Maps: A "Must Have" Item for Genealogists

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Maps: A “Must Have” Item for Genealogists

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First I am going to cover parts of a map, then I’ll talk about kinds of maps and their uses in genealogy, where to find maps both in print and online, other map-related online sites, and the pros and cons of print versus online maps. The majority of the ideas in this talk came from handouts written by Mary Douglass, who is a map librarian at Seattle Public Library.
First I’m going to talk about the parts of a map. Scale is the ratio of distances on the map to the actual distances they represent. A scale of 1:24,000 means that 1 inch on the map represents 24,000 inches on the ground or an area approximately 6 miles by 8 miles. Maps with a smaller number to the right of the colon cover a, relatively speaking, smaller area in greater detail than maps with a larger number to the right of the colon do. A map with a scale of 1:250,000 covers an area about 100 miles by 120 miles with less detail.
Coordinates are points of latitude and longitude. Latitude is the distance north or south of the equator. Longitude is the east-west position of a point on the earth.
Latitude lines are always the same distance apart—they are parallels. Lines of longitude get closer together as they get nearer to the poles.
Projection is a system to transfer the latitudes and longitudes in order to render the curved surface of the Earth, which is three-dimensional, onto a two-dimensional piece of paper.
Relief is a representation of the elevation of the surface of the Earth. Here the elevation is represented by contours and spot heights.
The legend is the explanation for what symbols on the map mean.
There are many types of maps. A political map shows where the boundaries of countries, states, territories, and counties are. A person needs to know what territory or state a place was part of at a particular time in order to know where the records created at that time might be. There are exceptions to this as an early Nevada governor, Tasker Oddie, took the early state records to California and gave them to the Huntington Library. In this map, Nevada is part of Utah Territory.
This is a 1863 map. Now most of Nevada is Nevada Territory, land was added to the eastern boundary in 1862, and the southern tip is part of Arizona Territory.
This is a 1867 map. Nevada became a state in 1864, land has been added on the eastern boundary in 1866, and the southern tip is part of the state, which happened in 1867.
Thematic maps show a specific topic or theme. If a person’s ancestors were involved in a war, a person can look at maps of battles in that war. This is a map of the Battle of Gettysburg during the Civil War. If a person knows what regiment a person was in or what ship a sailor was on, they may be able to see what part that regiment or ship played in the battle. There are regimental histories online that talk about the part the regiment played in certain battles. There are also regimental timelines, and sometimes participation in a battle is shown by the name of the commanders of the different units. This map came from Library of Congress’s American Memory digital project. The National Archives also has maps of battles.
Suppose the patron knew where their relatives lived in Mechanicville, NY, in the 1880s, but they didn’t know what religion they were and wanted to look for church records. This panorama map, which shows how the town would look from the air, shows where the different churches were. People often went to the closest church, so this map could help them find the closest church. Any type of map that shows churches would work. It would also be possible to look up churches in a city directory and then look on a map to see where they were. This map is from Library of Congress’ American Memory Project.
Cadastral maps have to do with land ownership. One form of cadastral maps is plat maps, which show land boundaries and subdivisions. If a person knows his ancestor’s address, he can see exactly where they lived. Sometimes cadastral maps even have the names of landowners on them.
There are Sanborn insurance maps. They showed what buildings were where, and what those buildings were made of in order to determine insurance rates. If a person’s ancestor had a business, it may be possible to see where the business was. This is the index for the 1923 Sanborn maps of Las Vegas.

There is an agreement between the Library of Congress and Historical Information Gatherers that is a two year project to scan Sanborn and other fire insurance maps held in the Geography & Map Division that are in the public domain. HIG has generously permitted the Library to make Sanborn maps published before 1900 available on the LC Sanborn website as they are completed. Those public domain maps published after 1899 will have a three year waiting period, after which they will also be available from the Library of Congress. HIG will start making select maps available this month. More information is available at: [http://historicalinfo.com/color-fire-insurance-maps.php](http://historicalinfo.com/color-fire-insurance-maps.php)

