.
I. W. Gilkison.....	1840	Augusta county, Va.....	Mint Spring.....	Physician and surgeon.
Col. J. C. Cochran.....	1824	Augusta county, Va.....	Folly Mills.....	Farmer and stock-grower.
A. D. Tribbett.....	1867	Rockbridge county, Va.....	Folly Mills.....	Owner of grist-mill.
Mrs. M. L. Gay.....	1845	Greenbrier county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Farming.
William C. Geiger.....	1845	Augusta county, Va.....	Staunton.....	Farmer and former teacher in deaf and dumb school.

Both images above from: Waterman, Watkins & Co., *Historical Atlas of Augusta County, Virginia*, 1885. Images courtesy of Old World Auctions.



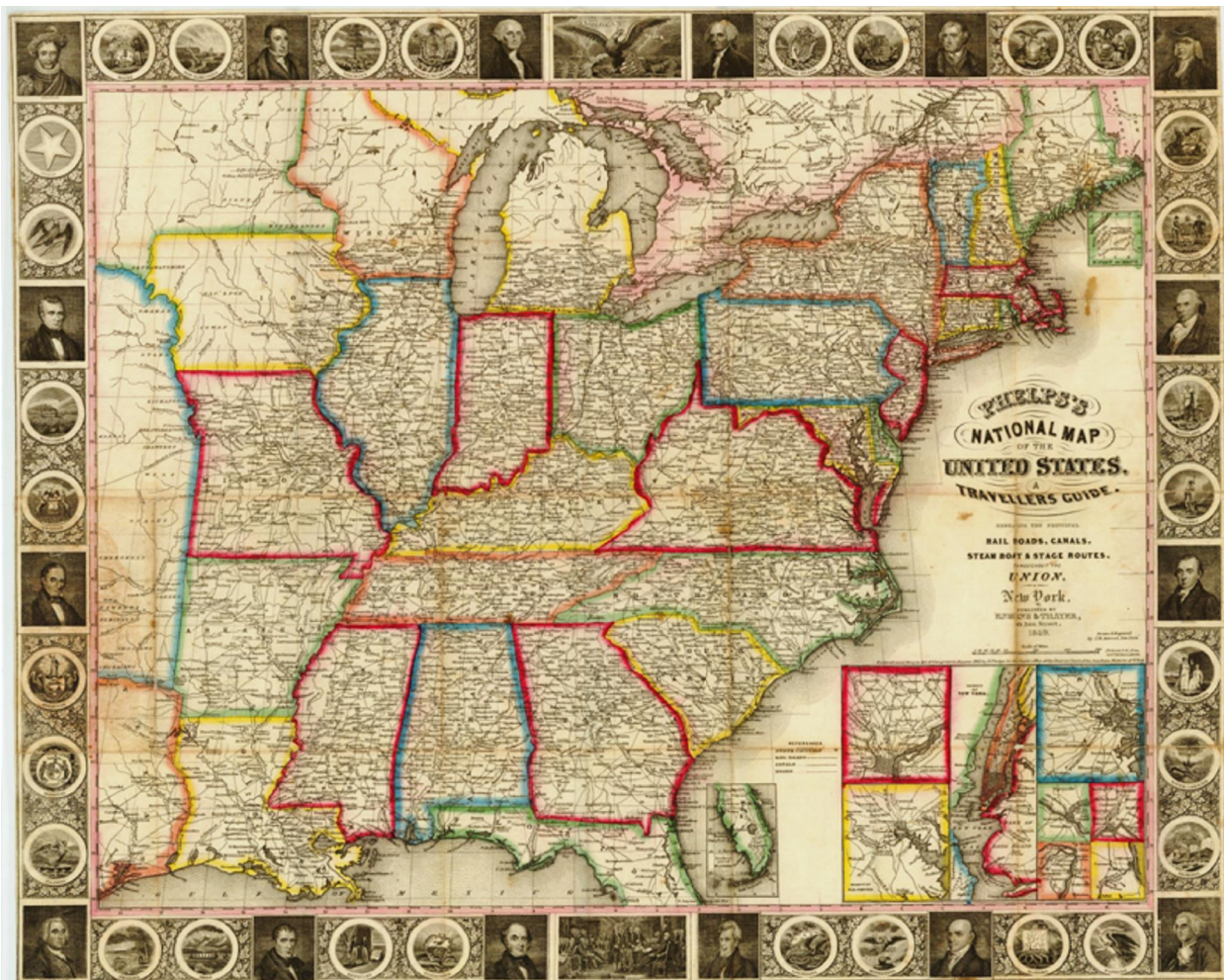
Both images above from: Titus, Simmons & Titus, *Atlas of Cuyahoga County Ohio from Actual Surveys by and Under the Directions of D.J. Lake, C.E.*, 1874. Images courtesy of Old World Auctions.

