

RESEARCHING YOUR HOME HISTORY: A QUICK GUIDE

Every house has a story to tell. No matter your house's age, discovering and sharing its history can be highly rewarding and genuinely fun. While the task may seem daunting at first, the resources and research tips that follow will help you quickly uncover your inner home historian.

GETTING STARTED

Researching a home's story comes down to a few basic questions:

- * What kind of information are you seeking?
- * Where do you find this information?
- * How do you compile the information in an engaging, accessible way?
- * How do you safely preserve your home history — including your own stories — so that they can be enjoyed for generations to come?

Finding a Professional Home Historian

Uncovering your home's story can be rewarding and fun. But it's not for everyone. If looking through courthouse records, reading old newspaper stories and pouring through black and white photos at your local historical association doesn't appeal to you — or simply isn't feasible at the moment — there are people to help. A qualified, professional historian can be hired to write your entire home history, track down just your old tax records, find information about a particular owner — or something in between. But it is important to choose professional help carefully. HomeHistoryBook.com includes links to professional home genealogists who are available to provide their talents and expertise. Additionally, before you hire an historian, do your research. The Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) have developed a nice 'checklist' for the hiring process, as has historian [Dan Curtis](#).

DISCOVERING YOUR HOME HISTORY

For more in-depth information on researching your home history, please download the more comprehensive “Home History How-Tos,” and “Home Historian Resources,” documents found on the “How to Research Your Home History” page at www.homehistorybook.com.

HOW TO BEGIN RESEARCHING YOUR HOME'S HISTORY

First, determine what is important to you in conducting research. For example, are you more interested in knowing about your home's architectural/building history or the people who lived in your home? How much detail do you want to obtain?

Look around your home to help you discover clues about your home history. For example, newer plumbing in an older home probably means that a building permit is on file that could contain clues about past owners. When you look outside, what do you see? A home located next to a public school or near a park might show up in photos or records created about those properties. Names of neighborhoods can also sometimes provide clues about your home. Talk to your neighbors.

The search for many home histories will often start at the local building permit center of your town or county. Building permits can include a wealth of information. If they still exist, these records will likely be found at a municipal or county agency, such as the building inspection department, the planning commission's office or the city engineer's office. Also, information on building materials, remodeling and additions can often be found with these records.

HOW TO FIND YOUR PROPERTY'S LEGAL DESCRIPTION

For home historians, street addresses are often not adequate for researching a property's history. Instead, a legal description is needed. This information can be found in various places, often on tax notices and deeds for transfer of the property found at county tax assessor offices. The legal description more precisely identifies real estate parcels, and — if the property includes multiple tenants — a specific part of a building. Current legal property descriptions can be obtained at the tax assessor's office, public records office, or with the recorder of deeds. For questions and copies of deeds, consult the office of the recorder of deeds. For copies of federal land records, home historians can access these legal descriptions from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). On their Web site, older deeds can be researched and printed out for no cost. Consult them at www.blm.gov.

HOW TO FIND ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Building permits can be a valuable source of information. If the records have not been discarded, they might be found at a municipal or county agency, such as the building inspection department, the planning commission's office, or the city engineer's office. They will often contain contact information for the architect.

Architectural drawings can be found in a myriad of places, such as with the current owner, in a storage space, in a library or archives, with the descendants of the original owner or perhaps even with the family or alma mater of the home's builder or architect.

HOW TO FIND INFORMATION ON FORMER HOMEOWNERS

To find the chain of title for your home, contacting a title insurance company may be a good way to go. The chain of title is simply a record of historical transfers of title to a property that dates from the original to the present owner.

Additionally, the Polk City Directories are a great place to search for former owners and renters of your property. The city directories – which include information on home occupants – may be found in a variety of locations, including your local historical museum, public library or local historical society.

Furthermore, census data can be helpful and easily searched online at <http://www.heritagequestonline.com>. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormon Church) may also have information on local residents, so check with your local branch (www.familysearch.org). Cemetery records can help paint an individual's life picture, as can newspaper obituaries. Also: Ask local places of worship to which the family may have belonged. Finally, www.Ancestry.com is a site dedicated to family history and bills itself as “the worlds largest online resource for family history documents and family trees.” It boasts more than 1 million subscribers.

Home historians should consult older residents, neighbors and local historians. If you bring photos and information about your home, it may help to jog their memories as well. Also: If you know the names of previous homeowners/residents, mention them.