Requests for scans though the Library’s Duplication Service for Sanborn and other fire insurance maps are still possible and will be handled by Library staff.
On Sanborn maps houses of prostitution were often labeled as female boarding houses. Block 16 in Las Vegas is where there were many saloons and houses of ill repute. There is a boarding house in block 16 on this 1923 Las Vegas map.
If a house still exists that a patron’s ancestors lived in, it may be possible to look at it using Google Earth and Street View. This is the house the grandmother of a friend lived in in Provo, Utah. The friend’s great grandparents and great-great grandmother are in the picture. The picture was taken before 1918.
Here’s the same house in Google Earth Street View. The house is much reduced and serves as the office for the apartments that surround it on three sides. To find a house in Street View, a person types in the address, goes to the circle in the upper right corner to move around, zooms in using the “+”, then drags the little icon of a person at the upper right corner to get into street view and move around down the street.
Trail and migration path maps show how people’s ancestors got to where they settled. This is an 1878 map showing a wagon road in Wyoming and Colorado that was probably used by people settling that area.
To find someone in a census that doesn’t have a name index, a person needs to know the person’s address and the census enumeration district in which it was located. It may be a good idea to do a backup search that way even for a census with a name index because of the problems with recording names correctly. Ways to get addresses include family letters, phone books, city directories, earlier censuses if the person hadn’t moved, military records especially draft and enlistment records, and naturalization petitions. Steve Morse has a one step method on his website to find the census enumeration districts. I am looking for my mother’s and my father’s families in Circleville, Ohio, in the 1940 census.
After taking the address of my father’s relatives I got from an obituary and putting it in Steve Morse’s page and using the map on that page to find cross streets, I found two possible census enumeration areas. I tried one, and it didn’t look like the right streets, so I tried the other, and I did find the page with my relatives on it. Of course the house number for my paternal great uncle on the census wasn’t quite the same as the one in his obituary, but it was close. I could also see my mother’s relatives as she lived next door to my father and his relatives.
Here are the houses from the census record I showed you. That’s where my mother lived to the left of the dead tree and the two story house to its left is where my father lived.
Suppose you have a patron who wants to find where one of his ancestors is buried. Usually at least the city and state is on the death certificate. If the patron plans to go there, first he needs a state map to see where that city is. I looked for relatives buried in Circleville, Ohio, recently. Here is where Circleville is.
The name of the cemetery was on the death certificate, so here is a map showing where the cemetery is. This cemetery has an online listing of the people buried there, but my relatives were not included. Either the whole cemetery wasn’t recorded or they were missed because they may not have gravestones. Next I found the cemetery in the online yellow pages and called to ask if my relatives were there, and if so, where. Of course city maps can also be used to find places where records would be such as courthouses and churches.
They said they my relatives are there and gave me the area of the cemetery and the plot numbers. I asked for a map, and they mailed one to me. However, this is not always that simple. There are indexes called FindaGrave and Billion Graves online, but my relatives never seem to be in them. In another case, the town and state were on the death certificate, but not the cemetery. There was an index online for that town, but the pages it covers are not online. There is a volunteer listed where the index was, which is the Jackson County Ohio Genealogy webpage, which is part of the USGenWeb Project and OHGenWeb.
I emailed the volunteer with the page numbers in the index and the name I was looking for, and he mailed me back the name of the cemetery, the area of the cemetery, and the plot number. Then I did find the index to that cemetery online, and I found a map for it. I also found my relative in the index along with some other relatives. I found through obituaries that there are even more relatives there who aren’t in the index.
The third person is more elusive. A friend found an obituary for her on NewspaperArchive.com that said she is buried in the Roseville Cemetery in Roseville, Ohio. However, her death date is wrong in the records in the genealogy room in the library in that county, and they don’t have a record that she is buried there. I tried calling township trustees whose names and numbers someone from the county genealogy group got for me, but I could never get hold of them, and they didn’t call me back. I Googled the original funeral home and called the one that seems to be its successor, but they didn’t have records that far back, which is 1932. I emailed a tombstone company in that area, but they didn’t answer me. I am having a book with lists of people buried in that cemetery send to me via interlibrary loan. I contacted the Ohio State Cemetery Association, and someone there gave me a different name and number for a trustee in charge of that cemetery and also the name and number of a person at the Ohio Chamber of Commerce who could give me the names of cemeteries registered in that county. I may just have to go to the cemetery and find an area where people were buried in around the same year and start looking for her headstone. This picture is here because Roseville is famous for this type of pottery.
Topographic maps show relief, i.e. hills and valleys. Sometimes they can be useful because they show a lot of detail. I was looking for the small town a relative was born in. I couldn’t find it at first because it had been two words at one time, Clear Port, and then became one word, and someone from that area figured that out for me. I think it really doesn’t exist any more, but I did find out where it was on a topographic map. I could have also looked in a gazetteer, which I’ll talk more about later. That was in Ohio, but this is a topo map of Las Vegas.
Geo-rectified refers to putting an old map on top of a modern map. This allows a patron to see what an area looked like when their ancestors lived there. Here is an 1830 map of the city of New Orleans on top of a modern map of New Orleans. This is a project in which the University of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab is bringing the *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (1832), entirely online and geo-rectifying the maps so they can be viewed atop modern digital maps.
The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation was a New Deal agency designed to help save homes from being foreclosed upon during the Depression. One thing they did was to rank parts of cities for desirability. Some of the factors were cost of housing and terrain, but a negative factor was the presence of foreign-born people and African Americans. This led to the practice of redlining, meaning the denying of loans based on the section of a city someone lived in. Patrons might be interested in seeing if their ancestors lived in such a section. This is a 1935 map of Richmond, Virginia, and is from the National Archives. I learned of this federal project from an online newsletter UpFront with NGS, which is the National Genealogical Society, posted on May 15, 2014. This issue of the newsletter was about a talk about maps in genealogy by Stefanie Evans at the 2014 Family History Conference in Richmond, Virginia.
Every map is produced for a purpose, so every map has a bias. There are also map mistakes. Some are accidental. The hotel I stayed in in Philadelphia for Midwinter was on the wrong corner on the ALA map. Maps will show a change but not show an earlier change. Map publishers do usually try to establish ground truth by field checking their maps. My husband found an airstrip that didn’t exist and other mistakes on the Hopi Reservation when he helped Benchmark field check an Arizona atlas. Map publishers also create fake towns and fake streets to see if competitors are using their maps. They are usually out of the way small towns. They’re called paper towns or map bunnies. The General Drafting Company created Agloe in New York State from the initials of its director Otto G. Lindberg and his assistant Ernest Alpers. Later a general store was built there with the name Agloe General Store, so competitors could claim there really was someplace with that name. I live on a one block street here in Las Vegas. It turns and becomes part of another street. It doesn’t exist on some maps. We’re not sure if that is an accidental map mistake or not. Fake streets are called trap streets.
A cartographic tool that can help with problems with finding where a place is or was is a gazetteer. Gazetteers are lists of place names that tell where they are located and sometimes give additional details about the place names.
The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) is our Nation's official repository of domestic geographic names information and was developed by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in cooperation with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. It gives where places are and what the official form of their name is. Information about foreign geographic feature names can be obtained from the GEOnet Names Server (which can be accessed from the GNIS website), developed and maintained by the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency.