State and county atlases can also offer additional information that can help you understand an ancestor's place and time. They often include a historical overview of the state or county, along with economic, agricultural, topographical, and cultural details. Some include engravings or photos of local public buildings, businesses, or even homesteads. And most of these atlases will include an index listing local businesses, cities and towns, streets, and occasionally a list of subscribers (individuals who ordered advance copies of the atlas). Advertisements from businesses are also often found at the end of state and county atlases, which show the types of jobs that were available in the area, the cost of goods at the time, and what was important in their society.

Entire atlases, as well as individual atlas maps, can be found digitized on the internet. Two of the best resources for US-based material are the Library of Congress Geography & Map Division (<https://www.loc.gov/maps/>) and the David Rumsey Map Collection (<https://www.davidrumsey.com/>), which have massive, searchable, digitized collections. Many state and university libraries have excellent map collections of their state or region, often with a portion that has been digitized. Starting your search online is a good strategy, as it can help you identify what is available and where to find it. If the county or township you are researching is not available online, you will need to visit a library in the state to locate the right maps within their non-digitized collection.

### **Emigrant, Traveler & Railroad Maps**

Even though travel was much more cumbersome 200 years ago, our forebears moved around quite a bit, whether for family, new job opportunities, or the prospect of land ownership. Publishers were eager to provide guidebooks and maps advising where to go and how to get there. The number of emigrant related maps and books exploded in the United States in the nineteenth century, encouraging people to move west. Most of the maps in this category depicted either the entire United States or a large region within the US. As a result, the maps included little to no detail at the county level, and often only identified the major cities in each state. The main focus of these maps was the transportation network of roads, wagon roads, trails, railroads, railroad stations, rivers, and canals. They also typically included information, either on the map itself or in the adjoining book, on why an emigrant would want to move to a new city and what resources would help them on their journey. As a result, these sources contained information on mines and natural resources, climate, vegetation, farms, forts, and provisioning stations. In the early nineteenth century emigrant and traveler maps were sold and distributed by speculators hoping to sell land and map publishers capitalizing on the increasing interest in settling the west. Later in the century railroad companies, steamboat companies, local business, and even municipal and state governments began issuing maps.



Phelps, Ensigns & Thayer, *Phelps's National Map of the United States, a Travellers Guide. Embracing the Principal Rail Roads, Canals, Steam Boat & Stage Routes, Throughout the Union*, 1849. Image courtesy of Old World Auctions.

Of course, you have to take into consideration the fact that these maps and guidebooks were "marketing" tools. The bounty of the resources and opportunities that could be found out west was sometimes overstated, and the maps sometimes showed roads or railroads that were incomplete or simply projected. Regardless, they give clues as to why an ancestor may have moved from one city to another and what route they may have taken. Because travel in the nineteenth century was so difficult and time-consuming, many settlers made multiple stops along their journey. Whether due to births, deaths, or lack of money to continue a journey, many settlers set down roots at these waypoints, leaving a trail of records along the way. Emigrant, traveler and railroad maps can help identify where ancestors may have stopped, and therefore where more information about their lives might be found.



Images above and below from: Rand McNally & Co., *Map of the Chicago Burlington and Quincy Railroad and Its Connections*, 1878. Images courtesy of Old World Auctions.

Other bonus material that can be found in these maps and guidebooks include census data, railroad and steamboat routes and timetables, business listings, and advertisements. Many also included illustrations of buildings and important sites or bird's-eye views of cities. Guidebooks in particular featured additional information on natural resources, the surrounding landscape, and descriptions of local towns. In addition to being published in guidebooks, emigrant, traveler, and railroad maps were published separately as well, often as pocket maps.

