



SPATIAL HISTORY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE: MAPS, IMAGES, & ARCHIVES IN THE COMMUNITY

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What is spatial history? Spatial history combines the historian's questions with the analytical capabilities of geospatial technology and computers. Spatial History in the Public Square (SHPS) is focused on ways to bring these methods and resources within reach of communities and researchers with modest resources. Some well-known online spatial history projects have made impressive use of GIS and mapping programs. Yet as models, they are often too expensive and too complicated for smaller, community-based institutions to duplicate and maintain. The time is right to bring Spatial History into the Public Square.

The initial phase of SHPS is being built upon digitized black and white Sanborn fire insurance map images of Harrisonburg, VA ranging in date from 1886 to 1930. Sanborn maps were created from the late 1860s through the 1960s for hundreds of cities and towns across America and now offer unique windows into those communities' history.¹ They employed an elaborate system of symbols and colors to indicate the physical features and uses of each building so that national insurance underwriters wishing to do business in a particular community could evaluate the level of risk associated with each site.² To keep the cost of this project modest, we have chosen not to undertake scanning the original color Sanborn pages and instead scanned the black and white images reproduced on microfilm in 1983 by the Library of Congress.³ This sacrifices the color-coded data about each building's construction materials, but preserves the wealth of other historical data. SHPS then enhances those maps by displaying them, in digitized and georeferenced mosaic form, over contemporary satellite views of the region with selectable layers that allow fading between years and zooming. Then we add historical "points of interest" features on the maps. These resource links provide brief historical narratives associated with particular places on the map and include links to the wealth of textual, photographic, and other historical resources available in nearby libraries and museums. This combination of features allows community users to investigate and closely compare and contrast changes over time in specific, familiar places in ways not currently available.

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¹ On Sanborn Maps generally, see Kim Keister, "Charts of Change," *Historic Preservation* 43 (May/June 1993): 42-49, 91-91; and Diane L. Oswald, *Fire Insurance Maps: Their History and Applications* (College Station, TX: Lacewing Press, 1997).

² On recovering long-forgotten histories with Sanborn maps, see Kevin L. Borg, "Teaching with Historic Places: Sanborn Maps and Dusty Old Buildings" *Notes On Virginia* 52 (2008): 40-46.

³ The appropriate use of the Sanborn Map images in this project has been established through the use of the American Library Association, Office for Information Technology Policy's Fair Use Calculator. A copy of the fair use documentation is available on request.