

Time Traveling with Historical Maps

Lesson Plan

This lesson teaches middle and high school students about maps as historical documents, map literacy, and New York City history through the New York Public Library's collection of digitized fire insurance maps.

Basics of the lesson:

- *Audience:* Middle school and high school students (especially, although not exclusively, those in New York City)
- *Timeframe:* 60-75 minutes, longer if completing the Post-Activity
- *Type:* Fully asynchronous, independent activity
- *Format:* A dedicated webpage that includes an option to download the lesson as a PDF

While the digitized map collection is extensive, it is hard to search and the maps are primarily displayed as single pages from a paper atlas, often not in any geographic or chronological order. Thus, this lesson uses composite maps that have been pieced together in Photoshop using the digitized pages in order to give students some context and ability to see a slice of the city in a more familiar form. The focus of the lesson is the New York Public Library—Schwarzman Building and Bryant Park, including the three city blocks to the north and south and one avenue to the east and west.

The lesson asks students to look at four maps covering a century-long time span, the 1850s to 1950s. (Note: only two maps, from 1890 and 1910, have been included here for illustrative purposes. However, the full lesson would include similar maps from the first paper fire insurance atlas in the 1850s and the last paper one from 1956 as well.)

A short introduction introduces the purpose and importance of the fire insurance maps and what we might learn from them today as well as the purpose of the lesson. Two pre-activities (together, about 15 minutes) orient students to the history of the Sanborn Map Company through a brief video and to the area in the lesson through a “walk around the block” using a more familiar form of map, the Street View in Google Maps. The lesson itself goes through two sets of questions: four questions about the place, which are meant to be answered individually for each of the four maps, and six questions about the maps as documents. Finally, an optional Post-Activity has students choose one feature of interest on the map, pose a simple research question, and identify potential research sources on the NYPL website. The Post-Activity is recommended if completing the lesson as part of a class (such as History or Geography) that will have teacher guidance and additional time to research. Students completing the lesson for less formal homeschooling may want to stop after the Activity.

The lesson has been included in its PDF form here, but the primary means of accessing the lesson would be through a webpage on NYPL's website (with high-resolution, enlargable images).

Outreach

This activity will be posted on the NYPL website, under the [Remote Learning Resources: Kids & Teens](#) section, in both the Middle School and High School sections (including on the Learn At Home Activities calendar for each age group). The activity would also be advertised in the NYPL Connect e-newsletter and on the library's social media platforms.

Evaluation

Below the Activity will be a one-question survey: "What's one thing you learned today?" with space for open-ended, freeform answers. If students choose to continue to the Post-Activity, there will be a two-question survey that asks students to enter 1. Initial research question and 2. NYPL sources found. Hopefully the simplicity of the surveys will encourage answers and demonstrate how students are engaging with the material.

There will also be an e-mail address for questions or comments. Teachers in particular will be encouraged to be in touch with thoughts about the lesson.

Time Traveling with Historical Maps

Introduction

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, fire insurance companies created incredibly detailed maps of urban areas. Some of the most detailed city maps ever published, they depict building footprints (sizes), lot dimensions, building materials, and sometimes building names or purposes. Originally created for the companies—most prominently, the Sanborn Map Company—to assess fire risk, the maps are now a rich source of information on urban history and the changing built environment. The maps are also colorful, hand-drawn documents that are beautiful to look at and dense with information.

The New York Public Library's [Map Division](#) has an extensive collection of these maps of New York City, originally published as paper atlases with just a few blocks depicted on each page. Over the past decade, NYPL has digitized nearly 9,000 pages from 162 atlases, published on the [Digital Collections](#). These are a rich source of information, but can be difficult to search and understand or interpret.

In this activity, you will learn to “read” these fire insurance maps to learn about local history, gain map literacy, and consider forces of development and change in a city. Using these digitized fire insurance maps, students will investigate the growth and development of the city blocks containing and surrounding the New York Public Library—Schwarzman Building at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street.