**CHICAGO**  
B **BURLINGTON**  
**AND QUINCY R. R.**

ITEMS OF INFORMATION  
— FOR —

### Excursionists and Emigrants to the Pacific Coast.

**FOR EXCURSIONISTS.**

The **UNION AND CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROADS** will entertain propositions for Excursion Parties at the following rates:

**OMAHA TO SAN FRANCISCO AND RETURN.**

In Parties of 10.....each \$180 00	In Parties of 40.....each \$150 00
“ 15.....“ 175 00	“ 45.....“ 145 00
“ 20.....“ 170 00	“ 50.....“ 140 00
“ 25.....“ 165 00	“ 55.....“ 135 00
“ 30.....“ 160 00	“ 60 to 75...“ 130 00
“ 35.....“ 155 00	

These rates are available for such organizations as Free Masons, Odd Fellows, Religious, Medical, Scientific, and other Associations; for Hunting and Fishing Parties, Tourists, Pleasure and Health Seekers, who may organize parties in the same neighborhood.

All arrangements for Excursions to California must be made in advance with the General Ticket Department at Omaha, and a full list of names furnished, with proposed date of departure from this point.

In all cases, Excursion Tickets to points beyond Ogden and Salt Lake must be purchased at Omaha, as only the issues of the Union Pacific Company will be recognized for Excursions over the Central Pacific. These tickets will not be transferable, and will be limited to thirty, sixty or ninety days, according to previous arrangement. The number of Excursionists for each train is limited to seventy-five.

**FOR EMIGRANTS.**

Between Chicago and Omaha, Emigrants are carried on first-class trains, with second-class privileges. The accommodations furnished second-class and emigrant passengers are good coaches nicely cushioned, well warmed in winter, and well ventilated in summer.

West of Omaha, the Union and Central Pacific Railroads furnish emigrant passengers the use of comfortable coaches, with cushioned seats, plenty of room, and nearly all the comforts that attend their first-class trains, except in point of time and sleeping cars.

The time from Omaha to San Francisco by emigrant train is about nine days, giving this class of passengers much more opportunity for seeing the country than is afforded on trains making quicker time. Sleeping cars are not run on these trains.

The difference in time taken for the trip from Omaha to San Francisco, between first-class and emigrant trains, is usually about four days.

Emigrants' movables go on the same train with the passengers from Omaha, through freight cars being attached for this purpose.

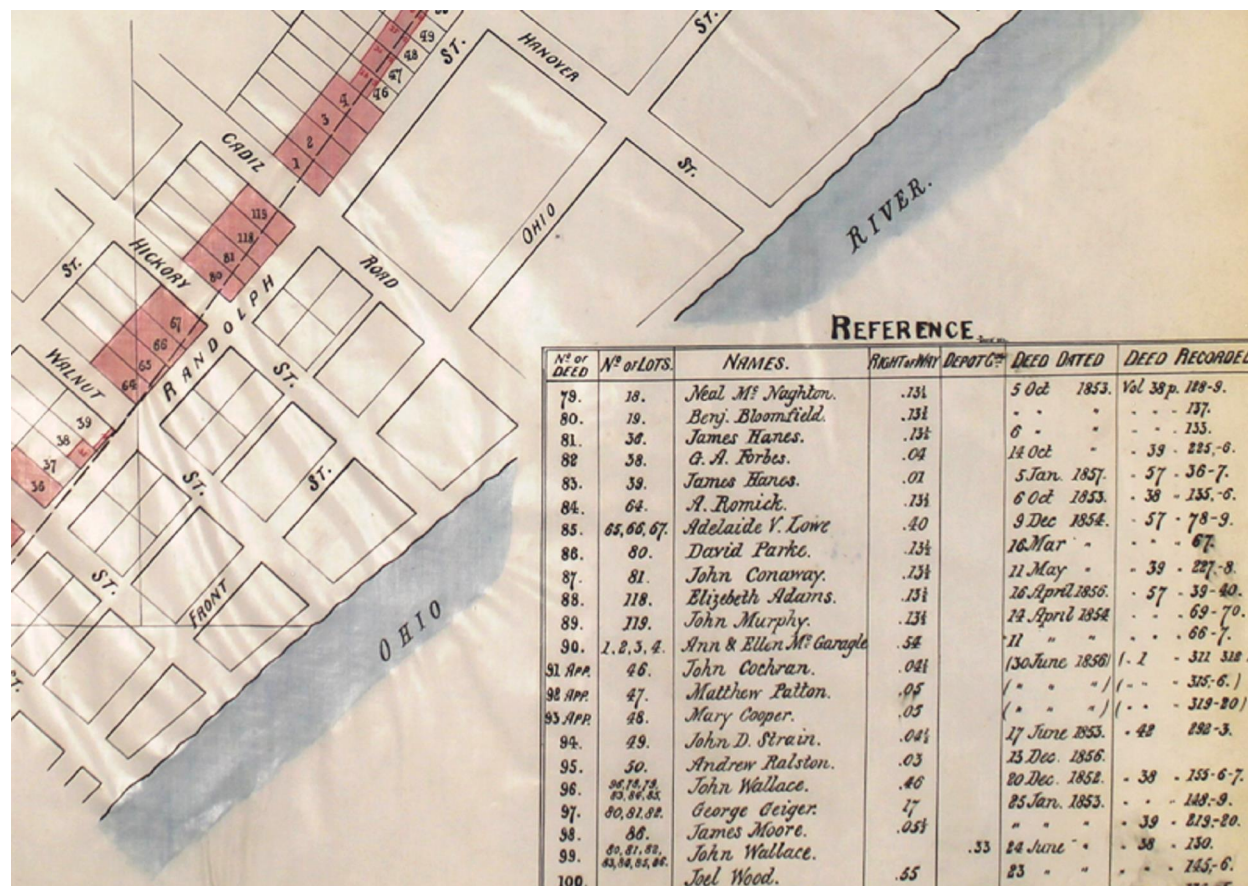
No cars are chartered by any line for transportation of passengers to points west of Omaha, as the Union and Central Pacific Railroads exact of every passenger traveling over their roads a ticket sold at regular schedule rates, without reference to the number traveling in one party, or a body. All roads doing business with these roads are rigidly held up to this rule, no deviation being allowed under any circumstances.

