

Historic House Research Handbook

You're intrigued by an old house and you want to know its story. How can you find out when it was built, who lived there, how it may have changed over time? Maybe your ambition is even broader, and you want to learn about its architectural style and the development of the entire neighborhood.

Historic house research resembles the painstaking, nonviolent aspects of detective work. All you need is patience, perseverance, and time. Luck also helps. The story of a house builds as you follow leads, cross-check facts and track down sources to learn about the owners, architect, and builders. The work will take you to libraries, city and county offices, historic societies, perhaps even on scouting trips to meet descendants of former owners. If your curiosity is deep, or you have a bit of bulldog in your character, you may be able to build a fascinating house biography.

Because counties vary in the organization of records and the availability of materials, the following research suggestions are, of necessity, general. When in doubt, consult experts in local history and ask questions.

Don't reinvent the wheel

Launch your old-house investigation by finding out if the information you seek has already been compiled. A file may exist in the local history collection of your community's library, county museum or historical society, particularly if your house was built by a prominent family.

If the house is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it has already been researched as a part of the nomination process.

If the house is in a locally-designated historic district, the preservation commission may have historical information about the building. To learn if there is a preservation commission or historic review board in your community, call the City preservation planner, Roz Keeney, at 541/917-7574.

If a very rough range of construction dates would satisfy your interest, a basic physical examination of the house and a brief study of its architectural style might provide the answer you seek. (See *Bibliography* for helpful books on recognizing architectural styles.) You can generally arrive at a ten- to thirty-year range for the construction date of a house by recognizing the style and checking reference works to determine the period of that style's popularity in the region. If you don't already know the year your house was built, narrowing the window in this manner will save research time in legal documents, city directories and other sources.

Using legal documents

If you want to know more than the architectural style and a rough date, consulting legal documents will allow you to develop the chain of title—a list of owners of the property from the patentee (original purchaser from the U.S. government) to the present. You may be fortunate to find an abstract for your house. If not, you will have to conduct deed research to establish the chain of title.

Although the activity recorded in an abstract, and the information you will find if you pursue deed research, refers to the land rather than the structure, these documents will reveal the names of owners and details that will help in dating your house. Mortgages, probate records, and liens often give concrete facts about the house and lead to other sources of information.

Abstracts

Most parcels of land have been the subject of a variety of legal transactions over time. An abstract is a summary of all such transactions—deeds, wills, mortgages, tax sales, probate proceedings, litigation—that have affected a particular piece of property. Abstract companies—forerunners to today's title insurance firms—prepared these documents in order to certify that sellers held clear and valid title before a sale.

An abstract generally contains the date and names of people or business entities involved in each property transaction, type of transaction, and reference numbers for the original record (the estate docket number, for

example, in a probate court case, or the warranty deed record and page number entered at the time of a sale). You may be fortunate enough to locate an abstract in the house itself—don't forget to look in cupboards and attic and basement rafters, in the collections of previous owners, or in the possession of the mortgage holder. If you have an abstract, it is not necessary to conduct deed research.

The transactions detailed in an abstract refer to land rather than structures, so it is not likely the abstract will tell you the date of your home's construction and the architect's name. Instead, you will have to interpret, infer, follow leads offered by the abstract to other sources, and cross-check in order to zero in on such facts. For example, a leap in the value of a property between consecutive sales might suggest a capital improvement, such as the construction of a house, on the property. This is by no means a foolproof assumption—inflation or reassessment could have caused the increase—but you can confirm it using building permit and sewer connection records, town council proceedings, newspaper articles and other sources.

Deed Research

If you are unable to locate an abstract, deed research will allow you to build the chain of title. To begin tracing the chain, you'll need the legal description of the property and the name of the current owner. The legal description is different from the mailing address and includes references to a section, township, and range. In the case of urban properties, the legal description usually also includes a subdivision name and lot number.

For example, the legal description for the Kemper House in Indianapolis is Roache's First Addition, 53'8" North Side Lot 5. The legal description for the Huddleston Farmhouse Inn Museum in Mt. Auburn, a rural property, is the northeast quarter of Section 28 in Township 16 North Range 12 East, abbreviated as Pt. NE1/4 S28 T16N R12E. If you don't know the legal description and current owner's name, contact the county or township assessor's office.

