

THE COUNTY ATLAS OF THE UNITED STATES

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The privately-produced county atlas is an American phenomenon. Since the appearance of the first of these volumes about a century ago, well over four thousand different atlases and plat books of United States counties have been published by private companies and individuals. County atlases and plat books are considered together in this study since there are essential similarities between these two cartographic products; the terms are used interchangeably by some publishers. The core of both the county atlas and the county plat book usually consists of cadastral maps of each civil township in a particular county. Roads and railroads in addition to property lines, the names of property owners and areas of individual land holdings commonly appear on the maps. Although this is usually the basic information contained in county atlases and plat books, depending upon the publisher and the date of publication, there is a great deal of variation in the format. Some of these atlases are handsomely bound and contain engraved maps and township plats, considerable textual material and lithographic illustrations. At the other end of the scale county atlases or plat books may consist of a series of blueprint copies of plats, or simply street plans in urban areas, between simple paper covers. Some county atlases were hastily compiled with the object of realizing a quick profit for the publisher, while others are very accurate and reliable records.

A number of atlases of United States counties have been published by federal and local government agencies. Although such atlases account for considerable cadastral map coverage in a few states, they do not form a large component of the total United States county atlas output. Such government-sponsored atlases are not considered in this article, nor are official or unofficial cadastral maps and atlases of minor civil divisions, which are often the most important source materials used by the compilers of privately produced county atlases, and plat books. Only atlases which cover all or a large part of any particular United States county and which have been compiled, printed and published by private enterprise are included. Emphasis is placed on the earlier county atlas, which is described in greater detail than the more familiar modern plat book.

DEVELOPMENT

Individual map sheets of regions, states and localities were published in America in colonial times. The production of general atlases in the United States, which dates from the last years of the eighteenth century, increased notably in the early nineteenth century, when the state atlas was introduced. During the first half of the last century a steadily growing number of cadastral maps of townships were made of the more populous areas of the north Atlantic states. At first, such maps were usually hand drawn originals commissioned by township officials. Boundaries, survey lines, roads and prominent physical features, particularly streams, are delineated on such maps. The perambulator-type odometer and the magnetic compass were the principle surveying instruments used for the field work which preceded compilation and drafting.

A demand among local landowners for these township maps led to production of engraved editions. By the middle of the last century privately-published cadastral maps, not only of townships, but also of entire counties, were fairly common. Since these county maps were often drawn on a scale of one inch to one mile or larger, they were cumbersome and easily damaged. The introduction of the county atlas, which is characteristically a volume of township plats, was an answer to problems of size, storage and preservation.

Although the first United States county maps and atlases were produced in the middle and north Atlantic states, especially Pennsylvania and New York, and depicted counties in those states, it is in the Middle West that the private county map and atlas business has had its greatest success. Following the Civil War a number of ex-army officers saw the commercial possibilities of producing cadastral atlases of the prosperous agricultural counties of this more recently settled region.

Preparation of cadastral maps of the prevailingly plains-like Midwest proved to be a simpler operation than it was in the counties of the northeast, where local relief and slope are commonly greater. Moreover, the basic method of land subdivision used in the Atlantic states is the unsystematic metes and bounds survey; in this type of cadastral survey boundary lines, which are often ill-defined, extend in any and all directions. Property mapping is admittedly more difficult in areas subdivided in this manner than in the Middle West, where the systematic, rectangular method of the United States Land System was employed. Under this survey regularly-spaced lines oriented in cardinal directions enclose the well-known mile-square sections; most of the farm holdings are simple proportions of the section, with boundaries commonly parallel to the fundamental survey lines. (Fig. 1)

A description of methods used in the county atlas business in the formative period is contained in a contemporary account by a critic of these methods, Bates Harrington.¹ According to this observer, the county atlas business grew out of earlier township and county map enterprises. County maps which were often financed on a subscription basis sold for about five dollars each in the mid-nineteenth century. The earliest examples are rather simple but later ones are frequently adorned around the edges with pictures of the establishments of prominent citizens. For the privilege of having such a picture on the map, the landowner would pay approximately thirty dollars. This proved to be a lucrative proposition to map publishers who wished to increase their incomes with additional pictures. However, there is a limit to the number of illustrations that can be conveniently placed around a map. An atlas enabled the publisher to increase greatly the amount of space available for pictures and maps and also permitted the introduction of pages of text.

