

GenGuides | USING MAPS

by *Genwriters* | in your Genealogy Journey

Maps can provide answers that aren't evident in other sources. They can provide clues to the topography and geography around the communities you are researching. Maps can graphically show your ancestors' homes in relation to each other and in relation to major geographic features. A wide variety of maps exist. Finding a map from the town and era your ancestors lived in will provide valuable insights into your ancestors' lives. A map should be the first place you turn when:

- ✓ you begin researching a new locality;
- ✓ you need a tool to analyze your research when you stumble upon a brick wall;
- ✓ you want to understand more about the time and place where your ancestors lived;
- ✓ you want to locate possible locations/localities for further research.

USING MAPS CAN HELP YOU AVOID THESE ERRORS

- ◆ Writing to the wrong courthouse.
- ◆ Ordering the wrong book.
- ◆ Researching the wrong census.
- ◆ Using the wrong finding aids.
- ◆ Ordering incorrect microfilm.
- ◆ Traveling to the wrong destination.
- ◆ Wasted time and energy.

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WHAT CAN YOU DISCOVER USING MAPS?

Maps can reveal changing place names when two maps from different time frames are compared.

Maps can reveal boundary changes, particularly state, county and township lines.

Maps can be used to track your ancestors' migration routes. They reveal natural boundaries and suggest travel routes.

Maps can locate points of interest near your ancestor's home, such as churches, cemeteries, schools, and nearby towns.

Maps help us to visualize the places our ancestors lived, traveled, worked, and played. They can show us the "lay of the land" by identifying streams, rivers, forests, deserts, etc.

SELECT THE RIGHT MAP FOR THE JOB

POLITICAL MAPS are commonly found in commercial atlases. They indicate the location of cities, towns, and counties. The boundaries of these jurisdictions may or may not be indicated. Physical features, such as rivers and lakes, are often shown. Many maps will show current existing roads and highways. These maps are easy to use and are typically accompanied by an index. Maps answer the question “Where is ...?” Political maps show us how to get there.

TOPOGRAPHICAL MAPS show physical features such as hills, mountains, rivers, and streams. Some maps show the features with colors and shading indicating how high or steep the terrain is. Cities and towns are often identified, but roads are often omitted. Topographic, or physical, maps are most useful when identifying migration trails because they show us the lay of the land.

THE 25-MILE TEST

Political and physical maps can be used to locate vital records repositories. Many times our ancestors chose to register a child’s birth or record a deed at the closest courthouse. That courthouse may not have been in the county, or even the state, in which they lived. By drawing a 25-mile diameter circle around your ancestor’s place of residence on a physical or political map, you might clearly see the courthouse of choice (or convenience).

COUNTY MAPS AND ATLASES are some of the most useful maps to genealogists. They are helpful in tracking those sometimes elusive county boundary changes. Use county maps and county histories to research the genealogy of a county to understand how your ancestor fit into the community. Two great resources for county maps are:

Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Census by William Thorndale and William Dollarhide.
The Handybook for Genealogists by Everton Publishers.

The **SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAPS** were originally created to help insurance companies establish premiums. These maps provide a wealth of information for genealogists. They are very detailed street-level maps and may indicate building materials, dwelling use, street widths, address and lot lines, and building height and number of stories. More than 12,000 American cities and towns were mapped by the Sanborn Company between the years 1867 and 1961.

LAND AND PLAT MAPS, often found at the county courthouse or a local historical society, are detailed maps indicating owners of parcels of land. Other information that might be included on these maps are the number of acres owned by each landholder, land use, crops grown, and the location of important structures. These maps are useful in placing your ancestor in a particular location at a particular time.

CENSUS MAPS define census enumeration districts. These maps are particularly useful, almost necessary, when searching census records in urban areas. Enumeration districts did not remain static from decade to decade, so be sure to find one for the time period you are researching.