Armed with the legal description and name of the current owner, you can begin the process of deed research in the county recorder's office. To save valuable time and frustration, find a helpful staff member or someone in your county who has conducted such research and can offer directions, introductions, guidance, and shortcuts on the process. (See *Where to go for help*.)

Although counties vary in the organization and availability of records, the following **process** is common in deed research. To build the chain of title or ownership history, you will trace backward in time beginning with the current owner, using transfer books in the recorder's office (or clerk's office, assessor's office, transfer department, or various other names the office may carry, depending upon the county).

Deeds—the proof of property ownership—are indexed by grantee (the recipient of the property or buyer) and grantor (disposer of property or seller) in transfer books. Look for the current owner's name in the most recent index; he or she will be listed as a grantee. (You will note that the alphabetical order in these books may be loose.) The grantor's name will also be listed, along with the amount of the transaction and reference number to the page and book where you will find the deed. As you proceed, be sure to keep complete notes on each transaction, source and reference number.

Repeat the process using the previous owner's name. Remember, the *grantor* of the deed you are looking up is the grantee in the preceding sale. If you do not know when transactions occurred, check grantor-grantee indexes for every year.

Once you've constructed the chain of title, use the reference numbers to look up the actual deeds and copy any pertinent information you find there. In each case, check to verify that the legal description refers to the property you are researching, since many people have owned and sold several lots in their lifetimes. Transaction amounts shown on deeds, as in an abstract, may offer clues to construction; a large increase in property value may indicate the building of a house or an addition.

In addition to property owners' names and amounts of sale or consideration, the deed may provide birth, marriage, divorce or death dates of owners and associated individuals and, in some cases, lists of household contents or other tangible assets, and information about buildings on the property. Deeds will also record restrictive covenants and easements.

Watch in the grantor-grantee indexes for special deeds such as mortgages and references to court records, mechanics liens, and other encumbrances such as leases and tax delinquencies, all of which may be filed

separately from warranty deeds. Since a mortgage is an owner's means of raising money, it may signal a construction project—the building of a new house or a remodeling.

Mechanics liens—claims filed by construction contractors for unpaid bills—may also be filed separately from the deeds. Since they indicate building activity, these records are worth tracing; they may describe the construction project, and even detail materials and products, in addition to listing the names of builders or craftsmen and the amount of the claim. Court records referred to in the grantor-grantee index are also significant sources of house information. Lawsuits, wills and probate proceedings, and divorce and insanity cases may contain relevant descriptions of the house and its contents.

Although their availability varies greatly from county to county and city to city, tax records and building permits are public documents which may yield information of interest. For Linn County tax records are available at the Linn County Courthouse, 4th Street, Albany.

Using historical documents

Libraries and historical societies at the local, county and state levels are fertile sources for historic house research. City directories, old newspapers, fire insurance maps, volumes of biographical sketches, corporate and club histories, photographs, and memoirs, can put flesh on the skeleton developed through deed research.

City directories

City directories are an easy source to consult for the names of a home's occupants (as opposed to owners), as well as an approximate construction date.

Beginning with the most recent edition and working backward, find your address and record the name of the occupant in each year's directory until you reach editions in which your address does not yet appear.

Be aware that street names and numbering systems may have changed. Keep in mind, too, that directories do not provide up-to-the minute data; their publication schedules often create a one- to two-year lag in information. For example, if your address does not appear in directories until 1921, the house might have been built between 1918 and 1921.

Be cautious if a structure is continuously listed at your address from a much earlier date than your home's probable construction date. In such a case, consider the possibility that an earlier structure on the site was demolished or otherwise lost, making way for the building of your house.

Directories frequently contain spelling and other mistakes, so confirm your research with other sources. You generally can find city directories in the local library.

Insurance maps and atlases

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, publishing companies began issuing maps and atlases of American cities and towns to assist the fire insurance underwriting industry in establishing rates. The Sanborn Map Company of New York grew to dominate the field. Depicting building outlines and color-coded to indicate materials, the periodically-updated maps and atlases served the underwriting industry until after World War II.

Sanborn maps representing the period from about 1883 to 1955 are generally available for Indiana cities. By comparing maps produced over a series of years, you may note alterations in your house and outbuildings, new construction, and neighborhood development.