Place names

- Geographic Names Information System (GNIS)
  http://geonames.usgs.gov/

- GEOnet Names Server

- National Geospatial Intelligence Agency
  https://www.nga.mil/Pages/default.aspx
A topographical dictionary could give a patron detailed information on the places his ancestors lived. I mentioned directories before as a source of addresses for things such as census enumeration districts. A reverse directory is where a person can look up an address and see who lives there.

More cartographic tools

- **Topographical dictionaries**
  
  Historical; often a lot of information about a locale; like Victorian England.
  
  Example: *Topographical Dictionary of England*

- **Directories**
  
  Reverse, postal, telephone books

- **Atlases**
  
  A book of maps--Current and historical
The map history web site is many web pages of worthwhile information about early, old, antique, and antiquarian maps. It is maintained by Tony Campbell, who is a retired map librarian from the British Library in London.

More map web sites

• Map History/History of Cartography
  http://www.maphistory.info
Here are resources for finding map collections. The John R. Borchert Map Library has a page listing topographic maps online and a page listing city maps online.

How to locate map collections

Print:


Online:
- The John R. Borchert Map Library at the University of Minnesota website:
- [https://www.lib.umn.edu/borchert](https://www.lib.umn.edu/borchert)
Online map gateways

- Cyndi's List - Maps, Gazetteers, & Geographical Information
  http://www.cyndislist.com/maps.htm

- Old Maps Online
  https://sites.google.com/site/oldmapsonlineorg

Here are more places to find map collections online.
These are major map collections in public libraries that are online. It may not be online, but there may be a map collection in a public library in your town.
Here are some big map collections in academic libraries that are online. There may be a map collection in an academic library in your city.

Academic libraries

• American Geographical Society Library, Univ. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
  http://www.uwm.edu/Libraries/digilib/maps/index.html

• Perry Castañeda Map Library, University of Texas (Austin)
  http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/index.html

• Alexandria Digital Library, Univ. of Calif., Santa Barbara
  http://alexandria.sdc.ucsb.edu/
Here are some online Nevada historic map collections.

