



Mapping the United States, Block by Block

WENDI MALONEY AND ALISON HALL

Located midway between Tucson and Phoenix, Casa Grande, Arizona, has a population of about 50,000, making it fairly small by today's standards for cities. But it's a lot bigger than it used to be. In 1898, only 200 people lived along the Southern Pacific railroad tracks there.

Besides scattered dwellings, Casa Grande had a hotel, lodging houses, stables, blacksmith and carpentry shops, stores operated by Chinese immigrants, a school, and saloons. It also had several water tanks, but its water facilities were deemed poor—an important factor for a town that had been devastated by at least two disastrous fires.

We know all that thanks in part to one of the nearly 25,000 Sanborn fire-insurance maps the Library has digitized and placed on its [website](#). The maps were created to help insurers estimate the fire hazard associated with individual structures. Now they are used by genealogists, historians, urban planners, teachers, or anyone with an interest in the evolution of a community, street, or building.

D.A. Sanborn, a surveyor from Somerville, Massachusetts, founded the Sanborn National Insurance Diagram Bureau in 1867. It produced meticulously detailed, large-scale maps showing information such as street names and widths; the location and boundaries of dwellings, public buildings, churches,

and businesses; and the presence of fire hydrants and such hazards as blacksmith forges or large bakers' ovens.

The earliest Sanborn holding in the Library's collection is a map of Boston, actually an atlas, published in 1867. But the bulk of the collection dates from 1883, when Sanborn began to register maps for copyright protection regularly, depositing the required copies with the Library.

A team from the firm Historical Information Gatherers created a database of maps no longer under copyright protection. Team members then digitized these maps, which extend from the 1880s to the early 1960s. The Library can post maps published before 1900 as soon as staff process them. For maps published later, the Library must wait three years after receiving digital files to post them. All 500,000 maps in the public domain will be available on the Library's website by 2020. Colleen Cahill, digital-conversion coordinator in the Library's Geography and Maps Division, is processing digitized files eligible for posting on the website and adding metadata to make them searchable.

The Sanborn Map Company, the Sanborn Library, LLC, and EDR Sanborn continued to renew previous registrations and to register their revised works with the Copyright Office throughout the twentieth century as the cartography was updated. According to their website, The Sanborn Map Company has produced 1.2 million maps of more than 12,000 American cities and towns. [C](#)



An insurance map of Boston, published in 1867.