County atlases, like the earlier county maps, were usually produced on a subscription basis. An agent of the atlas company would go to a county to attempt to interest the wealthiest and most influential men in

¹B. Harrington, "How 'tis Done": A Thorough Ventilation of the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers." (Chicago, 1879).

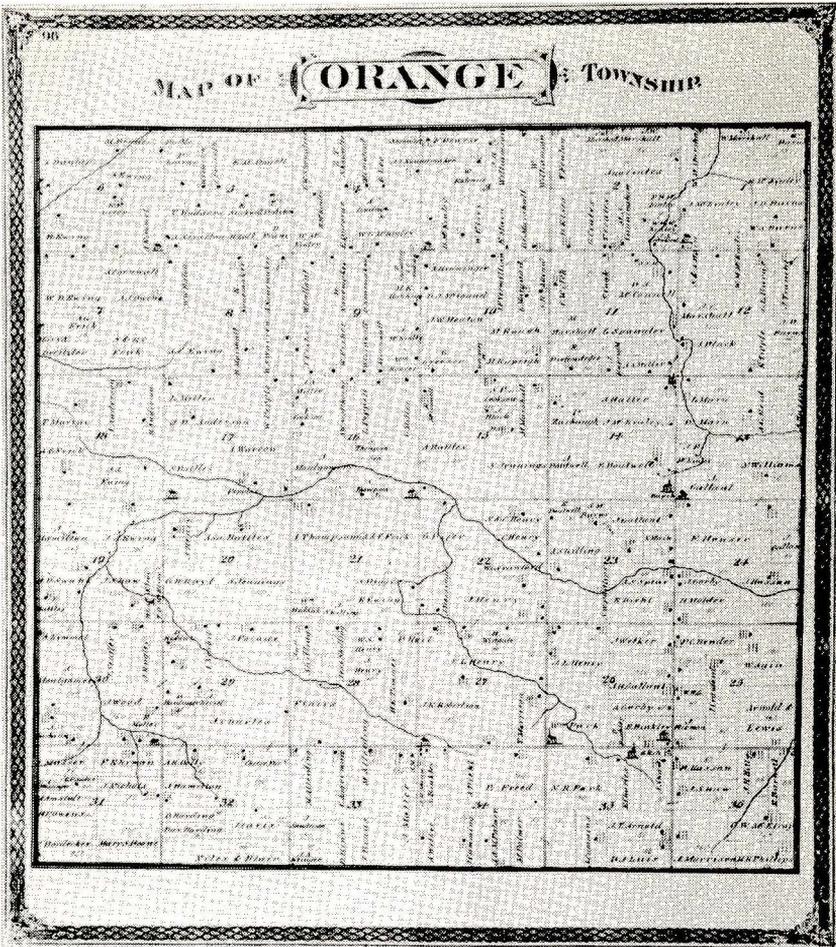


Fig. 1. Township plat from "Atlas of Union County," (Ohio) by A.S. Mowry published in Philadelphia in 1877. This map, the original of which is on a scale of approximately 2 inches to the mile and occupies one page in the atlas, is a representative example of county atlas cartography.

the atlas project. He would interview local officials, lawyers, business men—especially realtors—as well as large landowners. Sometimes the canvasser succeeded in obtaining official sponsorship of the county board of supervisors and often a notice of the projected atlas would appear in the local newspaper together with a list of the sponsors. Canvassers would then go into the rural areas to sell subscriptions to farmers; each subscriber was required to sign a contract for the atlas, delivery being promised for several months later. A list of all the subscribers appears in many county atlases. The usual price for a single atlas subscription in the late nineteenth century was approximately ten dollars.

Another agent of the publishing company would contact the wealthier men of the county relative to having pictures of themselves, their families or their property included in the atlas. If an individual was agreeable to this proposal, he was required to sign a contract and later an artist would call to make sketches under the patron's direction. Such sketches were the basis for the illustrations which appear in large numbers in some of the atlases. The cost of such a picture was usually not less than fifty dollars and might be several times this figure, depending upon the subject and the amount of space occupied. (Fig. 2)

