

# Sanborn Insurance Maps

**Activity Overview:** Have you ever wondered what your neighborhood looked like 100 years ago? With this Goldie at Home activity, you can examine and explore the evolution of a Des Moines neighborhood between 1884 and 1920 using Sanborn Insurance Maps. By comparing and contrasting the historic maps, you will learn about the different businesses and jobs that were important to Iowans in the past. You also will see the evolution and change over the course of 40 years and how technology impacted the area.

## Connection to Iowa History

The Sanborn Map Company created detailed maps of cities and towns that showed businesses during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The maps were created for fire insurance companies. Many of these maps have been digitized. Use the online collections of Iowa maps from the [Library of Congress](#) to see if there are maps of your town or neighborhood.

## How to Read the Maps

Sanborn maps offer unique ways to see how city blocks were designed at certain periods of time. Each map shows a small section of a neighborhood with the street names and building numbers. On each block, the shape of each building is outlined and the type of building (residential or commercial) is identified. Some buildings include additional information that would be useful for fire departments, such as wall heights or dangerous equipment.

Since these maps are from the late 19th, early 20th century, some of the types of businesses no longer exist or words may have changed. For example, homes might be labeled as dwellings or “dwell’gs.” Some labels might be shortened, such as “Hardw” for a hardware store. If you are unsure of a label, a quick online search may yield some results.

## Instructions ([Video Instructions Available](#))

- 1 Preview.** Begin this activity by looking at one of the Sanborn maps without context. Use the provided links for better views of the maps. Allow some time to look it over, and then use the worksheet to record first impressions. After documenting first thoughts, discuss the map’s purpose, and how to find and read labels prior to beginning the activity.
- 2 Start.** Begin the activity with the [1884 Sanborn map](#) (either online or using the provided images)
  - The area on W. Court Avenue between 4th and 5th street will be the focus for this activity.
  - Using the worksheet, list the types of businesses, building names and additional notes you can find on this map. If there are words you don’t know, do a quick online search to assist you.
- 3 Predict.** After you view the 1884 map and answer the questions, write down your prediction on the worksheet about what happened to this street between 1884 and 1920. How will this street change? Why would it change?
- 4 Repeat.** Repeat this same process with the [1920 Sanborn map](#). Write down the businesses, building names and additional notes you can find from the map on the worksheet.

## Materials

- [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Des Moines, Polk County, Iowa \(1884\)](#)
- [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Des Moines, Polk County, Iowa \(1920\)](#)
- How Neighborhoods Evolve Worksheet (attached)

*Instructions continued on next page*

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**5 Compare.** Compare the two maps and your notes. What changed? What stayed the same? How close were your predictions for the street?

**6 Modern Look.** If you would like to see how the block looks today, use Google Maps to see a [street view](#) of Court Avenue.

## 7 Questions to Spark Learning

- Why do cities change over time? What would cause these changes? Think about technology and transportation as examples for change.
- What do the maps show about life in Iowa during the time period based on the types of business in the area?
- Based on the two maps, what year would you prefer to live in Des Moines - 1884 or 1920? Why?

## 8 Additional Resources

If your young historian would like to learn more about this topic, explore these additional resources below.

- **Explore.** Take some time to explore the [Sanborn map collection](#). Check out other neighborhoods and time periods. Can you find your town?
- **Business Directories.** Do you wonder what other type of businesses were in Des Moines in 1884 and 1920? Use the Des Moines Public Library's [digital collection of business directories](#) to help find the business listed on the maps.
- **Historical Buildings.** The maps sometimes label large buildings like hotels. For example, on the street studied, the Randolph Hotel is labeled. Research some of the buildings found on the maps to discover more about them.
- **Occupations.** Some of the businesses listed on the map no longer exist. Look online for more information about these types of jobs and occupations and figure out why the business may no longer be open. How might technology have affected the closure of these businesses?

# How Neighborhoods Evolve Worksheet

Use this worksheet to record your observations while analyzing the 1884 and 1920 Sanborn maps.

## Pre-Activity Questions

*Describe what you see - look for familiar words and the illustrations.*

Do these images look like anything you might have seen before? If so, what?

What information is provided to help you understand the maps?

Given what you see, what do you think this document shows? What is its purpose?

What would you like to know more about the images?

Write any words here you find that you need to search later.

## 1884 Sanborn Map Observations

What type of businesses or buildings do you see?

Are these types businesses still around today? If so, which ones?

Write any words here you find that you need to search later.