In case a party of thirty, or upwards, are traveling together, there will be no difficulty in securing a special car for the use of the party, without extra cost above the price of tickets; but, as said before, no reduction can be made on account of numbers.

It is always the better plan to secure tickets as near your starting point as possible, as by that means you may save money, and be sure of getting them by the **CHICAGO, BURLINGTON & QUINCY RAILROAD**, between Chicago and Omaha.

See that your tickets read by way of this route.  
For Rates of Fare and other information apply in person or by letter,  
**To Ass't Gen'l Passenger Agent C., B. & Q. R. R., Chicago.**

Although not sold to the public, railroad companies also created detailed maps to show land grants and right-of-way passage for every piece of land through which their rail lines extended. These maps give similar information as the township maps found in county atlases. Individual towns are shown in great detail, including streets, landowners, and businesses. The Library of Congress has a large repository of railroad maps and atlases, only a small portion of which have been digitized.

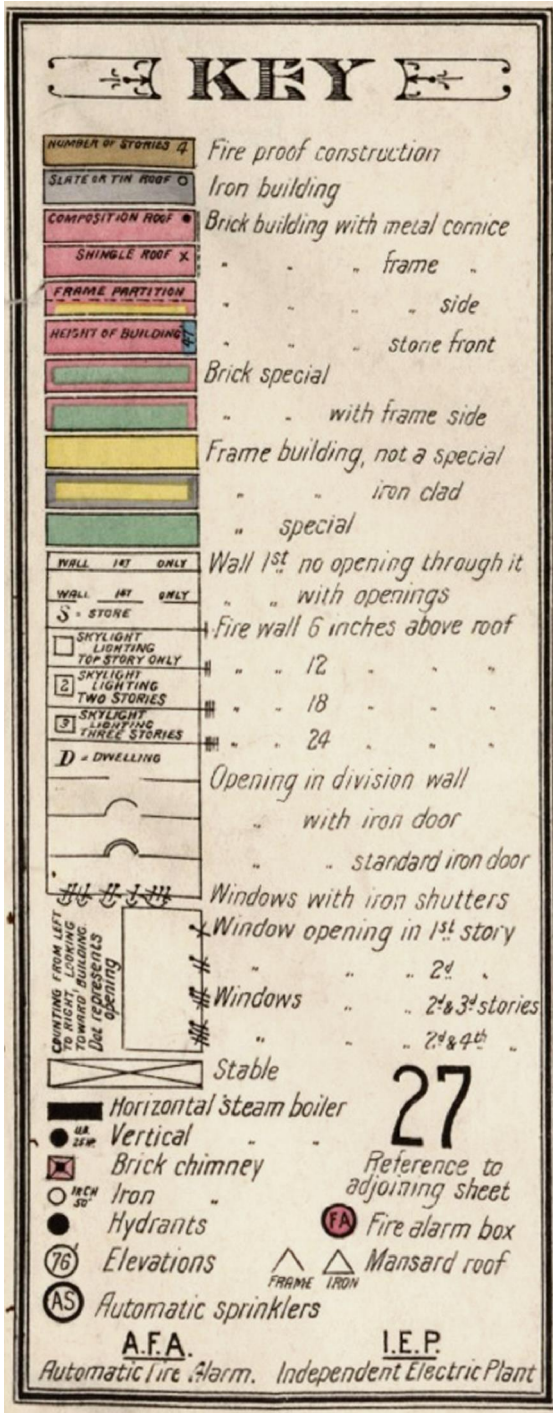


Cleveland & Pittsburgh Railroad, Cleveland & Pittsburgh Railroad River Division & Tuscarawas Branch, 1865. Image courtesy of Old World Auctions.

### Fire Insurance Maps

If you have the street address or tax assessor's number for one of your ancestors, fire insurance maps can give you a sense of your ancestor's dwelling and neighborhood. Following the Civil War, insurance companies in the United States began preparing maps of individual buildings in urbanized areas exclusively for insurance assessment purposes. As individual insurance companies found it too expensive and time-consuming to create these maps themselves, an industry of insurance mapping companies evolved. The most successful of these companies in the US was the Sanborn Map Company, which created over 700,000 individual map sheets between 1866 and 1977 covering over 12,000 US cities.



