

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES
BULLETIN

Where in the world can you find your ancestors?

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Abstract

There is a rising awareness of the tools of Geospatial Information Systems on the part of both amateur and professional historians. Professionals (historians, political and social scientists, and even medical historians) are able to see and think about various trends in a more visual and useful way to them (think of seeing how various diseases spread and where and why), while amateurs seeking more information of their ancestors can also benefit by seeing migration patterns and places of origin, which could help them think about why their ancestors left a place to immigrate to a new country.

Knowing who controlled what land and when can make the task of finding appropriate records, for any purpose, a bit easier. Also mentioned are grass roots initiatives, that is, not created by governments or commercial organizations, but by local genealogical and historical groups. This brief overview, done primarily from a layman's viewpoint, can engage the reader with an idea of how to get their work more appreciated and out "into the world". A study by a student at California State University at Fullerton mentions that such genealogy researchers tend to be generative (that is, concerned with passing information along to those following), and very aware of themselves and their ancestors in a time and place.

Hopefully this will get more interaction between academics and people out in the world who can appreciate their work.

Keywords: genealogy, family history, GIS, local history

Genealogists are often pigeonholed as looking only at censuses, and once in a while at an online family tree. But now it is becoming far more common for them to be aware of and use maps, and even GIS tools to enhance and expand their research. People exist in the physical world, and where they live has a great deal to do with what they do for a living, how they live, what food they eat, and what they do for work.

What I want to show is how genealogists are becoming more aware of the tools that are out there to be utilized; how they see these tools helping their (specialized) research; what they are contributing to the larger corpus of knowledge, and lastly to mention some interesting sites (a few out of far too many for one short article) that are using maps and data for the greater research good.

The average age of genealogical researchers appears to have dropped. This comment is based on a study done by Pamela J. Drake at Fullerton (California) State College for her degree in psychology. She stated that 72 per cent of the researchers were female (thus 28 per cent are male); but only 20 per cent were over the age of 65, which could be considered the age at when more people have the most time to do searching after their working years. She also stated that her subjects had an average length of experience of 14 years, that being not at all a beginning amount of time. However they did start their searching at about age 40 – coinciding with when childbearing is mostly done, but people are still young enough to have time and energy in passing along family information. Many more people have fairly powerful home computers and are comfortable with using and trying new ideas than might have been the case a few decades ago.

Maps also have the advantage of being able to display various kinds of information at a glance. They can help to visualize historical movements and landmarks, and if coded with metadata provide amplified content on their inhabitants of a certain time and place.

I have been involved with maps and cartography for quite some time – fifty years or more, starting in university. When I started as a genealogy librarian forty years ago, there was (essentially) no Internet. Now there is, and the same ease of communication that we have become accustomed to aids in the deployment of many different kinds of communication, data and provides far easier access to fairly high end mapping and georeferencing tools that did not exist just a few decades ago.

This availability along with more convenient sharing and ease of collaboration has made the use of maps by genealogists and family historians much easier to accomplish. For example, people in upstate New York often have relatives or family that originated or at least lived in Canada. But they are not very aware of the geography of the neighbouring country. The level of geographic unawareness or illiteracy is quite apparent once one starts to talk to lay researchers. To a large extent, searchers still do the same things, such as limiting their searches to census and church records, and not taking advantage of clues and history that maps may afford. This is why it is good to get more genealogy searchers into using GIS and maps. They can be helped into thinking as local historians and expand their found data to help others.

I mentioned local historians. As far as I know New York is the only US state to require under state education law that every incorporated place have an officially appointed historian. There are at this writing about 1700 of them, greatly supported by a new state historian.

But one also has to know how to use the available tools. As should be obvious, there is a glaring difference between knowledge and information. Knowledge is having items hardwired into your brain, while information is more likely what you can look up on your phone. What do you think is likely to be more useful? And what helps to explain your ancestor's life decisions and movements? If people are alive, they exist in a physical world. (If not, they tend to stay stationary – though not always, as many cemeteries are moved!).

So what kinds of maps should genealogists be exposed to and learn to use? I use the term genealogists to encompass those searching for religious reasons, such as the LDS (Latter Day

Saints, or Mormons), but this also includes family historians and researchers, local historians medical history researchers, language and history teachers, sociologists, political scientists and so on.

