

# Sanborn Fire Maps: Aid to Understanding Cranford's Built Environment

*By Vic Bary*

## Sanborn Fire Maps

First created in 1866 by surveyor Daniel A. Sanborn to assist the Aetna Insurance company in evaluating fire insurance risks in Tennessee, these periodically published fire maps enable us to study the development of Cranford's "built environment" (man-made structures) across time.

Within a year, Sanborn had published a volume of insurance maps of Boston and had established the D. A. Sanborn Diagram Bureau in New York City. Sanborn fire maps were first created and published for large cities, but by 1893 the first single sheet fire map of downtown Cranford was published. It shows the Opera House block and the many railroad and trolley lines already running down South Avenue. The single sheet 1898 Sanborn map of downtown looks about the same, with a few more buildings extending further down Walnut and Union Avenues.



**1893 Sanborn Map of Cranford**  
Cranford Warrants Multi-Sheet Maps

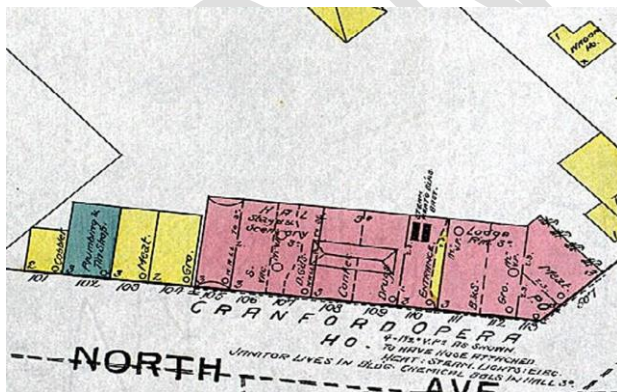
By 1903, Cranford warranted 5 sheets of Sanborn maps. The first sheet (index) might be considered a “neighborhoods” map of suburban Cranford. Using color codes, it shows what were the four earliest neighborhoods of suburban Cranford.

The pink (#4) and blue (#3) neighborhoods correspond with the suburban and downtown development initiated by Dayton, Eastman and Bigelow starting in 1865. The other blue neighborhood (#1) corresponds with the area northeast of the Rahway River developed by Sylvester Cahill. Finally, the yellow area (#5) corresponds with Roosevelt Manor, developed by J. Walter Thompson starting in 1894. It warrants its own separate map sheet (Sheet 5). **1903 Original Cranford Neighborhoods**

The green area (#2) is all railroad and railroad related property. As Cranford continued to grow, the number of map sheets required to describe it increased: from seven sheets in 1908, to nine sheets in 1915, and 33 sheets by 1922.

### What Individual Sanborn Maps Can Tell Us

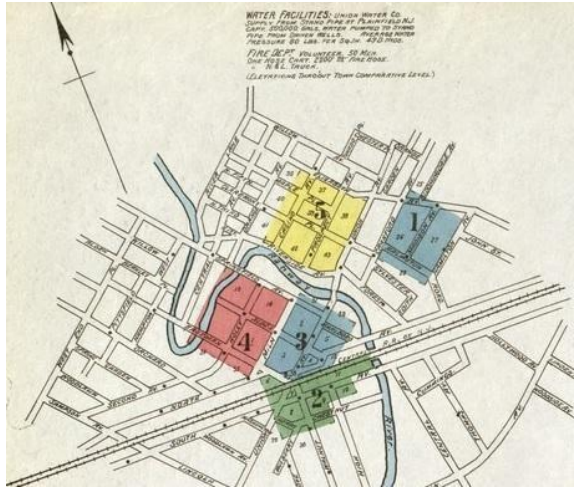
Because Sanborn maps are keyed to building materials, building height, whether a building is a dwelling (residence) or business (with the type specified), individual maps can tell us a great deal. Here’s an 1893 map section showing the Opera House Block (built in 1892 for J. Walter Thompson and totally destroyed by fire in 1912) showing the individual businesses by street address.



**Opera House Block 1893**

The pink section is the Opera House Block, and includes 105 – 115 Eastman Street and 507 Union Avenue. The pink color key denotes that the Opera House is built of brick, a “3” indicates the building is three stories high and an “o” code indicates that it has a slate or tin

roof. Businesses to be found within the Opera House are a meat market (507



Union Ave), the Post Office (115 Eastman Street), a grocery store (112 Eastman Street), a drug store (109 Eastman Street) and a confectioner (108 Eastman Street) to name a few.

To the left of the Opera House Block is the Miller Block. There are four attached buildings - 101, 102, 103 and 104 Eastman Street. All are three stories high with a slate or tin roof. The building at 102 Eastman is coded blue for a stone building, while the other three are coded as frame buildings (yellow).

#### Charting Dynamic Change

By looking at the same area across multiple years of Sanborn map sheets one can chart the growth of neighborhoods.

