



The Family Business Researcher

RomaMaryGrace.com

michelle@romamarygrace.com

A Genealogist's Guide to Sanborn Maps

Sanborn Map Details & Abbreviations

- 1867-1977
- 50,000 maps with 700,000 individual sheets
- 21 x 25 in. Maps with Scale: 50 feet = 1 inch
- Color-coded according to construction material
- Used by insurance companies to assess fire risk for properties
- Primarily commercial buildings & churches; some residential

Common abbreviations:

Dw or D= dwelling

S= store

Sal= saloon

B & S = boot & shoe

Clo= clothing

D.G. =dry goods

Gro=grocery

Whol=wholesale

Rest= restaurant

W. Ho.= warehouse

outside = street address

inside = dimensions / stories

Hash marks on exterior walls = windows,
sometimes # of glass panes

For full list see Source List on page 4.

Daniel Alfred Sanborn founded the longest lasting and most successful fire insurance company in 1867, mapping more than 12,000 U.S. cities. Sanborn Maps exist for many small and almost every large city in the U.S. and some in Canada and Mexico. Anywhere buildings were insured against fire, Sanborn mapped. Other companies existed, as do their maps, but Sanborn quickly became and remained the industry standard into the 1970s.

The maps can be as useful for family historians, providing detailed information of cities and towns across the United States. The maps were drawn by hand, and revised as needed, charting changes. Go to your local library and see these gems in person!

The original maps were very large, but in the 1950s the map books decreased in size to make them easier to publish. Inside the cover of the smaller editions is an excellent guide to their use. It has been digitized by the Penn State University Library [here](#).



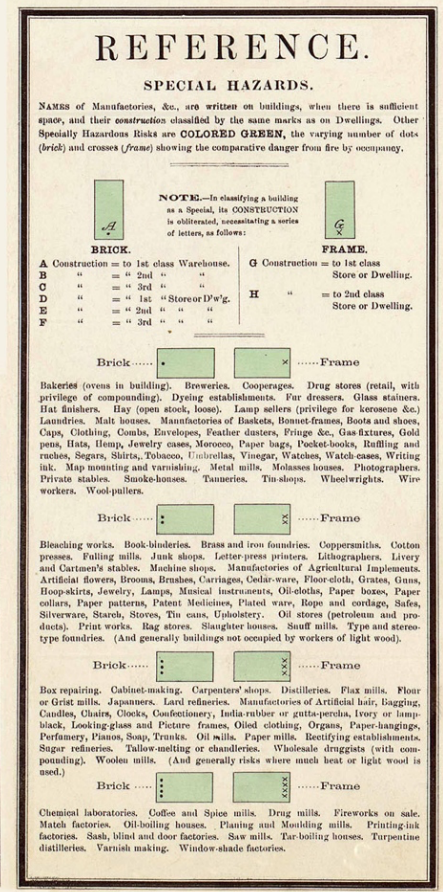
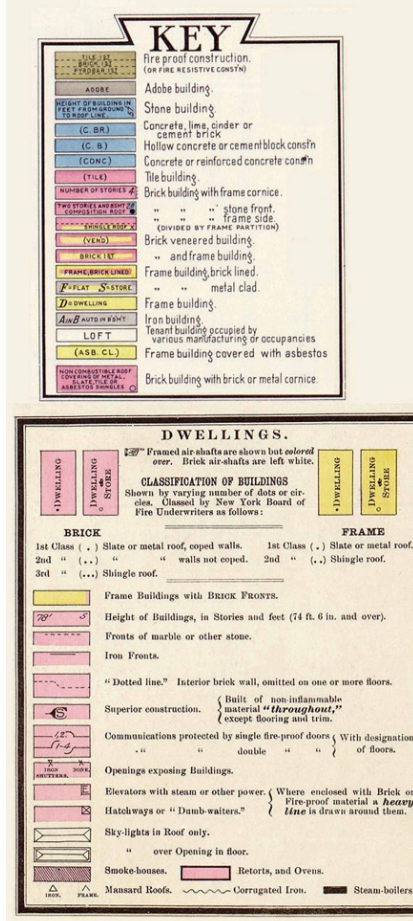
The Family Business Researcher