Giving talks to them is a good start, and one can mention the standard town and county plat maps. But there can also be included topographic maps (the United States Geological Survey has recently released PDF versions of them all for free); railroad maps; parish maps, from religious organizations; provincial maps (Canadians and other countries have those instead of states); historical atlases; military maps (considering what the average person can now get from Google for free, one has to wonder what quality is available to those in the military); land ownership maps (metes and bounds software is easily available to plot out lands using verbal descriptions); maps done by various levels of government and even businesses, and the ever useful Sanborn insurance maps, just to start out. I particularly like the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. They give the shape and size of the buildings appearing on them, interior details, and of course street information. They are ideal to use as a base for a community based research project, described later.

It is important to mention that while many places such as libraries, historical societies, and historians have map collections, that they very often are not cataloged in any meaningful way. As opposed to large collections available online elsewhere, I am aware of institutions that have thousands of maps described if at all only on a handwritten 3 by 5 card in a file drawer. If they are hidden as such, they are far from useful and accessible. Some of these collections have been partially digitized and made available to all users on the web. There are some attempts to make comprehensive guides, but it is usually necessary to remind such genealogical users to find and use more than one source.

Maps can help genealogy researchers and others pin down their people of interest in a certain place and time. That could enable them to accurately determine where to find more information. For example, near where I live there is a house that has been in three counties in the past 200 years. The land hasn't moved – it's not in an earthquake zone! – but the fact that counties divided and records are to be found in separate county seats does make a difference. If one went by the latest census available (in the US, that is the 1940 Federal) one would look in Rochester (the county seat) but before then it was in Ontario County, whose county seat is Canandaigua. That is just since 1820, when Ontario was set off from earlier counties. New York was originally settled by native peoples, and over a period of more than 200 years as European people came into the state more counties were set off. Finding those early records is made somewhat easier by knowing controlled a piece of land and at what time. Before that time, much of NY State was in yet other parent counties (or even other US states), or under Dutch control, as the English took over from them in the 1660s. So depending on where you look and on how far back you wish to go, using a map will help the searcher determine where to most productively look for records. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. And yes, some early New York records are still found in Holland.

I will describe some projects of which I am aware. These can be used not only for genealogical research, but also for local history, for mapping medical occurrences, for seeing political and religious trends, for immigration analysis and so on.

There are other reasons to use maps and put amplifying information onto them. Thomas Hyder, a teacher on Long Island NY, has had his classes study immigration to the Cortland NY area for almost 20 years. These students carry that knowledge with them for a long time after high school.

As far back as 2008 Dr. Robert Jones of Skidmore College presented at the Conference on NY state history in Saratoga Springs NY. He gave a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Practicum, showing how to work with historic maps in new ways, manipulating them and interpreting the results to shed new light on a community's history. He presented a Saratoga NY map overlaid upon an older colonial American map showing where the old church burying yard was – it is now under a parking lot - and where other important features of early settlements in that region were located. I remember him saying that one could use ArcGIS, an expensive desktop software, or use maps found on the web and Google Earth (at that time it was still a paid subscription for the Pro version) for free. Considering that most of us have financial constraints, especially those of the general public who do genealogy as a hobby and pastime, this is of some interest.

Other projects that are being worked on are the community-generated databases exemplified by the past work of people like Thomas Barss of the FamilySearch organization. He put together a study of western Nova Scotia, linking families and maps with information on that area. It was an effort to gather and publish the genealogy for a whole town or community. The information also includes the supporting sources. Each "Community Tree" is a searchable database with views of individuals, families, ancestors and descendants, as well as printing options. The goal can be to identify and reconstitute all families of a particular place from a village, county, or even a country. Mr. Barss is still with FamilySearch where he was the supervisor of the Canada Reference Unit for three years. His work includes audio recordings, pictures of the interviewees, transcripts of audio materials, and individual lineage charges or a family tree for that person.

This is important because using maps to research where and when, and then to append supporting documentation and information to such projects allows a place to be examined in greater depth and with more initial understanding than just looking at a chart or spreadsheet.