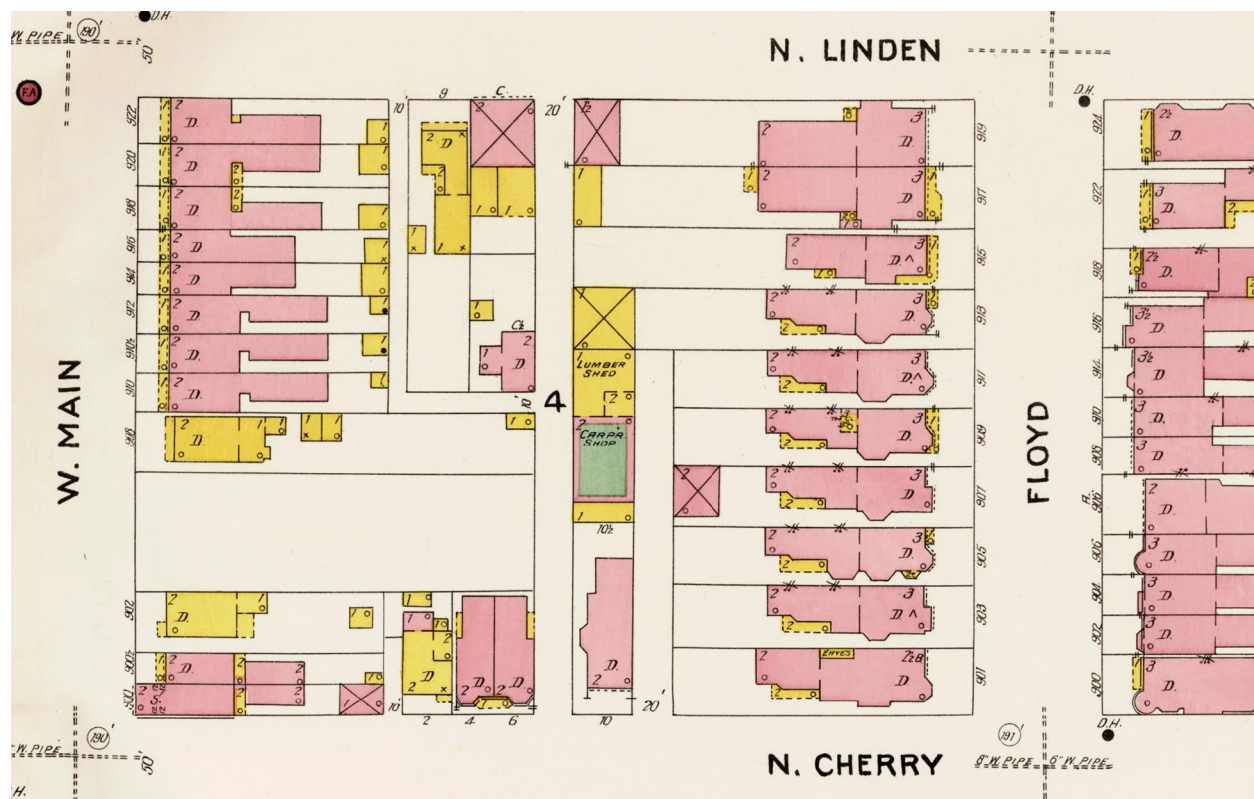


Drawn on a scale of 50 feet to 1 inch, fire insurance maps show the layout of the city, street names, individual buildings, the primary use of a building (dwelling, business, public building, etc.), the construction material of the building, and other details of the building, such as passageways, porches, and the existence of a basement or attic. One of the reasons for the popularity of the Sanborn maps was the company's use of standardized symbols, colors and abbreviations, which were explained in an extensive legend and allowed the maps to be both aesthetically appealing and filled with detail. Sanborn published atlases of individual cities and towns, and often included special indexes listing major businesses, public buildings, factories, and other large structures.

Fire insurance maps do have a more limited use in genealogical research, as they only cover urban areas and require you to know the street or parcel on which your ancestor lived. However, using fire insurance maps in combination with deeds, city directories, or federal census records can give you an overview of the composition and size of your ancestor's dwelling, as well as insight into the economic and social landscape of their community.

(Image at left from: Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps Richmond Virginia*, 1905. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.)

The Library of Congress has acquired nearly the entire collection of Sanborn fire insurance maps, with over 25,000 sheets already available online. The Library's goal is to have 500,000 Sanborn maps digitized by 2020. These maps can also be found in local municipalities or courts, where they are used for road, utility and building construction.



Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps Richmond Virginia*, 1905. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.

### Tips on Using Commercial Maps in Genealogical Research

Although maps can offer valuable information regarding your ancestors, the first step is to identify names, places and dates through documents or oral histories. The next step is to identify what additional information you need to better understand your ancestors. Depending on what information you already have and what you want to know, you can select the appropriate type of map aid in your research. Regardless of which type of map you use, there are several tips that will help you analyze the map.