PANORAMIC MAPS, many of which were created between the years 1847 and 1920, show a bird's eye view of streets and individual buildings. These maps, while not drawn to scale, provide a valuable reference to the community as a whole. Buildings and other features are drawn on the maps and a legend will often indicate the occupancy of larger, more prominent buildings.

One of the newest class of maps available online are **SATELLITE MAPS**. Available at *maps.google.com*, these maps give a bird's eye view of most addresses in the United States. Scan the area to see what's nearby, such as churches, cemeteries, and neighboring communities.

MIGRATION MAPS show us where our ancestors might have gone and how they got there. Early migration trails were well-traveled routes through harsh country. Did your ancestors travel the National Road to Illinois, the Oregon Trail to Wyoming, or the Mohawk Trail through Massachusetts? A migration map might have the answer. Two good resources to get you started on your search:

Map Guide to American Migration Routes by William Dollarhide.
Atlas of American Migration by Stephen A. Flanders.

EVALUATING MAPS

Not all maps are made the same, nor are all maps reliable. Just as you evaluate other documents on your genealogical journey, you must also evaluate map resources. There are several criteria to consider when selecting maps.

Who was the **MAPMAKER** and why was the map made? Is there bias in the presentation?

Pay close attention to the **TITLE** of the map. Some are very detailed and descriptive.

Compare the **DATE** the map represents and the date it was created. Maps created close to the time period they represent are often more reliable.

Look for the **LEGEND**, the explanation of symbols and colors used on the map. Map symbols show us land forms, water features, structures, vegetation, travel routes, cemeteries, etc., and are often color-coded.

Each map should have a **SCALE**. Remember, an inch may not be a mile. And, not all maps are drawn to scale. Both of these facts will affect how you interpret the map before you.

Many maps have a **COORDINATE SYSTEM** (a grid, often coded alphanumerically, with horizontal and vertical lines dissecting the map). This grid is most helpful when using a map index to locate specific features on the map.

Be sure you are clear as to the **ORIENTATION** of the map. North is not always up, particularly with early maps. If a compass is not provided on the map, you may be able to determine the orientation of the map by comparing the features to other maps of the area.

SOME WEB SITES TO GET YOU STARTED

GLOBAL GAZETTEER

www.fallingrain.com/world/

Online gazetteer covering the world. Latitude, longitude, and elevation are given for cities as well as hamlets. A great tool to assist the genealogist in locating those small localities.

THE COLUMBIA GAZETTEER OF NORTH AMERICA

www.bartleby.com/69/

With 50,000 entries, this most comprehensive encyclopedia of geographical places and features will prove invaluable to anyone for whom places hold fascination and who require accurate data about them. It covers every incorporated place and county in the United States, along with several thousand unincorporated places, special-purpose sites, and physical features, as well as Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean

HOW FAR IS IT?

www.indo.com/distance/

Calculate the distance between any two places on Earth. The latitude, longitude, and elevation of each place is given along with the distance in miles. A fun site for locating small towns and villages, and determining the distances between the towns our ancestors lived in and the nearest large city.

HOME TOWN LOCATOR GAZETTEER

gazetteer.hometownlocator.com/

Search any place name. There are over 170,000 populated places (city, town, village, neighborhood) in the database. Included are aerial and topographical maps and current population figures.

LOCATE A COUNTY BY PLACE NAME

www.fedstats.gov/cgi-bin/qf/lookup?state=

Don't know what county your ancestor's village is located in? Simply type the town's name, or zip code if known, then select the state from a drop-down box and click on "go." The county will be displayed.

U.S. SURNAME DISTRIBUTION

www.hamrick.com/names/

Select a surname, then select a census year (1850, 1880, 1920, or 1990) to see a distribution of that surname across the United States.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS AMERICAN MEMORY MAP COLLECTION

www.locweb2.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gmdhome.html

This web site contains the largest and most comprehensive cartographic collection in the world with collections numbering over 4.5 million maps including 60,000 atlases, 6,000 reference works, numerous globes and plastic relief models, and a large number of cartographic materials in other formats, including electronic.