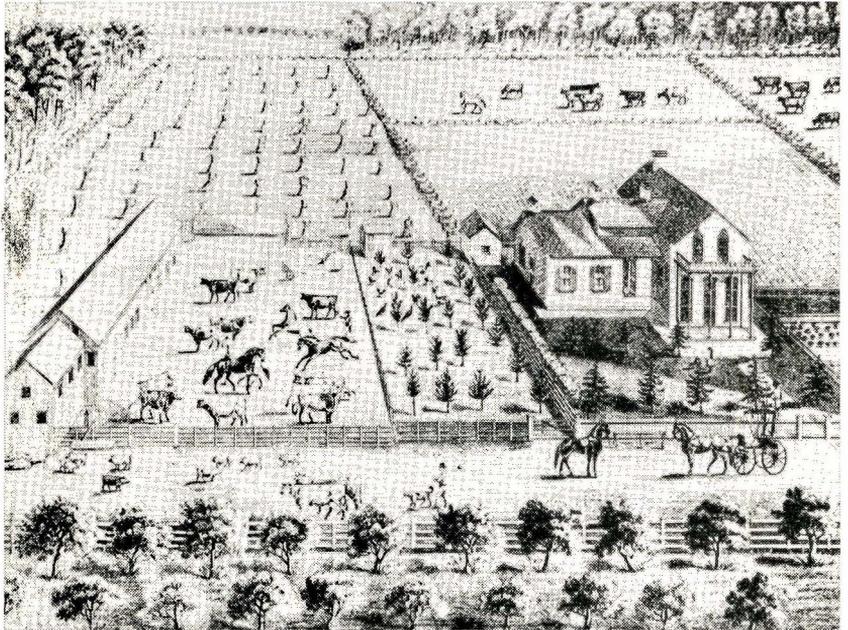


Fig. 2. A lithographic illustration from "Illustrated Atlas of Hancock County, Ohio," by G. A. Eberhart, published in Chicago in 1875. Views of this kind, although of little artistic merit, provide valuable information on the contemporary rural landscape.

Biographies of local persons are a feature of many of the atlases. Yet another agent of the publisher would be sent to the prospective client to discuss the matter of a biography. If a canvasser succeeded in selling this service another contract was signed, after which the agent would read a list of form questions to the patron and his family. From the responses to these questions an account of the life of the individual was composed; the price for a biography was usually two and a half cents a word with a minimum of ten dollars. Techniques employed in the county atlas business were well-tried methods of salesmanship: the product was identified with established institutions, the client committed himself a little at a time and payment was deferred.

The amount realized from the sale of a county atlas in the eighteen seventies appears to have averaged about twenty-five thousand dollars per

edition.² The total cost to the publisher was often about half this figure, while the remainder was clear profit. In view of this it is not surprising that substantial fortunes were amassed by some publishers. Usually the production of the original maps was one of the least considerable expenses, amounting to only a few hundred dollars per atlas. Information on property boundaries, size of properties and ownership was either copied from official cadastral maps or compiled from tax lists, and other records. When a draft of a civil division had been prepared by the agent of an atlas company, he would drive around the township in a buggy to add other information to the map. He would sketch in features such as roads, railroads, houses, farmsteads, churches, schools, blacksmiths' shops, orchards, timber lands, quarries, coal lands, etc. Detailed information on springs and wells derived from personal interviews with local residents, but the field work for an entire township might take only a few days. The major expenditures in the county atlas business were in printing, binding and selling the product, not in compiling the data.

The publishers of county atlases concentrated their efforts on counties considered to have sufficient numbers of landowners to support this kind of enterprise. A predominantly rural county with a population in excess of ten thousand persons was regarded by atlas publishers as a good prospect. In a county with a population of twenty thousand, an average of one thousand atlases might be sold. While many landowners refused to subscribe to the work, others would buy several copies. There is a record of one patron who purchased nineteen copies of an atlas for a total of one hundred and seventeen dollars; the same individual ordered a page view of his establishment at a cost of one hundred and sixty dollars and also contracted for a portrait and biography at three hundred and sixty-five dollars, making a grand total of six hundred and forty-two dollars.³

The most elaborate and expensive county atlases contain maps of the world and of various states. They also include short historical accounts of the development of the United States, of the county and of each township in the county, in addition to the usual maps, biographies, illustrations, and subscription lists.

COVERAGE AND PLACE OF PUBLICATION

Over two hundred cities and towns in the United States can claim to be the place of publication of at least one county atlas or plat book. However, most of these atlases have been produced in a few centers by a comparatively modest number of publishing houses.

