

## How to Research the History of a House

When tracing the history of a house, it is important to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the name of the structure?

Note: It is important to use an historic name, one that will continue to be meaningful regardless of changes in occupancy or use. Usually the name of the original owner of a house, or of the original use of a public or commercial building, is the correct one for historical purposes. Sometimes there is a recognized historic name, which was used by the original owner (such as: Drumthwacket).

2. What is the location and address of the house?

3. What is its date of erection?

4. Who was the architect, was there a designer and who supplied material for the structure?

5. What alterations and additions (with dates, name of architect, builder, etc.) have been made to the structure?

6. What is the name of the original owner and of all subsequent owners?

7. What additions were made to the property, and where there additions or sale of the original property by the owners?

8. What historical events and/or persons are associated with the structure?  
The means by which to procure answers to the above questions have been placed under four basic categories:

- A. Oral History;
- B. Documentary Sources;
- C. Inferred Data;
- D. Physical Evidence.

### Oral History

The term "oral history" simply refers to any information that is obtained from anyone who might possibly know anything about the house in its early years. Information of this type may be more abundant.

An important first step would be to establish a valid chain of title. This may be done through contact with the present owner or with neighbors. Always start your title trace by working from the present owner. Assuming you were able to trace the ownership of the house, you may wish to consult the local telephone directory

to determine if any of these people or their relatives still live in the area. Contact can be made by either phone calls or letter/questionnaires, which can quickly determine whether any helpful data may be obtained from these individuals. After a response is received from those people contacted, make a select list of those you feel would be most beneficial to your quest in finding historical and architectural information on the house and conducting interviews.

### **Documentary Services**

In most cases there is more than one public office where you can find records relating to the property in question. The following information is based on my own research in New Jersey, Virginia, and Florida. Generally speaking, the later the house was built, the greater the chance of finding specific information. Records prior to 1830 tend to be scant, vague, (and in Florida, hand written in Spanish!) and relate more to the land than to dwellings. It is also possible that none of the old records are still in existence. This can be attributed to either loss by fire or neglect. Procedures for filing public documents vary from town to town. The Municipal Building Department may be one of your best sources for information pertaining to the subject house. The one chink in this is that they may not have been issuing building permits at the time the dwelling was built. From these records you may be able to obtain the following information:

- A. Date of issuance of the building permit
- B. Name of owner
- C. Name of builder or architect
- D. Cost
- E. Type of heating plant, roof and basic materials used
- F. Floor plans that show placement of major fixtures
- G. Dates and types of major alterations

In order to locate the above information, it will be necessary to know or find out what the block and lot numbers are. These can generally be found on either the Deed, Building Department maps or from Plat Books (all of which will be discussed later). Often, only summary information (permit number) will be recorded on an index card, in the Municipal Building Department files. This will be used as a primary working reference for your property.

Researching the detailed information requires retrieving the original permit from the Building Department's archives. This can be a time-consuming chore and may require special permission. You may possibly run into problems with the Building Department personnel who will not exactly welcome your time consuming inquiries. But polite persistence will inevitably get the assistance you need.

## **Deed Searching**

A second source of documentary information is either the County Courthouse or the State Archives, Division of Archives and Records Management, or equivalent, where deeds listing real estate transactions are stored. These sources will give you names, dates of ownership of the property, and in some cases, sketchy information about the dwelling on the property.

Note of Caution: When the deed dates prior to the 1700s or early 1800s, you must not automatically assume that the structure you are researching is the same one referred to in the earliest deed. This may be attributed to the building's destruction by fire and replacement at a later date or that the structure was moved from its original place of erection to a new plot of land.

Assuming there is no clue to the actual date the structure was built, you must start at the County Courthouse with the name of the current owner.

A clerk at the Courthouse will explain to you how to use the Grantor-Grantee books that list the exact disposition of each deed. In these books the current owner will appear as a Grantee and the seller of the property, the Grantor. At this point you begin to trace the title of the property back, keeping in mind that the Grantor was presumably the Grantee in the previous transaction, by referring back and forth to both the Grantor and Grantee books. You will continue this process of locating the Grantor-Grantee until a chain of title is completed.

Remember, when researching deeds, etc., it is important to make note of its present location (Courthouse) book and page numbers. Also list the names of each owner and dates of ownership. County records, for the most part, date back only to the period 1785-1800, and later in some states. In the State of New Jersey, for example, all registered pre-revolutionary deeds, and also most county deeds prior to 1900, are located at the New Jersey State Archives, Division of Archives and Records Management in the State Library, in Trenton.

## **Wills**

In many cases property often passes not by deed, but by will. Evidence of this is that deeds under a particular family name are not listed over a long period of time. If this happens, check the listings of wills, under the name of the last known owner. These documents are also filed either at the Courthouse or, as before, the State Archives. When the will is located, check to see who received the title of the property. After this has been done, take this name and check the Grantor-Grantee books and resume the aforementioned process. These wills often contain valuable information about the house and its contents (possibly an inventory of the property).