RomaMaryGrace.com

michelle@romamarygrace.com

Michelle's Tips

- Maps include a key, street & map index, expanded city center map, and details such as equipment necessary for firefighting (e.g., phones, guards & water sources).
- Sanborn maps sometimes include genealogy gems such as the name of the company or business owner, as well as date of construction.
- There are some differences in the large city maps versus a small town. Both are worthwhile, but if you are researching NYC, you will need to have an idea of the location because each set of maps are organized in volumes. Start with vol. 1 and review the index map to locate your neighborhood, then go to that volume. Take a look at the contiguous maps to get a feel of the neighborhood.
- When did an addition, garage, or second floor get added to this house? Building changes might tell you when the family grew, took in boarders or other relatives. Coupled with city directories you can discover who lived in the house and when/if others of working age lived with your relatives.
- Comparing different years of maps can help you to understand your ancestor's neighborhood or city and may provide clues to city changes that affected their lives such as the construction of a new school, church or interstate highway.
- Compare maps with available photos. This is especially helpful if your ancestor lived in town or owned a downtown business. Parade photos are a favorite resource!





The Family Business Researcher

RomaMaryGrace.com

michelle@romamarygrace.com

7. Because of copyright restrictions, you will likely need to search more than one location to find all the maps of an area. See below for sources.
8. Check out this website of Bloomington, IN current GIS map overlayed with 1907 Sanborn. If we could only have this for each of our towns!
<https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=840a5e5ecef14f839ba24d6c8029f542&extent=-86.5754,39.1551,-86.4935,39.1832>

SOURCES

1. Not sure if your ancestor's town was mapped? Check the comprehensive "union list" created by UC Berkeley Library.
https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/sanborn/sanborn_union_list.html
2. Need help discerning an abbreviation? Check this list from MIT:
https://web.mit.edu/thecity/resources/abbreviations_for_sanborn_maps.pdf
3. Best place to search? Go local. Check your library for access to the **ProQuest** (black & white) & **Historical Information Gatherers** – aka **FIMO** (mostly color) databases. Both hold the copyrights to modern Sanborn Maps.
4. Library of Congress database [includes all color maps that are no longer under copyright and lists those that are not online: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/?searchType=advanced>
5. State university libraries and archives provide some of the easiest access. Here are a few examples:

Univ of AL:

https://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/FireInsurance/1_County%20Index.html

Univ of Florida:

<https://ufdc.ufl.edu/results?filter=type%3Asingle%20map&filter=mediatype%3AMap&q=sanborn>

Univ of IN: <https://libraries.indiana.edu/union-list-sanborn-maps>

University of Kansas: <https://digital.lib.ku.edu/ku-sanborn/root>



RomaMaryGrace.com

michelle@romamarygrace.com

Missouri Digital Heritage:

https://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/mdh_splash/default.asp?coll=fireinsmaps

Univ of MO: <https://dl.mospace.umsystem.edu/mu/islandora/object/mu%3A138690>

Utah: <https://campusguides.lib.utah.edu/utahsanbornfireinsurancemaps>

6. Outside the United States. Sanborn was not the only fire insurance company. The Charles Goad company began in Canada and expanded into the UK, other European countries, and a few in the Middle East. Many exist, but are not readily available online.
 - a) Digitized Canadian maps (Goad & Sanborn)
<https://www.lib.uwo.ca/madgic/fipon.html>
 - b) Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection (Mexico)
<https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/mexico.html>
 - c) *A catalogue of fire insurance plans published by Chas. E. Goad Ltd, 1878-1970.* Old Hatfield, Hertfordshire, England: The Company, 1984.
 - d) *Catalogue of fire insurance plans of the Dominion of Canada, 1885-1973.* (1976). Distributed by Phelps Publishing.

