

Sanborn Fire Insurance Atlases

Detailed historical study of urban areas across the nation is facilitated by the use of the Sanborn atlases. Many companies mapped cities in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century for fire insurance purposes, but the Sanborn Company was predominant in Illinois. Most cities were mapped several times over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so that researchers can trace the history of the corner of 4th and Elm over 70 years.

The atlases are block-by-block maps, which show building outlines and construction material, among other things. A historical society, for instance, can tell whether or not the house had a verandah by 1902. The atlases are also heavily used for their information about potential hazardous waste sites.

Chadwyck-Healy filmed the Library of Congress' collection of Sanborns, and the Illinois State Library purchased these sixty-six reels of microfilm on Illinois cities from 1884 to 1950. A complete list is given in the Library of Congress' [1981 Fire Insurance Maps in the Library of Congress](#). A microfiche version is available too. An additional two reels (#'s 67 & 68) take thirteen cities up to 1970. The call number on this microfilm is MICROFILM 912.773 SANB Reel no. []. The atlases are on the reels alphabetically by town and then chronologically. Each atlas then is indexed so that a user may find specific addresses within a certain year's atlas.

The Illinois Digital Sanborn Maps 1867-1970 collection (digitized from the Chadwyck-Healey microfilm) is accessible from the State Library's [Alphabetical List of Research Databases](#).

The State Library has also purchased another set of Sanborn microfilm. University Publications of America filmed atlases from the Sanborn Company's archives, which brings some cities up to 1990. The key to this set of thirty-three reels is a simple list by reel number of the cities on that reel and year of the atlas. The call number on this microfilm is MICROFILM 917.773 SANB2 no. [].

Chicago suburbs, not listed separately, may be listed under the Chicago entries. For the city of Chicago, a specific address needs to be identified and located in a manuscript index booklet before going to the many Chicago reels.

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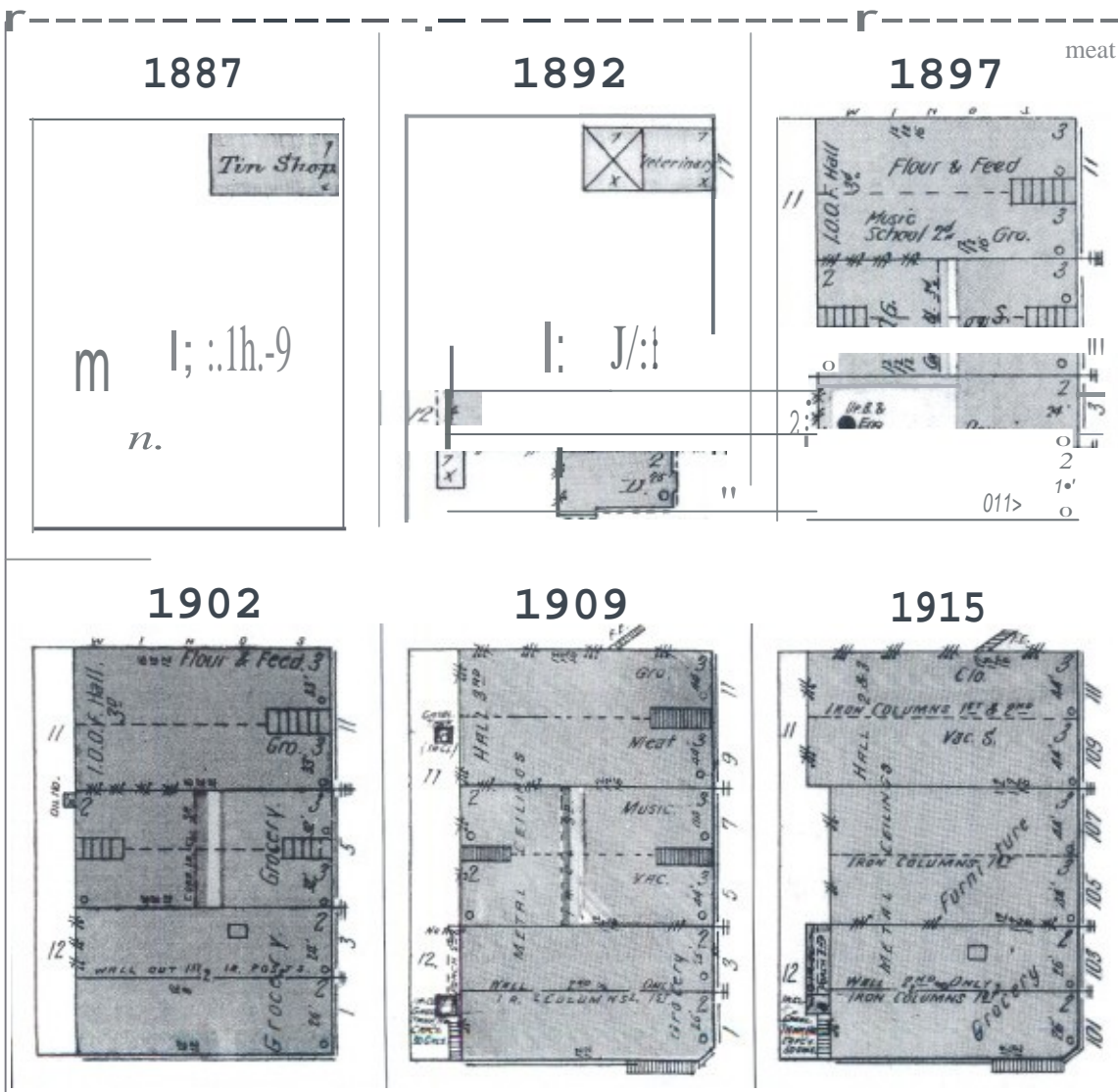
Figures 3-8 show a corner of the downtown edge of Champaign, Illinois, and the remarkable changes that occurred there between 1887 and 1915. In 1887, the corner was occupied by a one-story tin shop and a two-story dwelling with a shed in the backyard. Figure 4 (1892)

shows the tin shop refurbished into a veterinary and the addition of a two-story grocery store with windows and an additional dwelling. Figure 5 (1897) reveals a complete restructuring of this corner with a new three-story brick structure, the elimination of one dwelling, and the addition of a new grocery store on the corner. The detail of these maps even

includes tipper stories, as noted by the music school on the second floor and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows on the third in the northeast corner. Figure 6 (1902) reveals that the music school has left and that the block is dominated by grocers. Figure 7 (1909) shows more major changes with a grocery store moving to the northeast corner,

new meat and music stores, our first vacancy appearing, and the same grocery store on the southeast corner. It is interesting to note the addition of fire escapes, metal ceilings, two gasoline tanks in the back alley, and a second-floor porch behind one grocery store. Figure 8 (1915) concludes our view of this block. It shows continuing change in the three-story structure with the addition of a clothing store, a furniture store, and a

vacancy where the meat store had been located.



Figures 3-8. A corner of downtown Champaign, Illinois, 1887 to 1915