## **Historic American Buildings Survey**

The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), which was initiated in 1936 and is still in progress, may prove to be a useful source of information. These surveys are contained in books listing the sites by State, County and Municipality. The following information may be obtained from this source:

- A. Basic identification – the historic name, and location (in the event the house was moved, you may find the original location).
- B. A general statement as to the architectural and historical interest and merit of the structure, (why it was considered worth recording) also the overall condition of its fabric.
- C. Summary description, giving the number of stories, number of bays, overall dimensions and a concise characterization of the structure's layout of shape.
- D. Bibliographical references, listing books, etc., used to obtain the historical information. (These references may prove to be worthwhile reading).

When consulting these surveys, depending on the site, the historical information may be erroneous. This is due to the new methods of dating not available at the time that particular survey was done. In general the HABS information is accurate although information in them should be verified from other sources. HABS information can be found at the State Archives.

## **Directories**

During the late 1800s and early 1900s many areas had directories which listed people at their home addresses (these were the forerunners of the present telephone directories). Many of these directories included occupational information. The real value of these books is that they can be of immense help in tracing the ownership when official records have been lost or destroyed.

The directories are usually organized by address. In this case, you trace back and find the oldest entry you can (use same process of recording information as was previously described in the deeds section). Some directories were arranged alphabetically by last name. In these cases, you must have names from the deeds or other records in order to know whom to look up. From these directories you can often watch the rise or fall of an individual's fortunes by looking him up in successive directories. The directories can be found at either your public library or State Archives.

Another type of directory useful in the research of historical information (pertaining to an individual and/or his property) is the Federal Census for your state, although confidential for this century, which is available for the period of 1830 to 1895. There are also State Census records for the period of in some cases the late 1700s to the early twentieth century, which will provide general

information about an individual and his property. State archives and online genealogy sites are a great source for this information.

### **Tax Records**

Like the directories, tax records give an insight into the property and possessions of the individual being researched. Tax records are lists of all taxable items owned by an individual. The properties are usually listed alphabetically by township. (There may be a county list, but those, which list items in each township, are of more help). These documents tend to be vague and should therefore only be used to support other documentation.

Coverage of most states is incomplete at best, and non-existent at worst. Check your local library for help in locations for this source. The period covered is roughly 1700s to 1800s.

### **Parrish Records**

Some states particularly those in the original 13 colonies had church records in earliest times. These records were called Parrish Records, as the town or area was originally divided among churches as a Parrish. For example, the earliest records for Nansemond County, Virginia, can be found in the Upper and Lower Parrish records. Everything from Business deals, land transfers, quarrels, legal actions, punishments, you name it, can be found in these records.

### **Maps**

There are many types of maps that may prove to be valuable in your research. The most common and helpful are those contained in the Plat Books (volumes of large-scale maps showing plots and buildings on each block) that are available for most large communities dating back into the 19th century. These maps were originally drawn up for insurance purposes but serve as valuable research guides. By comparing county and city atlases from year to year it may be possible to see how a community developed, when water and sewer lines appeared, etc. The most complete collection of these atlases can usually be found at the state university. These maps or atlases can also be found at your local library, county courthouse and depending on the time period, the state Archives.

### **Books and Newspapers**

You may wish to consult books on local, municipal and/or county histories. These may or may not lead to the information needed. When working with books, particularly those written in the 19th century, you must be careful for they are apt to be inaccurate. Often primary sources (deeds, maps, etc.) were not available to the author. In addition, hearsay evidence was tolerated more than it is today. It is

always advisable, therefore, to check this information and use it in conjunction with information derived from primary sources.

To verify the existence of a house on the property in question, you may wish to consult real estate advertisements in local newspapers. This may be accomplished by using the date of purchase obtained from a deed, and by checking local newspapers dating back several months. An example would be for the period prior to 1783, advertisements referring to New Jersey may be published in several volumes of the New Jersey State Archives, a series available in most libraries in the State. These volumes are indexed by name and by town. The most complete collections of newspapers, and county, township, etc., histories in New Jersey can be found at the Rutgers University Library and the New Jersey State Archives. The situation is similar in other states. Again, check with your local library for help in finding the archive location in your state.

### **Historic Resource Surveys & Registers of Historic Places**

One of the most frequently overlooked sources of information is the Historic Preservation Office in your state's capital. The Historic Preservation Office is the repository for a multitude of Historic Resource Surveys. The properties recorded in these surveys are described, analyzed, mapped and photographed.

Each survey generally includes a narrative introduction which discusses the historic and architectural development of the area (municipality, county, region) surveyed. In addition to the survey information, the Historic Preservation Office is the repository for both the state and National Registers of Historic Places. The registers include designated districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that are significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering and culture. All records are accessible to the public. However, it is a good rule to contact the Historic Preservation Office in advance of your visit to ensure that staff will be available to assist them in locating the data.

### **Inferred Data**

In cases where no written records can be found, you must then rely on information, which is inferred (in other words, an educated guess) from the house itself. Houses built prior to 1830 may provide many clues from the fabric (material used in construction) of the house itself. During this period most construction materials were handmade and enough variations in materials exist to provide rough dating clues.