# How Neighborhoods Evolve Worksheet

## First Reflection

Before looking at the 1920 map, what do you think will happen to this block over 36 years?

Do you think these businesses or buildings will stay or change? Why?

## 1920 Sanborn Map Observations

What type of businesses or buildings do you see?

What are other observations about the map?

Write any words here you find that you need to search later.

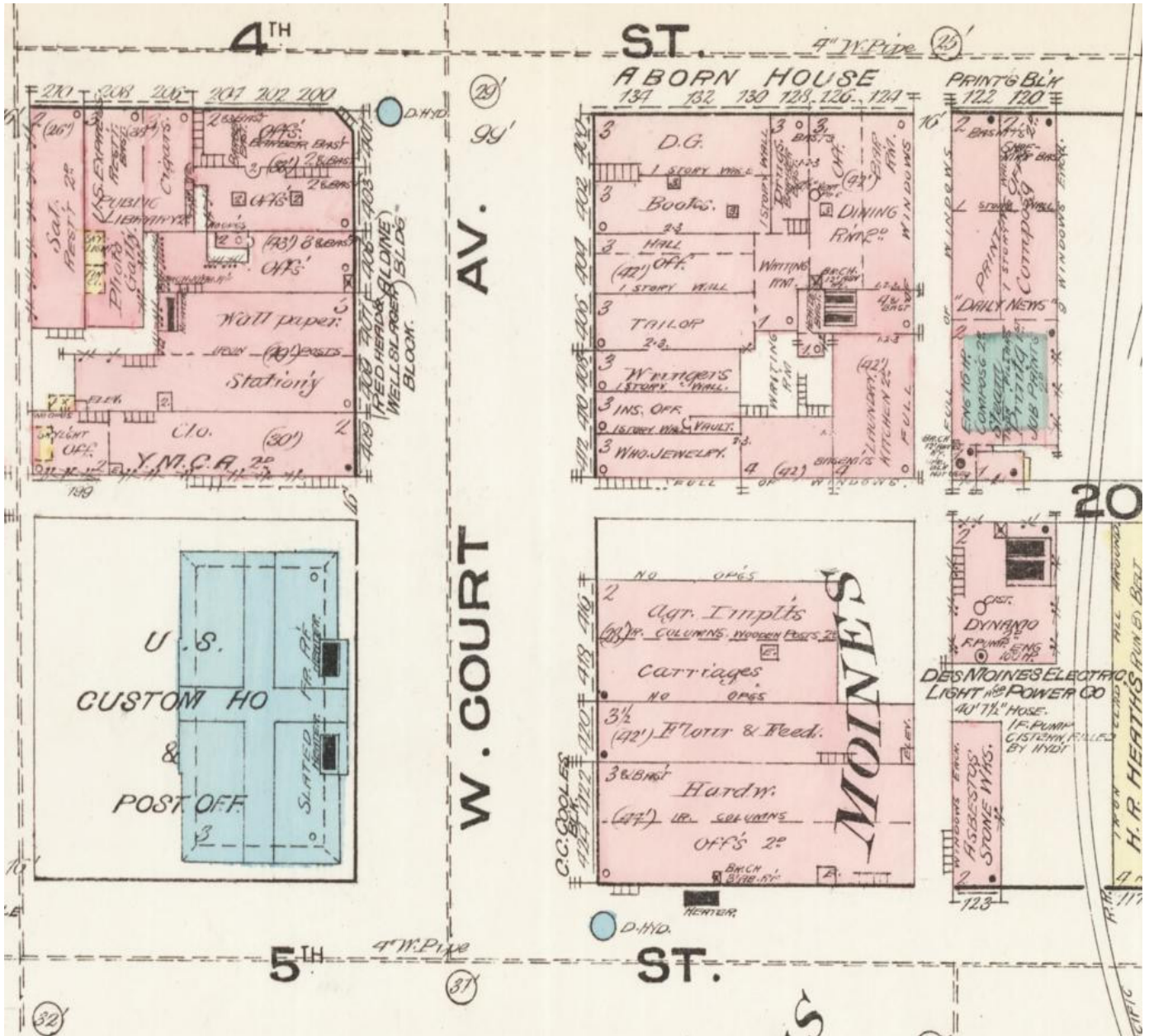
## Final Compare and Contrast

Are any of the businesses or buildings in 1920 the same as 1886? How many are different?

Have any buildings changed or been altered and how?

Why do you think this block has changed?

Sanborn Map from Des Moines, Polk County, Iowa (1884)





Sanborn Map from Des Moines, Polk County, Iowa (1920)