Apparently the earliest United States county atlases were of certain counties in Pennsylvania and were published in Philadelphia in the early 1860's.⁴ Toward the end of this decade New York City became, briefly, the leading publishing center for county atlases. During the period 1860 to 1869 atlases appeared of a number of counties in New York State and

² *Ibid.* pp. 74 and 75. The estimated sales of fourteen county atlases sold in fourteen different Illinois counties averaged approximately \$25,000 but ranged from \$17,000 to \$38,000 per atlas. The atlases in question, which are all dated between 1870 and 1876, include the work of several different publishers.

³ *Ibid.* p. 93.

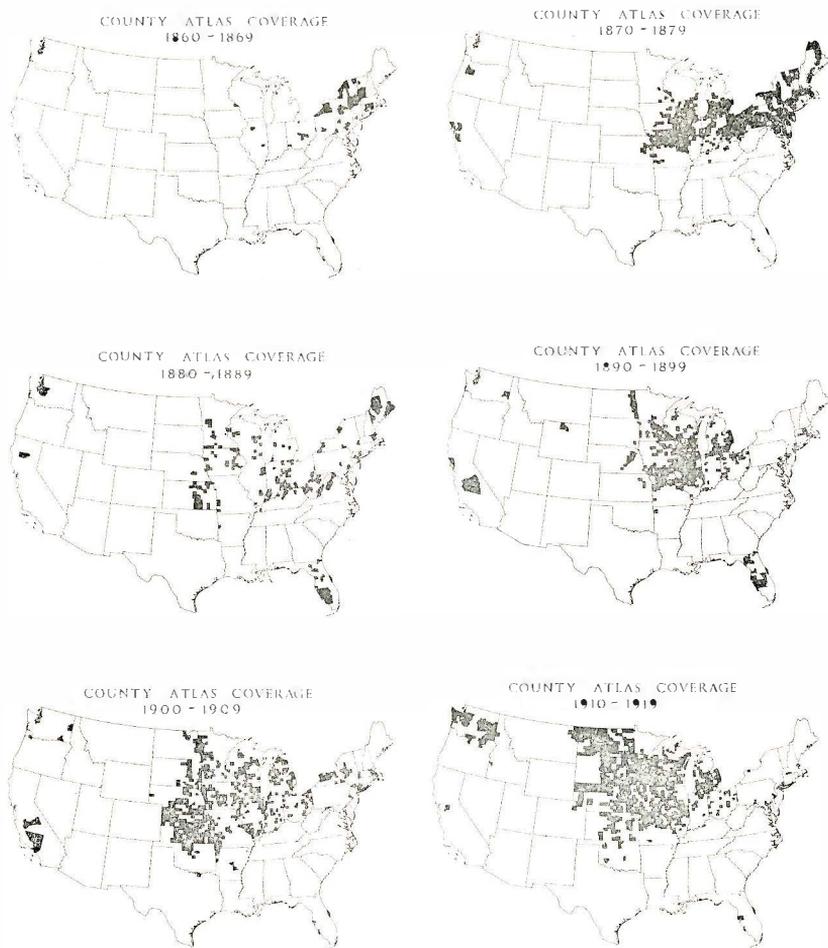


Fig. 3. The dark areas on the maps indicate the coverage of privately-produced county atlases and plat books between the given dates only. Atlases not positively dated are excluded.

New England as well as Pennsylvania and also a few scattered areas in the Middle West. (Fig. 3).

In the next decade, 1870 to 1879, Philadelphia assumed undisputed leadership as the place of publication of county atlases with Chicago and New York as the next most important centers. At this period atlases were

⁴C. Le Gear, "United States Atlases, A List of National, State, County, City and Regional Atlases in the Library of Congress," (Washington 1950), p. III and C. Le Gear, "United States Atlases. A Catalog of National, State, County and Regional Atlases in the Library of Congress and Cooperating Libraries," volume 2 (Washington, 1953), p. III. These volumes were principal source materials used for the compilation of the maps, Figures 3, 4, and 5 of this study.

produced for numbers of counties in the Atlantic states north of Washington, D. C., particularly those counties not covered in the previous decade. The Middle West became the most important market for the commercial county atlas at this time; most Ohio counties could boast of having an atlas by 1879, but no great publishing center developed in the state. Ohio county atlases of the time were produced mainly in Philadelphia, and later, in Chicago. Other significant publishing centers for county atlases at this period include Davenport, Iowa, St. Louis, Missouri, and San Francisco. Almost all the atlases produced in the last-named city were of counties in Central California.