1. Note any publication or copyright dates on the map. Although these dates will be generally correct, the cartography on the map may not reflect the exact year that is stated on the map, as a specific map may have been issued in multiple years without any updates. This is particularly true for early to mid-nineteenth century maps due to frequently changing boundary lines and the high cost of re-engraving maps to reflect changes. Particularly with state maps, using examples from several different publishers from the same 5-10 year period will give you a more accurate view of the towns, counties and roads.
2. Once you have found the exact location of an ancestor's town or property on a map, it is a good idea to record the latitude and longitude of the location, particularly for reference for future generations. Note the prime meridian indicated on the map, as it may not be the same as what is used today. The

Greenwich Meridian was not adopted until 1884, so a bit of math and comparing the map with a program like Google Earth may be required to determine the exact longitude.

3. Always pay attention to the symbols used on a map, in particular when analyzing a fire insurance map, and note that they are not always drawn to scale. Some maps will have a legend directly on the map itself, while others may only have a general legend listed for the entire atlas.
4. Oftentimes property owner names on maps are limited to the last name, or first initial and last name. Using the map in combination with census data, deeds, or other public records will help you find and confirm first names. Renters are also usually not named on maps, so census data is critical in determining the names and locations of renters.

Although this article on using commercial maps in genealogical research is certainly not exhaustive, it will help you get started on your quest to uncover your family history. What better way to enjoy and appreciate maps than to use them to understand your own history. Stay tuned for Part II of *Mapping Our Ancestors*, which will focus on how to use government issued maps.

## References

Kashuba, Melinda, *Walking with your Ancestors*, Cincinnati, OH, 2005.

Ristow, Walter W., *American Maps and Mapmakers*, Detroit, Michigan, 1985.