

Nineteenth-Century Beers Atlases and Local Maps on CD-ROM

By Maureen A. Taylor

Here's a great way to get to know a Massachusetts town — walk into the past by consulting an old map. If you've never tried walking in your ancestor's footsteps then you are missing a unique experience. Take an historical map of your town that shows landmarks and buildings and walk any street that appears on the map. You won't believe how it has changed. You will notice differences in names, structures, and even building usage. It's a great activity for kids too. Using a map of the neighborhood of their school or the street they live on, ask the children to identify what has changed. This is a fun activity that also lets them appreciate history. However, you won't be able to take that walk unless you have an historical Massachusetts town map or a reproduction of one. Now that the 1870 Beers County Atlas CD Collection of Massachusetts is available from Piper Publishing, studying the past has never been easier.

Piper Publishing, located in Easton, Connecticut, works collaboratively with libraries to reproduce “significant popular historical academic collections in print and electronic formats.” A complete list of their offerings appears on their website <http://www.piperpublishing.com/>.

As every genealogist knows, maps are very valuable research tools. Having a collection of Massachusetts atlases on a series of CDs opens up new avenues of sleuthing to family historians because of the amount of information contained on each map. The Beers family produced many well-known nineteenth-century maps with detailed data, but it is difficult to find a complete atlas. Many of them are in poor condition or have been disbound for framing and sale. By collaborating with the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, the Jones Library Special Collections Library in Amherst, the Massachusetts State Library Rare Collections, and the Monson Free Library, Piper Publishing was able to make this new set available to researchers.

There are CDs for Berkshire, Bristol, Essex, Franklin, Hampden, Hampshire, Middlesex, and Worcester counties. Each one contains a facsimile of the original maps published by the Beers family, which means they feature business directories, statistics, a table of distances, and engravings of significant buildings. The front matter of each volume presents an overview of the history of the county and each locality that appears in the atlas.

Beers atlases offer a fascinating glimpse into the past. Unlike many earlier maps, the Beers set includes the names and location of geographic features such as ponds and hills, schools, churches, mills, businesses, railroad lines, and the surname and at least first initial of property or house owners for all but the most densely populated areas of cities and towns. Finding the name of an ancestor on a map helps family historians discover exactly where ancestors lived, so that they may learn more about the area and perhaps even visit the site.

These maps also include cemeteries, which may help you find that historic graveyard that you cannot locate on a contemporary map. The cemetery could now be overgrown and forgotten, but its location might be clearly marked in this resource. Unfortunately for genealogists, there is no surname index to assist in locating directory listings and land owners, so you need to know exactly which map to consult.

System requirements are a computer with at least Windows 95/98, and 64 MB of RAM. There is no installation required. If you want to print out any of the maps you will need Adobe Acrobat, which can be downloaded for free at <http://www.adobe.com/>. Just click on the print command and an entire page of the atlas will be printed on a sheet of 8.5 x 11 paper. Printing the close-up details is a little more complicated, but a separate card enclosed with the CD leads users through the steps. For good quality prints, photo paper is recommended. Copies suitable for framing are available from the publisher.

Aside from the multi-step process required to print out magnified or zoomed-in views, the CD is otherwise easy to use. Since there is no software to download, you can begin using it immediately. An introduction places the maps in historical context and a publisher's note provides background on the collaboration that made this possible. Each map appears quite small and unreadable until you utilize the zoom feature, which is activated by clicking the + button.

Let's look at an example of one of the towns in Franklin County — Heath. A short paragraph outlines some basic

historical facts, such as who founded the town and when it was established. The population statistics may be of particular interest to genealogists—in Heath there were 1,200 inhabitants in 1832 but only 613 in 1870, due to emigration. On page nine of the atlas on the CD it is possible to see a full view of the town or an inset of Heath Centre. This inset is one of the special features of the nineteenth-century atlases and oversized maps that Beers and other companies produced. The full town page is too large to include the information present in the small town center. Several clicks on the zoom button allow you to view the inset and see that a Mrs. H. White lived in the center of town, which is also where S.W. Barber's Boot, Shoe and Grocery Store conducted business. While property boundaries are not visible in a whole town, they are outlined in the detailed inset maps.

In addition to your stroll through the past, there are several ways to use these maps. Here are a few other suggestions.

- Study the map to understand the local history of an area and incorporate what you've learned into your family history. Find your ancestor's hometown from other documents such as census and city directories and then try to find exactly where they lived by consulting a map.
- Visit the site and take pictures to use in your family history.
- Track your family history using maps of the area much like you would with city directories. Try to find relations on any printed maps available of the area in which they resided.
- Use the maps to lead you to a new family story. For instance, if you have several ancestral families living in one town you might discover your great grandfather married the girl next door.

In general, maps are a lot of fun beyond the genealogical material they contain. They are beautiful glimpses into a world that no longer exists. Even without a surname index, these CDs are an exciting new tool for genealogists. Each county CD is reasonably priced in the \$35 to \$45 range.