



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Sanborn Insurance Company Maps ***By Melissa Dagenais***

Maps have always been an important resource. Maps show where things are, how to get to places, property lines, boundaries, how land wealthy someone may be, and how things have changed over time. Maps also come in many varieties: town plats, bird's eye view maps from the late 19th century, atlases, and globes. However, there is a category of maps that has largely gone unnoticed and unappreciated for its value to researchers, historians, and map enthusiasts alike: Fire Insurance Maps.

Fire Insurance Maps were used by insurance companies to calculate the risk of insuring a property or business. They benefited both property owner and insurance company so that the correct insurance type and payment rate would be established. Fire insurance maps began to be used in Great Britain in the 1700s with great success. The Sun Company was created in London and was the first fire insurance company to offer coverage in the American Colonies; they realized the importance of having a visual reference for the type of building and business they were insuring across the Atlantic Ocean. The first American city to have a fire insurance map was Charleston, South Carolina in 1788. After the War of 1812, American

Continued on Page 2

Continued from Page 1

insurance companies began to take prominence. The need for insurance maps decreased as company agents and insured properties were in close enough proximity to allow for personal visits. With the rapid growth of United States cities in the late 19th century, the practicality of these maps once again emerged. The fire insurance maps allowed insurance agents to quickly assess the insurance risk factors of a building or business by indicating building material, size, and the building's use.

While several companies made insurance maps in the 19th century, the most prevalent and lasting were published by the Sanborn Map Company. D.A. Sanborn became the most popular fire insurance map maker in the United States in the late 19th century. He began his career at Aetna Insurance Company, and, in 1877 started the D.A. Sanborn National Insurance Diagram Bureau in New York City. His maps became highly regarded for their accuracy, detail, and consistency, because he copyrighted his symbol method and key. They were very easy to read, and immediately allowed insurers to set an insurance rate. These maps primarily focused on business districts of cities, and were helpful for both the insurance company and business owner in establishing insurance rates and protection. The maps ceased to be drawn and widely used for this purpose after World War II. They have begun to find their way into libraries and repositories across the country, with the Library of Congress holding one of the most complete collections. Today, the Sanborn maps are used by a variety of individuals including historic preservationists, map enthusiasts, and researchers.

What do these late 19th and early 20th century maps have to do with the Carlyle House? The Carlyle House focuses primarily on interpreting the lifetime of John Carlyle and Colonial America. However, as a house that has been around for over 250 years, it has a

CARLYLE HOUSE

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rich history. With many owners and families residing in the house, multiple changes took place over time. One way to uncover the history of the house through later periods is through exploring the Sanborn Insurance Maps. The Alexandria maps began to be published in 1885, and show structural elements of the house and surrounding property that no longer exist.

Through examining seven publications of the Alexandria Sanborn Maps that feature the Carlyle House, it is revealed how the house and surrounding buildings changed in the years between 1885 and 1921. We also learn how research information changed and how incorrect assumptions of the property prevailed throughout the decades until the correct information finally emerged. For instance, in the first three publications of the Alexandria Sanborn Maps, the house is indicated as a brick building, but we now know that it was made of stone. However, through additional research materials such as the Carlyle House Restoration Report, one learns that the house had extensive brick patchwork, and was stuccoed during the late 19th century. Therefore the assumption by the Sanborn Map makers would have been that the whole building was brick.

In the 1885 map the Carlyle House is depicted as a brick building located behind the Braddock House Hotel. The six story brick addition by James Green on the north end of the house sandwiched between the Bank of Alexandria Building and the house is also indicated. By 1902, the Carlyle House is finally indicated as a separate entity from the Braddock House Hotel property. The correct building material of stone is shown with the blue shading of the building, showing both the back stone terrace as well as a round terrace at the front entry. A particularly comical look at the progression of historical record can be seen in the 17 years it took (from 1885-1902) for the correct building material to be identified on the maps. The map also indicates that the Carlyle House was built in 1732, which was a common misconception about the Carlyle House perpetuated in guidebooks and other historical tourism materials during the early twentieth century.

Not only did the building materials change, the

building height did as well. The north addition between the Bank of Alexandria Building, and the Carlyle House had been reduced from six stories to four and a half, and the Carlyle House went from being defined as three stories to two and a half. By 1921, the Sanborn Map surveyors finally identified the correct construction date of the house as 1752 on the map. Several notable structural changes between 1885 and the 1921 maps are visible. First, the north addition to the Carlyle House was demolished. Secondly, a one story building that extended from the hotel and attached to the south end of the house was also removed. In 1921, the Carlyle House stood alone among the apartments and businesses. The front and back terraces give the house the appearance of an island. The gardens are the one area of the Carlyle House that never experienced significant structural changes. While the garden may have had many incarnations ranging from formal and taken care to wild and unkempt. The only structure built on the property was what appears to be a wooden garden shed in 1885 that by 1921 appears to have been upgraded to a brick garden building that sat on Cameron Street.

The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps illustrate an unfamiliar time period in the life of the Carlyle House. Current interpretation focuses on the late 18th century as well as during the Civil War. However between the 1880s and 1920s, the city of Alexandria experienced tremendous growth and changes in development. This can be seen by taking an intimate, closer look and examining Carlyle House through the lens of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps during a nearly fifty year period.