CYNDI'S LIST - MAPS

www.cyndislist.com/maps.htm

A great place to begin looking for maps is on Cyndi's list. Visit her maps page for dozens of helpful links to maps and map resources.



**We can't do Genealogy
Without a little Geography**

PERRY CASTENEDA MAP COLLECTION

www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/map_sites/hist_sites.html

www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/index.html

These websites offer a huge collection of maps and links to map websites elsewhere on the Internet. There are more than 5,000 map images on the website covering the entire world. Click on the “Historical” link for a good selection of early maps.

DAVID RUMSEY MAP COLLECTION

www.davidrumsey.com/

The David Rumsey Historical Map Collection has over 12,600 maps online. The collection focuses on rare 18th and 19th century North and South America maps. Collection categories include antique atlas, globe, school geography, maritime chart, state, county, city, pocket, wall, children’s, and manuscript maps. The collection can be used to study history, genealogy and family history.

IMAGES OF EARLY MAPS ON THE WEB - THE AMERICAS

www.maphistory.info/imageus.html

A collection of links to maps on the web. The list is quite comprehensive, and continually updated. You could get lost in this site for days.

ODDENS' BOOKMARKS - “THE FASCINATING WORLD OF MAPS AND MAPPING”

oddens.geog.uu.nl/index.php

A huge website featuring links to over 22,000 online gazetteers and maps. If you don’t know where else to start, this would be a good place.

UNITED STATES DIGITAL MAP LIBRARY

www.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/maps/

A volunteer online project to bring useful, readable, high-quality maps to the genealogy community. A state index enables quick locality searches. In addition to individual state maps is a large selection of maps of national interest.

U.S. GENEALOGY MAP PROJECT: STATE, COUNTY, AND TERRITORY MAPS

usgenmap.rootsweb.com/usgenmap.htm

U.S. border and land claim maps covering the years 1783–1959 are included on this website. Timelines and narratives accompany the maps.

HISTORICAL COUNTY LINES

www.jrshelby.com/hcl/

Animated maps depict the formation of counties across the United States. A fun website to watch the growth and settlement of our county. Also included are topographic maps of each state.

HISTORIC USGS MAPS OF NEW ENGLAND & NEW YORK

docs.unh.edu/nhtopos/nhtopos.htm

The United States Geological Survey began its topographic atlas of the United States in 1882. This online collection of over 1,500 USGS topographic maps includes complete geographical coverage of New England and New York from the 1890s to 1950s.

GEOGRAPHIC NAMES INFORMATION SYSTEM (GNIS)

geonames.usgs.gov/pls/gnispublic/

Search by state, by county, for cemeteries, churches, rivers, schools, or any of nearly five

dozen other features. You can even search on “populated place” for a list of all cities, towns, and communities in a given county. The latitude and longitude for each feature is given thereby enabling easy and quick map look-ups.

LAND OWNERSHIP MAPS IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

www.kinquest.com/usgenealogy/lom.php

The Library of Congress holds more than 1,400 land ownership maps covering over 1,000 counties in 46 states. This website provides a directory to those maps, many of which can be ordered on microfiche.

EARLY AMERICAN ROADS AND TRAILS

freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~gentutor/trails.html

Beverly Whitaker, CGRS, provides details on 18 major early roads. In addition to a historical narrative on each trail, links to a map of each trail are included.

HISTORICAL AMERICAN MIGRATION & SETTLEMENT PATTERNS: A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

book-smith.tripod.com/migration-top.html

Not a map resource, per se, but a reliable resource for locating migration-related resources. A definite must if you have ancestors that migrated across America.

LINKS TO ANCIENT FOOTPATHS

www.over-land.com/trindian.html

Brief overviews and links to information about early Indian trails in America. Original trails west were the established Indian routes. This site helps you identify routes your ancestors might have chosen for their trek west.

Maybe you can't find your
ancestors because you didn't
consult a map first!