7. Other online FREE sources

Digital Public Library (30,000+ maps) <https://dp.la/search?q=fire+insurance+maps>

Newberry <https://www.newberry.org/collection/research-guide/fire-insurance-maps>

Large collection csun.edu/map-library/collections/sanborns

Penn State digitized guide to Sanborn Map usage:

<https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/maps1/id/25563>

NOTES:

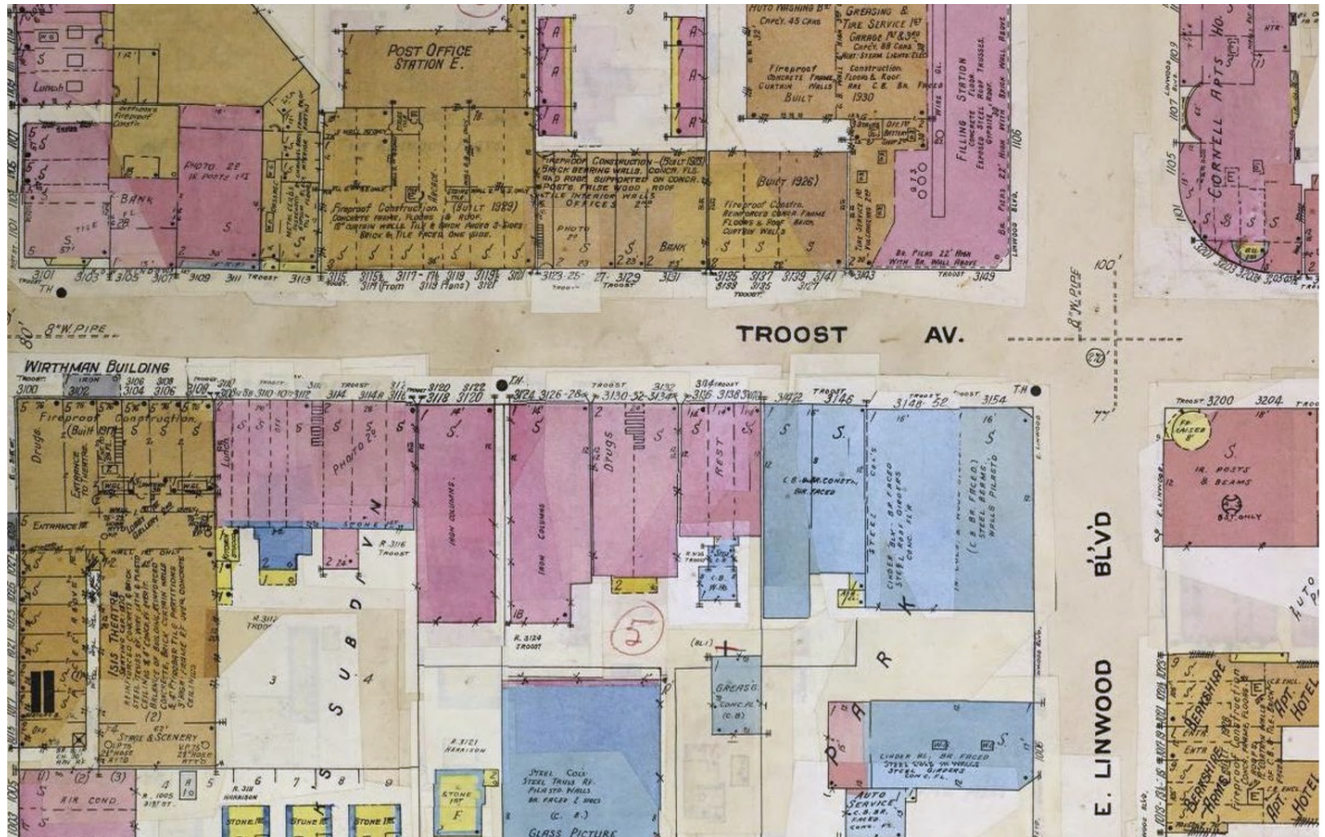


The Family Business Researcher

RomaMaryGrace.com

michelle@romamarygrace.com

Take a closer look. What do you see?



Troost Avenue, Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Kansas City, Jackson, Clay, and Platte Counties, Missouri. Sanborn Map Company, Vol. 4, 1909 - Feb 1951, Sheet 465. Library of Congress. Accessed online 14 Jul 2024 at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/?all=true&fa=location:missouri%7Clocation:kansas+city>