These kinds of projects can be helped along with genealogical societies members' contributions of their own research findings – with the proviso that nearly all of such members are not trained academics, librarians or archivists. They are the general public, and as such any contributions should be taken with a grain of salt. Still, it is better to have amateur contributions than to let information wither. Witness the steady cutbacks in staff at many societies and libraries, and even academic institutions. I have been writing a column entitled Doing It Ourselves for an online magazine (The In Depth Genealogist) for the last four years, and it highlights these kinds of projects.

There are other projects underway using maps. Our own society (the Rochester NY Genealogical Society) has an incipient project at: <http://www.rcip.info/census/>, which attempts to flesh out underlying settlement in a Polish neighborhood of Rochester. And this is related to what is next mentioned.

What kinds of data can be superimposed on a map? Such things as found in projects like HistoryForge in Ithaca, NY, <https://thehistorycenter.net/historyforge> or the Cayuga Heights

History Project, <http://www.cayugaheightshistory.org/> also in Ithaca. A map can be generated and various information layers applied to it – such as the location of a now gone salt mine, and the locations (taken from census information) of the people who worked there.

A plat book in a town hall or county courthouse or an old fire insurance map may show an outline of your ancestor's house and its placement on your ancestor's property. Such maps should help you picture where your relatives were born, resided, attended school, worked, shopped, voted, traveled over land or water, courted, married, raised families, and were laid to rest. You may need later maps of the same area or other places to track down ensuing generations.

Maps usually suggest some patterns of settlement and movement and might eliminate others. For example, topographic and other relief maps may show hills or mountains that impeded migration or access to certain areas. Rivers that are bridged now may not have been when one's ancestors lived in that area. In NY, the building of the well documented and well mapped Erie Canal helped commercial and migratory travel because sometimes it is easier to travel on water than through thick forests on a muddy early pathway.

As there is an increase in the popularity of genealogy, its devotees are learning to use sources other than the main commercial or free data based web sites. Many map librarians, archivists and the like are reporting more non academic users coming in to their locations or web sites, and using such materials to extend their research and amplify the stories that they can find about their subjects. Their societies are encouraging the use of such material as aerial photos gazetteers and historical maps with their known shortcomings such as lack of details or even topography. They are attending training courses given by their own societies or libraries on such tools as ESRI's ArcGIS software.

In sum, many more genealogists and amateur historical researchers are learning more about geographical and GIS related resources which can add to the understanding of their ancestors lives.

References, books and useful web sites: Many of these are included to show the wide acceptance of using maps and geospatial techniques in genealogical research.

<http://viewshare.org/> - A now-shuttered project, Viewshare from the Library of Congress, allowed people to upload locations and have them plotted by the online program for free

[Discovering and Using Historical Geographic Resources on the Web: A Practical Guide for Librarians: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers](#); Eva H. Dodsworth, L. W. Laliberté

<https://github.com/CartoDB>; Location Intelligence & Data Visualization tool for the cloud

<https://www.nysgis.net/> New York State GIS Association, which sponsors events including a "Mappy Hour"

<https://www.nps.gov/history/mwac/storymaps.html>; United State National Park Service; Story Maps program

<http://gis-sig.org/>; Geographic Information Sharing Special Interest Group; covers the Rochester NY /Finger Lakes region. A local group which sponsors informative programs such as How to use ArcMap and Google Earth Together to Create Powerful Mapping and The Use of 3D and GIS Technologies

<http://www.highlandparkfuneralcentre.com/>. Little Lake Cemetery. Created in conjunction with students from Fleming College's Geographic Information Systems program, the web mapping application displays a range of historical data about the mentioned cemetery in Peterborough ON. Users can search the grave marker inventory by Surname and/or Death Date. The search results include records containing family names, the oldest date on the monument and an image of the marker. At any point, the user can freely search the map and click on any grave marker to view corresponding information.

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2017/11/learning-beyond-the-original-purpose-with-sanborn-fire-insurance-maps/?loclr=eatlcb>; Learning Beyond the Original Purpose with Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps; Cheryl Lederle

<https://www.mapbox.com/>; a commercial site; Mapbox is the location data platform for mobile and web applications.

