Mapping Your New York Ancestors

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Why location should be top of mind for all researchers

At its core, genealogy is all about locating members of our family in both time and place. But all too often, family history researchers think too much about "names and dates" and too little about location.

Location is one of the defining characteristics of any given event in our ancestors' lives – knowing everything we can about the places of our ancestors will help us recreate the world they lived in, and discover more records and information about them.

Recent advances in digital maps and mapping applications – including significant ones that have taken place as recently as the past few years – have made understanding the places of our ancestors lives easier than ever.

GIS: Free, Powerful, Usable Software

A Geographic Information System (GIS) application is a piece of software that stores, manages, and allows analysis of spatially referenced data – in simpler terms, it's a program that puts stuff on a map! Users work from a map interface and can upload layers of data to capture, store, analyze, and present information.

There are many GIS applications available today, from the simple to the complex. This lecture touches on several popular GIS applications, but focuses on Google Earth.

Google Earth (https://www.google.com/earth): Google Earth is the application that, at the moment, strikes the best balance between availability (it's free to use), usability (you do not need technical expertise to use it) and capability (it can accomplish all but the most advanced GIS processes).

Family history researchers can use Google Earth in the following ways:

- Add data layers to the map that pinpoint family history events. Data points can include images, hyperlinks, and formatted text.
- Organize research notes about locations of interest and research leads.
- Import data from third-party sources (such as historical maps or historical datasets) to recreate the historical geography of our ancestors.
- Create animated, multimedia narratives that share our family's story in an exciting and unique way.

Google provides many free tutorials that will help users become proficient at using Google Earth: https://www.google.com/earth/outreach/learn/

KMZ and KML Files: A KMZ file is one of the most common GIS files used to display annotated geographic information. A KMZ file can be loaded into a GIS application and will populate the map with new information, whether it's a collection of location markers or additional data layers that displays historical boundaries, geographic features, or topography. Many online maps that display collections of data or historical boundaries have KMZ files that can be downloaded and loaded into a GIS application like Google Earth. GIS applications can also easily create KMZ files to export and share anything you have created locally in the program. Note: Researchers will also encounter the term "KML file" – for practical purposes, KML and KMZ files are essentially the same (A KMZ is simply a compressed KML file).

ArcGIS (https://www.arcgis.com/features/index.html): ArcGIS is a desktop software application used for the management, analysis, and display of geographic data. This is the most advanced of the GIS software covered in this lecture, but also the most powerful. This tool can be used for advanced geographic study, data science, and map-based web development.

Even if you do not decide to use ArcGIS, the ArcGIS community is constantly creating new and useful mapping datasets that are relevant to genealogists. Users should explore the Story Maps to see the full power of GIS applications: https://storymaps.arcgis.com/en/

Research Planning and Solving Mysteries: Tools to Use

A useful exercise for all family history researchers: Once you identify a location of interest in your family history, step back and remove all names and individuals from the equation – think only about the time period and location, and get researching!

In taking this approach, you can find clues about records and record keeping that will be helpful for researching your ancestors, and you can begin to form a more holistic understanding of their lives, as we learn the details of their places. Here are some tools that will help:

Gazetteers: A gazetteer is a publication that organizes information by geographic location, and contains information on notable locations in the area covered by the gazetteer. Many genealogy societies and educational institutions produce gazetteers specifically for family history researchers. The NYG&B's *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer* contains a chapter dedicated to researching in each county in New York State, as well as guides for New York City and Long Island. Historical gazetteers are also useful for researchers – a gazetteer created during the time period you're investigating can be a crucial resource.

County and Local Histories: Many county histories and histories of smaller municipalities have been produced throughout American history. Many are quite voluminous and have now entered the public domain. These sources can help build a narrative recreation of the world your ancestors lived in, and may also point to possible record sets or events to investigate. They are full of details that may seem boring or arcane to the average reader but will keep genealogists with ancestors in the area page-turning with fascination. Internet Archive (www.archive.org) and Google Books (https://books.google.com) are good places to start.