During most years of the 1880's county atlas production in Philadelphia exceeded that of Chicago, the second ranking center. New York City declined markedly as a place of publication for these volumes during the decade, while Minneapolis became increasingly significant. There appears to have been a temporary decline in the total number of atlases produced during the decade, but again the Middle West was the leading market area. An expansion took place into regions peripheral to the area covered in the previous decade. Atlases were prepared covering a considerable number of counties in Kansas, West Virginia, Kentucky and Maine. During the decade several counties in Florida were mapped; most of the county atlases for this state, produced in the 1880's and 1890's were published by a railroad company in Buffalo, New York.

After 1890 the Middle West became more emphatically the principal market area for county atlases than it had been in the preceding two decades. (Fig. 4). Chicago, at the time, was clearly the leading place of publication of the county atlas. During the decade 1890 to 1899 about twice

COUNTY ATLAS COVERAGE 1860 to 1950

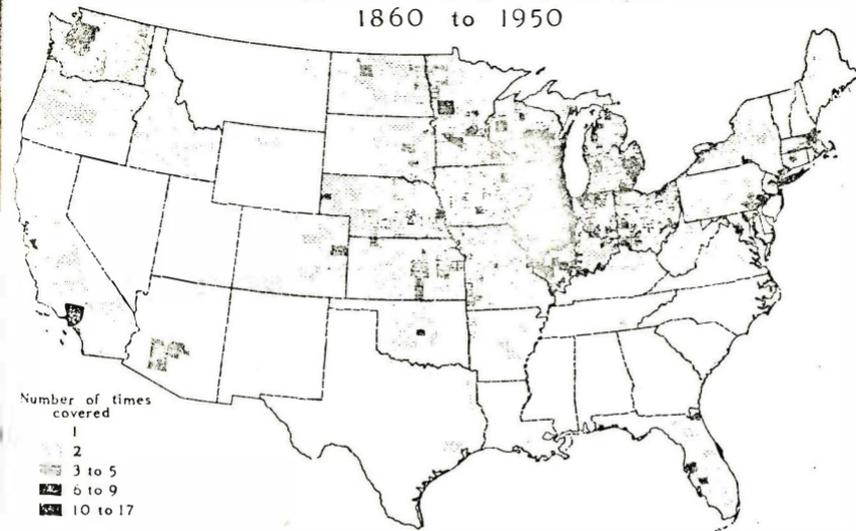


Fig. 4. The symbols indicate the extent and frequency of coverage by privately-produced county atlases and plat books, both dated and undated. Post-1950 coverage is concentrated mainly in areas previously covered, particularly counties in Iowa and Minnesota.

as many such atlases were published in Chicago as in Philadelphia, the next most important center. The third center, in terms of the number of atlases published at this period, was the Twin City area of Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

These trends continued in the first decade of the present century when approximately half of all the county atlases published in the United States originated in Chicago. The second most significant center at this time was the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. Philadelphia, following the example of New York City, dwindled in importance; only half as many county atlases were published in this eastern city, during the decade 1900 to 1909 as were produced in the Twin Cities. County atlases originating from big and small Middle Western centers accounted for considerable map coverage, particularly in the Great Lakes region and the central Great Plains.

Chicago maintained its position as the leading center of publication for county atlases during the next decade, 1910 to 1919, but it was seriously challenged by another northern Illinois city, Rockford. Philadelphia and New York were eclipsed by Minneapolis and Saint Paul and also by certain Iowa centers, especially Mason City and Des Moines. The publishers of county atlases and plat books were particularly active developing a market in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas and Minnesota. Some counties in the heart of the Corn Belt were being canvassed for the third or fourth time. After the appearance of a particular county atlas it was usual for publishers to wait from five to ten years before covering the territory again.

About the time of World I the elaborate county atlas gave way to the simpler and less expensive plat book. At this period a number of industries and enterprises moved from Chicago into the Rock River Valley; this shift is evident in the county atlas and plat book business. The center of plat book publication in the United States at present is Rockford, Illinois; several firms have their headquarters in this city. Unfortunately, the date of publication is not given on the plat books produced by some of the largest publishers, which makes these documents much less valuable than they would be if dated. Modern plat books may cost as little as one dollar, and it is not usual for them to be produced on a subscription basis. The present-day plat book consists, typically, of paper bound volume of township maps. On these maps the names of landowners, sizes of properties and the limits of land holdings are indicated; towns, roads and also streams are shown. Characteristically, a county index map is included and, quite frequently, a photograph of the county courthouse appears on the cover. However, modern plat books usually lack much of the cultural data which makes older county atlases such interesting documents.