The four maps on this site show snapshots in time from the 1850s to the 1950s for this area. You will use the four maps provided, along with their “Keys,” to uncover the history of this significant section of Manhattan and learn to interpret the information contained in these maps. (The maps provided are stitched together from multiple pages of the digitized fire insurance atlas pages in order to see more context and better understand the maps. The experience would be very different if you were to page through the atlases in person at NYPL!).

It is important to remember that these maps were made for a specific use, and although they are now valuable for other reasons, the needs of the fire insurance industry determined the information mapped here.

Learning Objectives

- Attentively read, make observations about, and identify key features of historical maps
- Make inferences, based on close observations, about the subject, audience, and purpose of fire insurance maps
- Formulate questions for further research

Pre-Activities

1. View [The Story of Sanborn Mapping Company](#), a brief video that originally aired on Channel Thirteen in 2008, which introduces the purposes and research uses of Sanborn maps.
2. Spend a few minutes taking a “walk around the block” using Street View in Google Maps. Start [here](#), and make your way around the New York Public Library—Schwarzman Building and Bryant Park (Fifth to Sixth Avenues, 40th to 42nd Streets).

Activity

Answer the questions below for each map individually (you should have four sets of answers, but they can be short and written in bullet points):

Questions about the place:

1. What kinds of buildings (residential, commercial, big, small, etc.) buildings do you see? What are the most prominent buildings or features of the map?
2. What might you infer about the culture or economy of this place based just on what is shown here? How does it compare with what you know about this place today?
3. How did the place change from the previous map? How do you know? (Ignore this question for the first map.)
4. How do you think this place will change in the future?

Answer the questions below for the maps as a set (you should have one set of answers):

Questions about the maps as documents:

1. Which way is north? How do you know? (Hint: look at the symbol in Bryant Park.)
2. What is the purpose of the Reference or Key? What does it tell you and why do you need it?
3. What types of information can you learn about a place (its buildings, streets, transportation, people, etc.) by looking at:
 - a. An individual map (a snapshot in time)?
 - b. A series of maps spanning a century (showing change over time)?
4. Why do you think fire insurance companies made such detailed, comprehensive maps of the city?
5. What other types of maps are you familiar with? How does the purpose of this map dictate the information presented? What do you want to know that this particular map can't tell you?
6. How do you think researchers, historians, scholars, genealogists, etc. might use these maps?

Post-Activity (Optional)

Choose one feature that appears on at least one map that interests you. It may be a specific, named building (such as the Harmonie Club or Geo. M. Cohan's Theatre), a piece of infrastructure (like the dis-used reservoir or the Manhattan Railway Station), or something else. What do you want to know more about? Formulate a general question to start, something as simple as "What is (was?) the Harmonie Club?" or "Why was there a reservoir next to Bryant Park?"

Once you have identified your feature, make a list of everything you can learn about just from the map(s). Where is it located, how big is it, what are the construction materials (if applicable, etc.). It might be a short list!

Next, brainstorm where you might learn more about it and what types of resources you could use in research. Think first about resources already at NYPL: [Digital Collections](#), [databases](#) (such as [The New York Times \(1851-2015\)](#) or [New York City Views](#)), keywords you might use to search the library's catalog. Spend some time browsing the NYPL website, or consider using the online reference service to chat with a librarian. Come up with at least two potential sources from NYPL and write them down.

Submit your answers on the website! (See Evaluation section.)

For teachers: This question could also become the basis for an assignment that combines primary source analysis with secondary source research.

Evaluation

From the Activity, what's one thing you learned today?

From the Post-Activity, what is:

1. Your initial research question?
2. The NYPL sources you found?

Additional Resources

- History of The New York Public Library: <https://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl/history>
- OldNYC: Mapping Historical Photos from the NYPL: <https://www.oldnyc.org>
- NYPL Map Warper: <http://maps.nypl.org/warper>
- Library of Congress: Sanborn Maps: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection>



Bryant Park; Croton Reservoir; West Presbyterian Church (1890)
via NYPL Digital Collections



Front facade of The New York Public Library, Dec. 26, 1907
via NYPL Digital Collections