**University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries’ digital map collection**
Southern Nevada: History in Maps
[http://digital.library.unlv.edu/collections/maps](http://digital.library.unlv.edu/collections/maps)

**University of Nevada, Reno Libraries’ digital map collection**
Nevada in Maps
The Newberry Library has some online map digital collections, but mostly it is a catalog to find maps and atlases in that library. There are maps listed in the LDS Family Library catalog, but the maps themselves are not online.
Federal maps

- US General Land Office (GLO)

- National Mapping Information - USGS (United States Geological Survey)

- Bureau of Land Management. Land & Mineral Records

The USGS sells topographic maps. The Bureau of Land Management or BLM as well as the US General Land Office has land ownership maps.
I talked earlier about NARA having maps online.
Museums, historical societies, private collections

- David Rumsey Historical Map Collection
  http://www.davidrumsey.com/

- Oregon Historical Society
  http://www.ohs.org/

David Rumsey is a map collector in San Francisco. He specializes in maps of California as an island, but he had many many other maps. He has scanned his map collection and put it on the web. Now he is in the process of giving his map collection to the Branner Library at Stanford, and they are building a map library to house it. The Oregon Historical Society has a map collection that contains over 25,000 maps that focus on Western exploration, Oregon Territory, Oregon state, cities and counties, and special subjects such as mining, forestry, railroads, coasts and rivers, soils, farmlands, land claims, Native Americans, and explorations. The map collection also includes Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps on microfilm, which present detailed information on the city in approximately 10-year intervals from 1879 to 1965. The maps are not online.
Suppose the patron asks you where they can buy a map. The USGS sells maps online. The International Map Trade Association lists companies that sell maps. There are online map jobbers such as Omnimap and East View Geospatial.

Where to buy maps

- Can buy maps from federal agencies from U.S. Geological Survey [http://store.usgs.gov/b2c_usgs/b2c/start/%28xcm=r3standardpitrex_prd%29/.do](http://store.usgs.gov/b2c_usgs/b2c/start/%28xcm=r3standardpitrex_prd%29/.do)

- International Map Trade Association [http://www.imiamaps.org/](http://www.imiamaps.org/)

- Omnimap.com [http://www.omnimap.com](http://www.omnimap.com)

Buy at a local store

- There is a map store here in Las Vegas:
  Gotta Getta Map at 1566 Western Avenue (NW corner of Oakey and Western) 702-678-6277

- Other cities also have independent map stores

- Rand McNally has stores in some cities and also sells maps online
Learning more about using maps in genealogy

Genealogy “guidebooks’ may have a section on using maps:


- Online maps information
  - [http://geography.about.com/od/understandmaps/Understand_Maps_and_Cartography.htm](http://geography.about.com/od/understandmaps/Understand_Maps_and_Cartography.htm)

There are books that give more information on using maps in genealogy. *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives of the United States* is available both in print and electronically. There is a website with information on understanding maps and cartography.
Advantages of electronic maps

- Increased access to map collections
- Allow user to select and display information for a particular geographic area or on particular themes
- Easier to produce maps and to revise them; genealogists can include them in publications
- Computers can also help us manipulate data derived from traditional maps in increasingly sophisticated ways (GIS and historical mapping)

GIS is geographic information systems. They have different layers showing different features like roads, certain buildings, etc. I talked about geo-rectifying earlier.
Advantages of print maps

- Can see the "whole"
- Nothing replaces the experience of seeing and handling the “original”

Sometimes it is possible with zooming and panning to get lost as to where a person is in a digital map.
Disadvantages of electronic maps

- Web is not necessarily organized and easy to use; quality and reliability of content can vary greatly
- Usually only a small portion of map can displayed at any give time; can be hard to use without having entire map available
- Size of file and download time can cause problems
- Image quality can be poor for a number of technical reasons
- Map files can take a long time to transmit, especially without a high-speed network

Zooming, which is making a small section of the map bigger, and panning, which is moving around within the map, require specialized software.
It is a lot faster and cheaper to look at a map online instead of going to a different state or country to look at it.

Disadvantages of print maps

• Can be difficult to handle because of size and condition

• Can be hard to locate collections because of inadequate cataloging

• Perhaps less accessible – private collections, visiting foreign libraries, etc
Credits

Images not otherwise credited are from UNLV’s Special Collections and most are from our digital map project.
MAGIRT’s website has LibGuides with more information. It also has lists of officers and committee chairs and committee members, so a person could contact them with in depth questions. WAML has a Map Librarians’ Toolbox and also a section that lists map librarians in map collections in the West by state. Those map librarians are willing to answer questions.
Questions?

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