Bird's eye views and county atlases

Bird's eye views, aptly named maps drawn from aerial perspectives, were popular in the nineteenth century for large and small communities. Although neither as common nor as frequently issued as fire insurance maps, bird's eye views are valuable for their scope and detail. They show buildings and outbuildings in three-dimensional perspective and offer valuable evidence of building relationships and major landscape features such as orchards and wooded areas.

County atlases from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries are another valuable source in historic house research, particularly if your home is in a rural area. These atlases contain maps of the county's townships drawn to indicate land ownership and usually showing the position of residences on the

lots, along with the name of each parcel's current owner and the amount of his or her acreage. Maps of the county's larger cities may be included, but they do not usually provide the names of property owners. Most of the atlases contain renderings of prominent farmsteads, sometimes inset with portraits of the owners. If the subject of your research is a farmhouse, an atlas may provide an owner's name, help you narrow down the construction date, show if the house has been moved—not an uncommon occurrence in rural areas—and perhaps even what it looked like.

Many of these oversized publications also offer histories of the county, the townships, major local institutions and professions, along with biographical sketches of citizens and business directories. The atlases were, in general, published in the 1870s and 1880s; in some cases, an update was produced early in the twentieth century. In recent years, many of these early atlases have been reprinted by historical societies and may be available for purchase. Look for county atlases in your local library or historical society or at the Indiana State Library.

County histories

You may find information about early owners of your property in a volume of county history. Like atlases, county histories were generally first published in the 1880s, with updates in the early twentieth century. The WPA Writers' Project compiled an index of each county history, a helpful tool if you're looking for references to a specific family. In addition to having a copy of the county history, your local library may have vertical files containing pamphlets, news clippings, and brochures on historic houses. Tell the librarian about your project and ask for help in using the library's resources to the fullest extent in conducting your research.

Newspapers

Most local libraries maintain copies of historic newspapers; many are on microfilm. If your local library does not have old newspapers, consult the Indiana State Library, whose holdings include approximately 4,000 titles representing 500 communities. Very few of these old newspapers are indexed; however, the time spent in front of a microfilm reader may be worthwhile, particularly if previous research has provided you with specific or general dates.

If you know when an early owner died, for example, you might look for the obituary; nineteenth and early-twentieth century obituaries are often lengthy accounts which offer much more information than today's brief notices. You might search for wedding announcements, which often include detailed descriptions of interior decoration.

If the house belonged to prominent people, or is located in what was originally an affluent neighborhood, the newspaper might have run a long feature article on the home's architecture and decor. In larger cities with daily newspapers, such features might have appeared in a "House and Garden" or "Real Estate" section off the Sunday paper.

Biographical and other historical resources

Your local library and historical society are also good places to look for biographical information on architects, builders and previous owners. In addition to consulting, the previously mentioned county histories for such information, consult biographical indexes for other leads. Ask for help in locating other helpful resources—scrapbooks, diaries, memoirs, business and professional directories, church and club histories, and uncataloged materials such as clipping files on architecture.

Census data

Beginning in 1850, census records include the names and number of people living in a house. In addition to revealing where inhabitants were born, their race, sex, age and marital status, later records sometimes tell their occupations. Your local library or historical society may have census records. The census records at the Albany Public Library are on microfilm and indexed for the following years: 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860, 1900, 1920; 1880 is partially indexed; and 1870 and 1910 are on microfilm but not indexed. On open shelves in the Genealogy Division's reading room, you will find indexes to many marriage, birth, and death records,

and family histories in the Division's collection may provide information on property and possessions in addition to people.

Bibliography

For more information on historic architecture and house research, consult the following general references available in the library of Historic Landmarks Foundation:

Books about architectural styles

- Blumenson, John J. G. *Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms: 1600-1945*. 2d ed. Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1981.
- McAlester, Virginia and Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
- National Trust for Historic Preservation. *What Style Is It?* Washington: The Preservation Press, 1977.
- Rifkind, Carole. *A Field Guide to American Architecture*. New York: New American Library, 1980.
- Whiffen, Marcus. *American Architecture Since 1790: A Guide to Styles*. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1969.
- Albany, City of; Clark, Rosalind. *Oregon Style: Architecture 1840 to 1950s*. Portland, OR: Professional Book Center, Inc., 1983.

Books about historic house research

- Howard, Hugh. *How Old Is This House?* New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.
- Howe, Barbara J., et al. *Houses and Homes*. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1987.
- Webber, Joan. *How Old Is Your House? A guide to Research*. Chester, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1978.