<http://www.genealogyintime.com/>; from their web site: “The Genealogist [a subscription web site] has started the process of putting online a very detailed street survey of London, England from 1910. Known as the *Lloyd George Domesday Survey*, it is a series of maps of where people lived in the city. The maps go right down to showing individual street addresses. Trying to trace an ancestor’s London address using modern maps is a major challenge that can often lead to incorrect results. Vast parts of the city were destroyed and rebuilt after World War II”

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-06-23-online-hillforts-atlas-maps-all-4147-britain-and-ireland-first-time>; A research team based at the universities of Oxford, Edinburgh and University College Cork has been helped by citizen scientists from across England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Ireland.

<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/whats-map-ancestors/>; a blog post; mentions a mobile app for users of FamilySearch.org

<http://www.qualifiedgenealogists.org/RQGNews/general/using-maps-in-genealogy>; link to a YouTube video talk about using maps in genealogical research.

<http://www.archives.com/experts/ortega-gena/genealogy-maps.html>; professional speaker Gena Philibert Ortega’s article on the subject of using maps in genealogical research

<https://www.amyjohnsoncrow.com/5-types-maps-every-genealogist-know/>; professional speaker Amy Johnson Crow’s take in the subject of using maps for genealogical research

<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/best-mapping-websites-2014/>; David Fryxell's take on using maps for genealogical research

<https://www.cyndislist.com/maps/interactive/>; a major free genealogical hub site for research, with leave links maintained.

<http://ancestornews.com/maps-genealogy/>; Nancy Hendrickson's take on using maps for research

<https://genealogyadventures.wordpress.com/2017/09/13/using-maps-in-your-genealogy-research/>; a personal take from Brian Sheffey, which also includes maps dealing with DNA research.

<https://progenygenealogy.com/Products/Family-Maps/Research-Features>; reviews and illustrations of a commercial software program for Windows.

<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/searchmapframes.php>; the In Search of Your Canadian Past project from McGill University (Montreal).

<http://genealogysstar.blogspot.com/2015/01/use-cadastral-mapping-to-find-your.html>; James Tanner from (FamilySearch.org) useful suggestions on how to use cadastral maps

<https://www.routledge.com/Geography-and-Genealogy-Locating-Personal-Pasts/>; Geography and Genealogy Locating Personal Pasts, by Jeanne Kay Guile; Routledge

<http://www.avotaynuonline.com/2010/04/geospatial-genealogy-visualizing-and-exploring-ancestral-places-by-stephen-l-egbert-and-karen-g-r-roekard/>; presented in 2010, showing an Eastern European experience is using maps for research. Also available at Brigham Young University as a PDF document (<https://fhtw.byu.edu/static/conf/2010/egbert-geospatial-fhtw2010.pdf>)

<https://canadiangis.com/historic-cartography>; the Canadian GIS and Geomatics site; contains very useful links

<http://newyorkhistoryblog.org/2017/11/07/initiatives-for-putting-history-to-work/>, by Bruce Dearstyne; mentions maps as part of the Bunkhistory project at the University of Richmond (Virginia)

<https://magirt.github.io/ALA2017/>; presentations at the 2017 American Library Association Conference in Chicago. Includes links to several interesting presentations on using maps for genealogical research.

<https://www.thoughtco.com/map-adventures-with-google-1421977>; contains links and how to's for creating maps.

http://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/56_donna.html; Maps in Family Research; the very experienced professional genealogist Donna Przecha's take of mapping.

<https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2002/0099/report.pdf>; Using Maps in Genealogy, from the United State Geological Survey

<https://www.raogk.org/us-map/>; a useful guide for beginners from the web site of Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness.

<https://familyhistorydaily.com/free-genealogy-resources/travel-back-in-time-with-historic-sanborn-maps/>; These Old Fire Insurance Maps Reveal a Surprising Amount of Genealogy Data; from the Family History Daily web site

[Journal of Map & Geography Libraries](#) ; Advances in Geospatial Information, Collections & Archives

[Turning Genealogists onto GIS](#), Michele D. Shular, of the Science and Engineering Library University at Buffalo; a good article on librarians being able to help genealogists with maps.

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Maps; the Familysearch.org wiki article on maps and genealogy.

<http://psych.fullerton.edu/genealogy/> - Findings from the Fullerton Genealogy Study; A Master's Thesis Project by Pamela J. Drake

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