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Historic Mapworks charts old property maps online

By Galen Moore

Video Gallery

[Charles R. Carpenter](#) wants to take the Internet back a century or two.

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The first step in the process has been to corner the market on property maps, known as cadastral maps, by buying up the companies that printed them. The name sounds like fortune teller's equipment, but from 1860 to about 1930, cadastral maps recorded property ownership at every address in the U.S.

Carpenter's company, [Historic MapWorks LLC](#) of Scarborough, Maine, now owns the rights to some 1.2 million of them, covering the entire U.S. Seven employees are scanning the map library and linking them street by street to current maps, using latitude and longitude points where old streets have disappeared and old neighborhoods are paved over.

"We have produced a digital, historic Google Earth," said Carpenter, a fellow at [IDEXX Laboratories Inc.](#) (Nasdaq: IDXX), and a longtime art collector.

Earlier this month, [Google Inc.](#) (Nasdaq: GOOG) announced in a blog post that its Google Earth product would begin offering historical images. Another feature, added in 2006, indexes 120 maps from a private collection, allowing users to lay them in digital transparencies over current Google map and satellite images.

All this is free, but Carpenter believes subscribers will pay \$30 a month for unfettered access to many times more and deeper historical data in an online map collection that is expanding daily. His current customers include genealogists, title researchers, libraries and art galleries, he said. "There's a business in the history of places." Carpenter hopes at some point to license the maps to Google and other generalist map applications.

Historic MapWorks, capitalized with about \$3.5 million in total investment from founders and angels, has coded its own database search and global information system (GIS) software. It plans to reach break-even by the end of 2009, said Carpenter's son and

Affiliate publications: [AGL.com](#), [Business Journal](#), [Bizjournals.com](#), [Portfolio.com](#), [Wired.com](#)
business partner, [Charles A. Carpenter](#)

But canny mapmakers' tricks of the trade have made it difficult to turn a 2009 dollar on the originals. To protect their lock on the lucrative market for atlas inserts and addenda, cadastral map publishers subtly shifted the north-south axes of their maps, the younger Carpenter said.

That makes it hard to index each map to true latitude and longitude, the younger Carpenter said. "You can't automate it. You can't sit down and say, 'We know this map goes here, so map B goes there, and map C goes there'," he said. "There's a lot of human time involved."

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