

# DETECT



Center for American History

## City Detective: Who Designed My Town? A Lesson in Plats, Maps, Atlases, and Plans

**Teacher Instructions** ■ Subjects: Social studies, civics, history, geography ■ Length of time: classroom—3 hours

### Objectives

This lesson introduces students to the foundation of the town—its original design as it was recorded in maps and plans. Students will learn about the historic origins of the town and how it developed into its present form.

In addition, students will learn about maps and their various uses and formats. They will use legal documents, planning tools, and historical documents.

### Resources and Materials Needed

#### Original Plat

A plat is a map that shows the land in a community subdivided into lots with streets, boundaries, easements, and dimensions drawn to scale; the plat shows the original outline of the community.

The original plat will be recorded in the county courthouse or city hall in the Register of Deeds office. Obtain a copy.

#### Early Plans, Maps, and Atlases

The local or state historical society and the local library will have collections of materials that you can photocopy for classroom use. Some materials may be available online. Check with your local librarian.

#### Online:

[Library of Congress Map Collection](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/cityhome.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/cityhome.html>

[University of Texas, Perry Casteneda Library Map Collection](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historic_us_cities.html)

[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historic\\_us\\_cities.html](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historic_us_cities.html)

#### Sanborn Maps

[History of maps](http://lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html)

<http://lib.berkeley.edu/EART/snb-intr.html>

[Location of maps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanborn_Maps)

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The Wikipedia entry for Sanborn maps lists states that have Sanborn Map collections. Other Sanborn maps are in the Library of Congress.

#### Contemporary Maps: Paper

The town planning and engineering departments will have map files. (Your town's planning department may go under the name of "planning and development," "community development," or "planning and zoning.") See also tips for finding your local planning agency.

Obtain two maps:

1. Current map showing streets and lots. If this map is too large, use the map showing the downtown area of your town.
2. Current planning map (from planning agency); this may be more than one map, so select one that covers the historic area or downtown.

#### Contemporary Maps: Online

Many communities will also have a Geographical Information System (GIS) for maps. Some communities will have these maps accessible online. Ask your local planning department.

#### Topographic or Aerial Photography Map

Google maps provides aerial photographs that reveal topographic features. In many areas, the maps allow browsers to zoom in closely for details of the town.

The U.S. Geological Survey produces standardized topographic maps of the entire United States. USGS sells both digital and hard copies of these maps. <http://www.usgs.gov/>

#### History of Your Town

Find the history of the town that gives the date of founding.

#### Obtaining Materials

The teacher will collect these materials. If the teacher wishes to conduct the lesson completely within the classroom, then materials will be gathered ahead of time.

The teacher can make the gathering of the material part of the lesson. In that case, students will need an orientation lecture from the teacher and be provided with instructions for locating the maps.

#### Presentation by a Planner

Invite a planner from a local planning agency to meet with your class. The teacher may wish to also invite a local historian or preservationist, and someone from the Register of Deeds office. Or, the teacher may wish to visit those offices with the students. Staff can talk with students about the assignment and their jobs.

For the planner's presentation, ask him or her to talk about the following issues:

1. What is the oldest section(s) of the town?
2. What is distinctive about the design or layout of your town?
3. What major changes have occurred in the layout of the town?
4. How are changes and new developments recorded on plans, plats, and maps?
5. When was the planning department created?
6. When was the first official planning map created?
7. What do planners do?
8. Is the town trying to preserve the oldest section(s) of the original plan?
9. What maps does the planner use in his or her job?
  - a. What kinds of maps are they?
  - b. Who creates them?
  - c. How often are they updated?
10. What is the oldest map the planning department uses?



**American Planning Association**

*Making Great Communities Happen*

# City Detective: Who Designed My Town?

## A Lesson in Plats, Maps, Atlases, and Plans

### Student Exercise

#### Your Case

Your town has a past. Your town has a distinctive design or arrangement of streets, buildings, and open spaces. Look for clues about how the founders designed the town. Explore how the town was designed relative to natural features, such as water.

Learn how the founders legally established the design of the town. Discover who created the first plan. Find out the occupation of the plat maker.

Explore how your town has changed. Why have these changes occurred?

#### Your Assignment

You will be given a series of plats, atlases, plans, and maps to complete your assignment.

#### One. Examine the original plat or plan of your town

- ✓ What do you notice about how the streets and blocks were laid out?
- ✓ Are block sizes different? Why might this be?
- ✓ What is the most important street? How can you tell?
- ✓ Where were homes located? How can you tell?
- ✓ Where were businesses located? How can you tell?
- ✓ Are all streets set in a rectangular grid? Do some streets curve? Why might they curve?
- ✓ Which way is north? How do you know?

#### Two: Determine who created the plan

Where is the name?  
 What was his (or her) title?  
 Where is the original plat or plan stored?  
 Why is it stored here?

#### Three. What year was your town founded?

What date is on the earliest plat?  
 If the dates are different, why is that?

#### Four. Who founded your town?

For this investigation, you will need to consult a history of your town.

Decide which of these people or groups founded your town. You may have to look up definitions for some of these.

- ✓ Proprietor
- ✓ Land or development company
- ✓ Religious organization
- ✓ Manufacturing, mining or other company
- ✓ Railroad company
- ✓ European government
- ✓ Native Americans
- ✓ U.S. government (ex. military).

#### Five. Compare the plats or maps

You will have 3-5 maps to examine. Some may be online.

- a. Determine the date each map was made. Write the dates on the maps or on a sheet of paper. Refer to the dates as you compare the maps
- b. Determine who made each map. Write the names on the maps or on a sheet of paper. Refer to the map makers as you compare maps.
- c. Locate the following on each map, as well as you can:
  - ✓ Main street
  - ✓ Businesses
  - ✓ Churches or other religious buildings
  - ✓ City hall
  - ✓ County courthouse and other government buildings
  - ✓ Clubs, recreation buildings, social halls
  - ✓ Parks
  - ✓ Single homes

- ✓ Apartments, condominiums, or other attached homes
- ✓ Hotels
- ✓ Motels
- ✓ Railroad station
- ✓ Bus station
- ✓ Schools
- ✓ Body of water (river, lake, spring)
- ✓ Hills or mountains.

- d. Has the original layout of the town changed?
  - ✓ Are new streets different than old streets?
  - ✓ Are blocks different sizes?
  - ✓ Do main roads and streets run throughout the entire town?
  - ✓ Locate the main shopping areas

#### Six. Have things changed over time?

Discuss why the location of these features may have changed.

Discuss your observations and questions with the visiting planner.

#### Seven. What can you see on each map?

Compare the plans. Create a list of things you can see on one map that you cannot see on another. What is unique about each map? What is the purpose of each map?

#### Eight. Write a definition of these terms

You may look up the definition of these terms, but you must prepare your own definition based on what you learned.

- Plat
- Plan
- Atlas
- Map
- Aerial imagery
- GIS.



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