Periodicals (PERSI): Genealogy and local history periodicals are excellent sources for learning about the locations of your ancestors. The Allen County Public Library has been collecting volumes of these

periodicals for decades and indexing every article in every issue. Some are even being digitized. There are thousands of little-known gems in the Periodical Source Index (PERSI) and it's all available to search online. Visit: www.findmypast.com/PERSI

Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) (https://geonames.usgs.gov): This database, developed departments of the U.S. Government, is the official database for geographic names used by the Federal Government in the U.S. It includes contemporary and historical names, and is an excellent resource for determining the exact location of a place with an unfamiliar or no-longer-used name. GNIS includes names of physical geographic features, such as rivers or mountains, as well as municipalities.

Newberry Atlas of Historical County Boundaries (http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/): A project of the Newberry Library in Chicago, this website is a fantastic resource for exploring the changing boundaries of counties in all 50 states. You can use the interactive map online to see borders of any county in the United States at almost any time in history. The maps can also be downloaded as KMZ files and then uploaded as overlays into a GIS program such as Google Earth or ArcGIS.

The National Map (https://nationalmap.gov): The United States has an official map, which is the result of a collaborative effort by various departments of Federal, State and local governments. There are many layers and versions of the map - topographic maps, historical maps, boundary maps, geographic name maps, and many more. Any layers or data sets available can be viewed in an interactive online map, but most can also be downloaded as KMZ files or other files capable of being displayed in a GIS program.

Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org): Wikipedia is excellent for general information about modern-day locations as well as historical and defunct locations. When exploring a location on Wikipedia, make sure to click the link with the coordinates on the upper right-hand corner of the page - this will bring you to the location's "GeoHack" page. This page will show you a wide variety of online maps where the location can be found - historical maps, topographic maps, and more.

Centennia Historical Atlas (http://www.clockwk.com/default.aspx): This tool is a downloadable program that can be purchased for a one-time license fee. It is a comprehensive historical map of Europe and the Middle East from the 11th century to the present. It is an excellent way to investigate Eurasian borders and place names at any given point in time, and can conveniently illustrate the changes as they happened. It's a fantastic tool for tracing European origins and can help immensely with locating an unfamiliar place of origin for an immigrant ancestor.

NYPL Map Warper (http://maps.nypl.org/warper): The New York Public Library Map Warper is an online tool that allows users to align historical maps with today's modern digital maps. If you're interested in contributing to some crowd-sourced mapping initiatives, this is a great candidate - anyone can learn how to "rectify" the maps and help out with the many maps that have yet to be aligned. You can also browse already-rectified maps, and download many as KMZ files that can be imported into any GIS program.

NYG&B: Mapping *The Record* Search (https://labs.newyorkfamilyhistory.org): This product of NYG&B Labs (https://nygbs.org/labs) allows you to search a location-based index to articles in *The Record*, the NYG&B's periodical, which contains thousands of articles that include record transcriptions, case studies, compiled genealogies and more, about locations throughout New York State. We encourage

everyone to visit this page and enter the locations of your New York State research - chances are the Record contains a helpful article!

Sanborn Fire insurance maps: The Sanborn Map Company created many fire insurance maps in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - these maps are among the most detailed maps you will be able to find, with highly accurate portrayals of buildings, property, and infrastructure. Many exist in physical form at various repositories throughout New York State, but there is not currently a large statewide database of digitized maps.

The New York Public Library possesses an excellent collection focusing on New York City, and maps for other locations in the state can be found on the Library of Congress website (https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection/) and NY Heritage (see entry below). NYPL also has an excellent page that compiles the location of Sanborn maps all across the U.S.(https://www.nypl.org/collections/nypl-recommendations/guides/fireinsurancemap). New York Heritage Digital Collections (https://www.nyheritage.org/) also has a number of Sanborn maps, along with thousands of other New York State historical maps.