After 1830, machine technology became widespread, and as a result, materials and methods of construction are from this point on, more or less uniform; so, it is very difficult to date late 19th century houses from materials alone. Another semi-accurate method is to look at the architectural styling of the house, both inside

and out. The flaw in this is that in older houses as style changed, architectural details were modified. Inferences, which have been drawn from architectural style, *must be based on* the knowledge that tastes in domestic architecture have gone through well-defined phases. Two precautions must be observed when drawing conclusions:

1. Styles were in fashion at different times depending on the area in question;
2. You must learn about the deceptive clues that a house may display.

A fair approximation of dates for construction of the house can be obtained after consulting books in the bibliography.

### **Deceptive Clues**

Most common errors in looking for age clues in the style of a house are those based on the entire physical mass. This approach overlooks improvements and modifications. Example:

The Grover Cleveland birthplace in Caldwell, New Jersey was a simple vernacular Presbyterian church manse built in 1832. It underwent extensive renovation in 1870; a one-story kitchen addition was added, the roof on the original kitchen wing was raised one story; and fancy bracketing and corncicing were placed on the structure. This gave the appearance of a typical Mid-Victorian house (the house was later restored to its original condition).

Only closer examination revealed the building's earlier character. Also confusing to the beginner is the tendency of many builders and architects to incorporate into a single dwelling several features of different styles. Therefore, any attempt to classify this under one style would be fruitless. Studying each detail in the house (windows, doors, cornice, porches, chimneys, roofline, siding, ornaments, both interior and exterior) may give you clues so that a date for the house to within 10 years may be obtained.

The key to finding an approximate date of age and original style of the dwelling lies in the study of its structuring (for example, the way boards were sawed and the manner by which they were attached to each other to form framing). For the most part the dating and styling of homes should be left up to qualified experts. However, a devoted researcher can usually learn enough about local architecture to pinpoint the age of the house to within 30-50 years.

### **Physical Evidence**

For houses built prior to 1830, physical evidence can prove to be of great value. After this date, as mentioned before, there are not enough variations in materials and methods to be of much help. When dealing with physical evidence it is

advisable that a professional architectural historian or restoration architect be consulted. Due to the complexity of the subject, most researchers can not expect to obtain accurate results without in-depth study.

Always remember not to draw conclusions from a single scrap of evidence. It is advisable to take as much material as can be obtained and dated in hopes that a pattern will develop. There are many elements which can reveal clues as to the age of the house and among them are: nails, latches, hinges, timber framing, sashes, plaster and lath, also wood screws, fireplaces and paneling. Many builders tended to reuse some old building materials and it is not uncommon to find 1780 hardware in an 1830 house.

The following sections provide a brief list of kinds of things a trained professional would look for.

### ***Nails***

All nails prior to 1790 were hand-wrought. After this period a series of technological developments made possible the manufacture of nails by machine. The period between 1790 and 1840 witnessed many changes in the types of nails. Wire nails became prevalent in 1900. Therefore, a good sampling of nails may possibly set the construction date of the house within a given period, either prior to 1790, 1790 to 1900 or after 1900.

### ***Screws***

Up until 1846, screws without points were in wide use. Screws with points were the product of machinery which gained general acceptance after 1846. Therefore, the existence of screws without points in house hardware would indicate the house was built prior to 1846.

### ***Latches & Hinges***

Both latches and hinges may reveal dating clues, although in many cases the original hardware has been replaced. When dating this type of material it is best to check the minor rooms on the second floor and/or attic. The reason for this is that the main rooms on the first floor were more apt to be modernized. For information on this subject refer to the Bibliography following this section.

### ***Door Molding***

Original door moldings can also give valuable dating clues. Until approximately 1835, all moldings were cut as an integral part of the door with hand tools. After 1835, cheap machine-cut strip moldings were made available and were widely adopted by builders. Not all doors after 1835 were made in this manner for old customs in some areas prevailed for many years. Only an expert would be able to properly date these items. For the most part, it is not advisable that the amateur researcher removes any material that may be of assistance in dating the house, without professional consultation. Photograph it and take it to a professional.

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### **List of National Register Bulletins**

The following bulletins may be obtained by writing to the *National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, PO Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.*

No. 2  
Nomination of Deteriorated Buildings to the National Register.

No. 6  
Nomination of Properties Significant for Association with Living Persons.

No. 13  
How to Apply National Register Criteria to Post Offices.

No. 15  
How to Apply the National Register Criteria to Post Offices.

No. 16  
Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms.

No. 18  
How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes.

No. 20  
Nominating Historic Vessels and Shipwrecks to the National Register of Historic Places.

No. 24  
Guidelines for Local Surveys: A Basis for Preservation Planning.

No. 25  
Directory of Technical Assistance.

No. 30  
Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes.

No. 32

Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Properties Associated with Significant Persons.

No. 34

Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Historic Aids to Navigation.

No. 36

Historical Archeological Sites: Guidelines for Evaluation. (draft)

No. 38

Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties.

No. 39

Researching a Historic Property.