The total coverage of commercially-produced county atlases and plat books from 1860 to 1950 is shown approximately on the map, Figure 5. The number of times particular areas have been covered by different county atlases or separate editions of the same atlas is indicated by shading. Perhaps the most striking feature of the map is the general paucity of county atlas coverage in the rural South. Because of the Civil War and its aftermath it is understandable why there would be no great demand

for county atlases in the Southern states in the 1860's and 70's. The fact that a market did not develop later is perhaps a reflection of the generally lower level of prosperity in the region and the lack of sufficient numbers of independent landowners who would be likely to purchase county atlases or plat books. The Middle West has been, unquestionably, the greatest market for these volumes as well as the major producing area. County atlas publishing expanded notably in the Pacific Northwest in the 1920's and 30's, with Portland, Oregon and Tacoma, Washington as the principal publishing centers. Most of the atlases covering counties in the states of the Northwest originated from these cities or other less important centers in the region. Since the early part of this century there has not, apparently, been a great market for county atlases in the rural areas of the north Atlantic states. However, in that region, and in some other areas, property and street atlases covering the whole or large portions of predominantly urbanized counties have been produced commercially. The county atlas coverage of southern California is of this type.

County atlas and plat book production has fluctuated considerably from year to year and from period to period. Only about half as many county atlases appeared in the 1880's as were published in the previous decade, or in the succeeding one. Since 1890 at least three hundred county atlases or plat books have been published in every decade, and for some decades the total number is about twice this figure. During the years of World War I there was a slight decline in production and a profound one during the depression years of the 1930's. This lower production continued during the period of the Second World War, but after 1945 the number of plat books published increased greatly. Approximately one hundred new plat books have appeared annually from the mid-1940's to the present time.

UTILITY OF COUNTY ATLASES AND PLAT BOOKS

The value of privately-produced county atlases and plat books is recognized by county surveyors, who are responsible for official cadastral mapping. This official coverage is usually in the form of original maps of individual townships in the county, which are amended as property changes occur. Because there is often no provision for copies of these master maps to be deposited in county archives at specified intervals, official cartographic coverage provides a record only of current cadastral patterns. County surveyors will supply copies of their maps to the public, but some of these officials find it convenient to sell the latest commercially-produced plat books when cadastral map coverage is requested. Lawyers frequently refer to county atlases and plat books to establish facts of land ownership, the atlases being often the best and sometimes the only record available. These privately-produced atlases are also consulted by county tax officers.

Teachers in the social sciences find county atlases valuable documents for instruction in local geography, history and government. Although many of these volumes are privately owned, copies may be found in court houses and public libraries; some historical societies collect county atlases assiduously.

To geographers in general and to historical geographers in particular the county atlas and plat book offers a wealth of usable information. A

single atlas usually provides uniform and detailed map coverage of a county unit at a given date. Occasionally, large blocks of counties were mapped in essentially the same fashion by one concern, in a short space of time. The township plats in the atlases make possible the reconstruction of features of earlier landscapes such as road patterns and property boundaries. In a county courthouse in rural Ohio the writer saw a map compiled by a superintendent of schools showing the distribution of early one-room schoolhouses in a particular area. The information was supplied largely from county atlases; it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to have constructed the map without this source material.

If an area has been covered by county atlases at different dates, interesting and useful comparisons can be made respecting changes in the landscape. Other source materials may provide essentially the same information but more often the data are unavailable or at best scattered. The maps contained in the atlases have survived by virtue of the fact that they are bound in volumes; while separate sheet maps, which are more difficult to preserve have, in many cases, perished. This includes maps on which the atlas coverage itself is based. Historical geographical studies may be greatly facilitated by the use of county atlases which are convenient, but sometimes neglected, sources of information.

The privately-produced county atlas of the United States has been regarded as a rather inelegant monument to the vanity of man. Perhaps it may be considered, with more justice, as a rugged tribute to agricultural America and to the economic system of which it is a product.