The 1898 Sanborn map showing the corner of Alden Street and Union Avenue depicts a single 2 ½ story frame building (and outbuilding) assumed to be “Marlborough Place”, home of developer Alden Bigelow. **1898 Sanborn Map**



**Marlborough Place**

In 1913, Alden Bigelow's widow offered the Marlborough Place property for sale to Cranford Township so that they could build the new Cleveland School (site of today's Cleveland Plaza) to house the upper grades which had previously been served by the Grant School at the corner of Holly Street and Springfield Avenue. The 1915 Sanborn map of the same area shows it greatly changed from 1898.

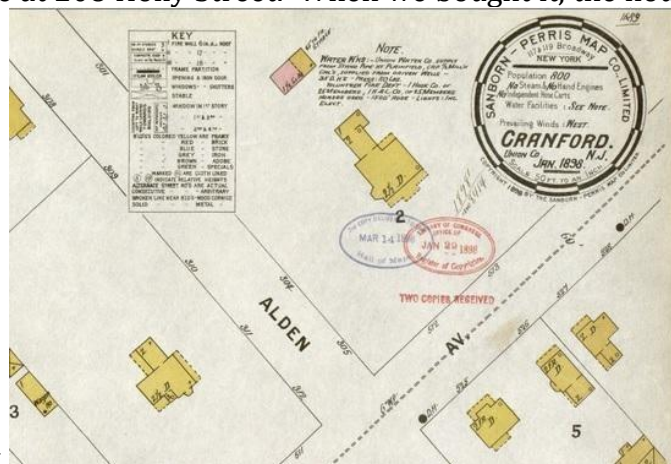


1915 Sanborn Map

Where Marlborough Place had once stood, we now find St Michael's Church, the Cranford Theater and the Cleveland School.

Even Small Questions can be Answered

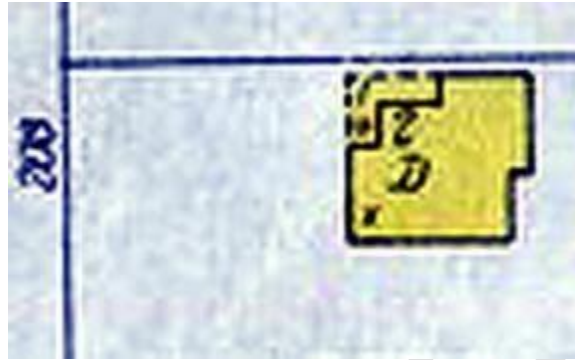
We own an 1887 Queen Anne house at 208 Holly Street. When we bought it, the house had



a porch on the left side of the front which continued half way back on the left side. The side portion stood out three feet from the cross

gable. The front porch roof on the left side also reached forward in the left corner over bull nose flooring.

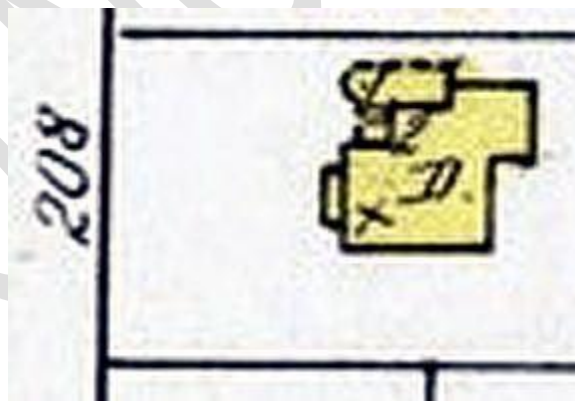
A contractor working on the side porch roof for us remarked that the roof wasn't original, and had been extended at a later date. We took this to mean that the house did not originally have a side porch. However, a recent review of Sanborn map sheets tells a different story.



**208 Holly Street Original House Configuration**

Sanborn maps for 1903, 1908 and 1915 show 208 Holly Street with a half front porch and half side porch that are flush with the projection of the house body.

The 1922 Sanborn map shows the porch extended outwards and forwards, the way it was when we purchased the house in 1986.



**208 Holly Street - 1922 Sanborn Map**

Granted, this is a question probably of interest to no one other than Maureen and me. However, it shows how review of Sanborn maps across time allows a dynamic picture of a property (or neighborhood or section of town) to emerge.

#### Accessing Sanborn Maps

Sanborn maps, which began to decline in popularity by the Great Depression, and had been replaced by other forms of insurance underwriting by the 1950s, are available online from a

number of public sources. Princeton University's library (<http://library.princeton.edu/libraries/firestone/rbcs/aids/sanborn/union/cranford.html>) has digitized Cranford maps for 1893, 1898, 1903, 1908, 1915 and 1922 online. Maps after 1923 can't be digitized without approval from the copyright owner, so Cranford maps from 1929, 1949 and 1959 (the last map) are not available on-line.

Whether researching a Cranford location at a single point in time, or researching the development of a section of Cranford across time, Sanborn Maps are a rich source of information. Give them a try.

Sources:

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanborn\\_maps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanborn_maps)
2. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection/>
3. Discussions with Sanford Maps staff