

History, just a click away

Charles Carpenter's company has made thousands of historic maps available online.

By TUX TURKEL
Staff Writer

WESTBROOK — We see them on our computers and on television news, those satellite mapping images that show Earth from space, then zoom in on single streets and houses. It's an amazing way to examine the world today, but then, try to imagine what those views looked like, say, 100 years ago.

Images that peel back time might show how your neighborhood developed from farmland, or the house in a distant state where your mother grew up. You might be interested to see — in 1874 — when the place that's now Fenway Park in Boston was part of the swamp for which it is named.

Time travel remains a dream, but these vistas from the past are captured in tens of thousands of detailed antique maps, scattered around North America. Now anyone with a computer can see them, searching addresses and place names with a click of a mouse. Developers of this resource say it's akin to a 19th century Google Earth, the on-line digital mapping system.

"They look like hand-painted satellite images," said Charles Carpenter, president and founder of Historic Map Works, a year-old company creating what it says is the world's first database of address-searchable maps of 19th and early 20th century America.

Carpenter owns a private library of roughly 30,000 antique maps of American cities and towns. He recently acquired a Midwest atlas company and now owns more than 100,000 maps. The purchase has given him the most extensive collection of county atlases outside the U.S. Library of Congress.

But this is no hobby. Carpenter has spent two years and \$1 million of his own money assembling the foundation of this unusual database. He recently attracted \$400,000 in operating capital from private investors and will soon seek a



Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

Owner Charles Carpenter, left, works with Jason Braley, data manager for Historic Map Works, during a printing run of a historic Portland map they are offering for sale on the Web.

second round of funding.

The money has allowed him to get the first phase of his business plan running on the Internet at www.historicmapworks.com.

Visitors now can view more than 35,000 maps. They can search by address in specific maps that cover Portland, New York City and Boston, with more searchable maps in the pipeline. They also can buy high-quality reproductions of any available map, starting at \$29.95.

But this Web site and retail operation are really just a means to an end.

Each day, the 14 workers at Historic Map Works feed 250 or so more maps into large-format scanners and beefy servers. They digitally brighten colors and diminish the ravages of age. They use Geographic Information System software developed by Yarmouth-based DeLorme to cross-reference modern longitude and latitude coordinates to old maps, the technology

HISTORIC MAP WORKS

WHERE: 856 Spring St., Westbrook, 510-7626
FOUNDED: 2005
EMPLOYEES: 14

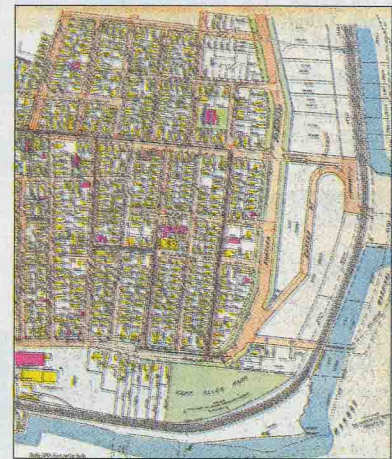
WEB: www.historicmapworks.com

QUOTE: "They look like hand-painted satellite images."

— Charles Carpenter, president and founder, on the atlases he's turning into a searchable database of maps from 19th and early 20th century

that allows users to call up a specific address. And they pursue book dealers, auction houses and Internet sites for the missing maps that — they hope — will eventually let them create a complete database of North America as it looked over the past 200 years.

That asset, Carpenter and his investors believe, soon will be worth several mil-



One of three maps made by Historic Map Works that show Portland's East End at different dates. The image was provided by the company.

lion dollars. They see it as a component of the mapping products being developed by Google, Yahoo and Microsoft, something these online giants will want to acquire.

"That's our real business

plan," Carpenter said. Charles Carpenter didn't set out to become the continent's king of antique maps.

A research fellow at nearby

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Idexx Laboratories, he has a Ph.D. in microbiology and holds 18 patents in biochemistry and medical devices. He also has a 30-year passion for collecting rare books and manuscripts on the history of science.

That interest in history led him, 14 years ago, to buy an 1871 map of Scarborough. The map showed the location of his house, built in the late 1770s. He liked that the old map showed the names of the people who lived in the homes at that time.

What he didn't realize was that producing these maps was once a cottage industry in America. Surveyors wheeling primitive odometers clocked off road distances and recorded the names of occupants. Teams of women handpainted the detailed depictions, creating an art form that was popular with well-off property owners who wanted a framed map with their names on it.

Four years ago, Carpenter came across an atlas of antique maps at a book store in New Hampshire. When he saw the name and thought about the growing interest of genealogy and personal history, something clicked.

"I thought, 'Wow, that's a business,'" he said.

Carpenter has since trademarked the term "Residential Genealogy." It's meant to describe how people can use online antique maps to learn the history of their homes and neighborhoods, or maybe search for a relative's roots.

What makes Carpenter's evolving database especially powerful for genealogy and historic research is that typing in an address can bring up a succession of maps. This layering of maps from different time periods lets a visitor see how a place has changed. Links to antique city directories, census records and phone books also will let researchers learn more about the people who lived at those locations.

Historic Map Works has an early version online but is shooting for a formal launch Oct. 15. More refinements will come with time.

Most people aren't familiar with the maps, but some genealogy Web sites, such as Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter, have discovered them and have posted enthusiastic reviews.

Another blog, called The Genealogy, contains this posting: "Seldom do I run across a website that makes me giddy with excitement. Historic Map Works managed to push me over the edge."



Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

Toni Feeny, a scanning technician at Historic Map Works, puts a mylar sheet over a map to be scanned.

The site will generate interest at research institutions such as the Maine Historical Society. Nicholas Noyes, head of library services, spent a few minutes navigating the site earlier this week.

"It's amazing," he said. "From a research point of view, it's great."

The Maine Historical Society has 45,000 original maps on file and coordinates an online archive of 10,000 digitized documents at www.mainehistory.net

That site contains some maps, and Historic Map Works, Noyes said, will complement these other resources.

The GIS layering technology also expands on a resource developed by another Maine startup, Orbis LLC of Gray. That company caters to clients involved in land use disputes and construction. Its Web site is www.orbismaps.com.

In the months ahead, Carpenter envisions taking Historic Map Works beyond a startup company.

He recently bought Title Atlas Co. in Minnesota and the rights to publish thousands of atlas maps from Midwestern states. The company has expanded from a barn in Scarborough to 4,000 square feet of office space on Spring Street in Portland. It will lease another 1,000 square feet downstairs.

By next year the company expects to have 34 employees to

ease the crush of scanning and processing the growing database. At some point after all the atlases are digitized, Carpenter said, he plans to donate them to the Osher Map Library at the University of Southern Maine.

Carpenter and his associates are working now on several tracks.

Purchasing Title Atlas gave Carpenter a jump-start in the Midwest. He's got good coverage in California and Canada but is trying now to nail down atlases in Texas and southern states.

Historic Map Works also needs to grow its retail side to raise capital.

Beginning in January, Historic Map Works will become a subscription site with an annual fee of \$29.95. The company also is expanding a franchise concept that lets people print antique maps at local frame shops.

Carpenter also is meeting with investors later this month to seek a second shot of financing. The key, he said, is raising enough money to build a complete database ahead of big players like Google.

"Every penny we spend to sell maps, that really takes time away from building the database," Carpenter said.

Staff Writer Tux Turkel can be contacted at 791-6462 or at:

tturkel@pressherald.com