



## Using Maps for Genealogy and Local History

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Plat maps, Sanborn maps, and a variety of related sources can help you find your ancestors' farms and residential houses. They can also give you a better sense of the communities they lived in, including transportation routes, types of farms, Native American heritage, and the natural landscape.

### Rural Lands and the People Who Lived There

- Plat Maps (County Atlases and Sheet Maps). Plat maps show land ownership over time and are a great source for locating your ancestors' farms. They include the names of landowners and work best for rural areas. The Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) has plat maps for all 72 counties in Wisconsin.
- Surveyor's Field Notes and Maps. Starting in the 1830s, surveyors hiked around the state laying out the township and section lines that we still use today. Their notes and original sketch maps have been scanned and are available online at <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/SurveyNotes/Search.html>. They provide a unique glimpse of the landscape before most European immigrants arrived.
- Land Economic Inventory. In the 1930s, surveyors once again combed the state, following in the footsteps of the original surveyors of a hundred years earlier. They sketched their own maps of every township and section, and took an inventory of the plants, trees, animals and structures they encountered. The original notes and sketches are in the WHS archives, and the final printed maps from the project are online at <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/EcoNatRes/WILandInv>.
- Wisconsin Archaeological Atlas (Charles Brown Atlas). In the 1920s, the office of the State Archaeologist began tracking archaeological sites on a set of county plat maps for the entire state. The maps show Native American trails, campsites, burial mounds, villages, croplands, and other sites, and are arranged by county and township. These maps are available in their original paper form only, and are stored in the WHS Archives.

### Ghost Towns

Have you ever found a reference to a town that doesn't exist anymore? We have sources that can help you figure out when that town existed and where it was located. The Library (2<sup>nd</sup> floor) and the Archives (4<sup>th</sup> floor) each has lists of former Wisconsin Post Offices. Those lists will tell you when the town existed, and what county it was in. Then you can use maps from that time period to figure out where it was.

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## Cities and Towns

- Bird's Eye Maps. The WHS Archives has "bird's eye" maps of many Wisconsin towns and cities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These maps are often in color, and were drawn by artists to show towns from a high vantage point (like the view of bird). You can find many of our birds-eye maps online by searching for "bird's eye" at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=N:1166>
- Street Maps. When you find a street address for one of you ancestors in a newspaper clipping or city directory, you can always try searching "Google Maps" to figure out where they lived. However, sometimes street names have changed and houses have been renumbered over the years. Old street maps are a great source for locating addresses that don't exist anymore.
- Sanborn Maps. Sanborn maps are fire insurance maps. They can help you locate old addresses, and they include details about individual buildings and neighborhoods. They can show you the outline of a building's footprint, what it was made of, and how it was used. The WHS Archives has Sanborn maps for dozens of communities in Wisconsin from the 1870s through the 1960s. You can find all of our pre-1923 Sanborn maps online at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=N:1166>. Search for your town's name and the word "Sanborn" to see if we have anything for your community.

## State Maps and Beyond

The WHS Archives map collection is world-wide in scope. Our earliest map dates from 1513, and is one of the first world maps to show North America. We have over 20,000 sheet maps and 6,000 atlases in our collection. Nearly all of these maps are described in our online catalog at <https://search.library.wisc.edu/>. A much smaller number of maps have been digitized and added to our website at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=N:1166>.

- Wisconsin  
State maps can show you historic railroad lines, lakes and rivers that have changed over time, old roads, and many other natural and human-made features.
- United States and the World  
Historical U.S. and world maps include countries and cities that don't exist anymore, or whose boundaries have changed. In addition, there are maps that show immigration routes, including steamship lines railroads.