HOW TO LOCATE DEEDS

These documents prove ownership of property and are typically filed at a county courthouse or public records office. Deeds can clearly show a chain of property ownership. The buyer (often called a “grantee,” or recipient of the property) and the seller (often referred to as a “grantor,” or disposer of the property) are clearly named on deeds. Keep in mind property can be donated or inherited. In addition, home historians should be sure to check with the local historical society, as some societies have published their own “deed guides.” Among the information home historians can likely find in a deed: owner names; owner occupations; places of residence or former residences; dates of property transfers; legal description (at the time the deed was originally produced) and clarification on property-use restrictions and allowances. They may also include birth, marriage or divorce details and death notifications of owners and associated individuals — as well as other details. Different deeds can suit several different purposes, too. For example, deeds of foreclosure may indicate financial missteps; deeds of trust or mortgage may show financial savvy, bankruptcy and sometimes an inventory of assets. Additional research into deeds includes researching into the mortgages of those persons living on each property and their owners. Checking the mortgagor (person taking out the mortgage) and mortgagee (individual or institution loaning money; creditor) indexes for the names of property owners — as in the previous grantor-grantee indexes — can yield details about the properties that might otherwise remain unknown, such as property-cost considerations; terms of mortgage and related details.

HOW TO LOCATE VISUAL DOCUMENTATION

Family photo albums, newspaper offices, real estate offices, professional photography studios and private and public collections — such as in a museum or college — are all excellent places to search for photo documentation of your home.

Your house may even be featured on an historical postcard — a trend that was popular in the early days of the camera. Home historians should research this in their local library or historical society. Aerial photographs produced by government agencies — a wonderful and entertaining resource — may be available for a cost. More information on aerial maps may be available through the state geological survey or soil conservation service.

Maps created by the Sanborn Map Company date from 1867 and consist of a series of maps representing commercial, industrial and residential areas of the U.S., Canada and Mexico. Sanborn maps provided information such as the building height and the number of stories; whether there is a basement; even the locations of doors and windows in buildings. Additionally, they provide information on the construction of the building. Check with your local museum or historical society regarding their availability.

HOW TO FIND INFORMATION ON RENOVATIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

Information on materials can be found with the architectural plans, building permits and zoning records. Copies of zoning ordinances and regulations are often available at public libraries or archives. Case files are often available at a municipal or county agency, such as the building inspection department, the planning commission's office or the city engineer's office. If the zoning for the property involved some controversy, make sure to check the local media archives.

Real estate taxes assessed by local and state governments are kept on file, and contain a wide range of information for home historians. While tax records are normally open to the public, tax assessor field notes — usually containing detailed building description — are often not.

Tax notices usually include the name of the owner, the assessment rate and the assessed property value, as well as the address of the property trustee. Details on improvements, new construction, remodeling and additions can also be gleaned. Look for tax records in your county revenue department, tax appraiser's office, county tax office, office of the ordinary, or judge of probate. Other historical tax records may be kept in the city clerk's office, city hall or your state's historical archive.

HOW TO RESEARCH THE HOME EXTERIOR

Try to notice alterations, such as mixed materials or material scarring that may indicate structural deletions. Finding this evidence can be challenging – especially considering modern construction practices that make telling the difference between an original material and a substitute difficult.

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To determine architectural and construction styles, consult house stylebooks at libraries. One book in particular, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, by Virginia & Lee McAlester, is considered the go-to source for determining home styles.

House plan books have been around since the mid 1800s. They contain sketches or photos of homes, complete with floor plans. Homeowners would simply send away for blueprints, and give them to their builders to construct. Libraries and some larger bookstores may have copies of the original books. Newspapers — and perhaps even some lumber companies, who produced the wood needed for homes — may also have the information. For example, from 1908 to 1940, Sears, Roebuck & Company marketed and sold approximately 100,000 homes by catalog.

HOW TO RESEARCH THE HOME INTERIOR

Aside from more obvious modifications – such as new room additions – focus on more minor clues, such as signs of wallpaper replacement. This kind of detail may help indicate a room's previous use.

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Public utility connection dates can help verify construction dates and potential improvements that may have occurred. Utility companies may have access to records and maps showing approximate times of when gas lines were laid, or electrical lines were put in place, for example.

Home historians should try to research interior design using books and older publications, such as magazines and newspaper advertisements, if applicable. For example, advertisements may provide insight into a variety of interior-design issues, ranging from costs of materials and goods to appliances, heating and cooling systems.

HOW TO OBTAIN GOVERNMENTAL INFORMATION USING THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

Sometimes, when requesting certain records from the U.S. federal government, you may be required to fill out a simple FOIA form. This may be necessary when trying to access certain information, such as building permit data, records from the social security administration, etc. Alternatively, you can use automated forms for submitting requests to either federal agencies (www.rcfp.org/foialetter) state agencies (www.splc.org/foialetter). There may be a short waiting period when sending for information. Government agencies may also charge a nominal fee to reproduce the document and provide physical copies.

HOW TO LEARN MORE

To fully discover your home history, it's important to try to develop an understanding of your community. Check your local library for books about your town's history published by local authors. Such resources can help you put historical events in context for a particular community, and migration, social and economic patterns can be more clearly understood.

Also, please visit the “[How to Research Your Home History](http://www.homehistorybook.com)” page at www.homehistorybook.com, where you can review all our available resources. Additionally, follow the latest Houstory™ developments in home genealogy at our [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) pages. Finally, stay up-to-date by checking out our [newsletter](#), [blog](#) and [podcast](#).