

Guide to Researching the History of a House

The purpose of this guide is to introduce the researcher to online and other resources for researching the history of a house. Included here are resources for discovering architectural facts as well as historical facts. Most information contained here is available free online; however, some resources, such as books, can be found in online and brick-and-mortar bookstores and libraries. The subscription databases are only accessible to patrons of libraries or other institutions that subscribe to them. Check with your local library to see if they provide access to them and if you only can access these databases from within the walls of your local library.

The guide is divided into two sections: Overview and Search Resources. The Overview section includes resources for learning how to conduct a search, about types of documents you may find useful, and where you will find this information. The resources cited in the Search Resources section can be used in your search for relevant documents on the history of a house.

OVERVIEW

Resources for learning about the research process

INTERNET RESOURCES

The internet is a great place to learn how to research the history of your home. There are several checklists and articles to get you started. While some of these sources are city-specific, there may still be information here that you can use in your own city. Keywords for searching the internet include: "house history" and "how to research the history of your house."

About.com's Genealogy: House Histories – Who Lived in my Home? Researching the Owners

<http://genealogy.about.com/library/weekly/aa070802c.htm>

Basic resources for tracing the previous owners and residents of your home.

About.com's Genealogy House Histories – Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home or Other Building

<http://genealogy.about.com/library/weekly/aa062202a.htm>

Tips for beginning a search on the history of a home or building and researching its history by its address.

Cyndi's List

<http://www.cyndislist.com/houses.htm>

A large list of resources and web links for researching the history of a home.

Denver Public Library Building Histories Tutorial

<http://photoswest.org/exhib/buildings/intro.htm>

A detailed tutorial on how to research building and house histories, specifically for Denver, but useful information for all.

Wikihow.com's How to Research the History of Your House

<http://www.wikihow.com/Research-the-History-of-Your-House>

A good overview of what to look for and how to find it when researching a house's history.

About.com's Architecture: Research Your Home

<http://architecture.about.com/od/researchyourhome/>

Web pages and resources to conduct architectural investigations and find answers to your house questions.

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Researching the History of Your House, by David Langenberg

<http://www2.lib.udel.edu/subj/hist/resguide/house-bib.htm>

David Langenberg is an associate librarian at the Morris Library of the University of Delaware in Newark. His bibliography is a very thorough resource of articles, books and web sites that are appropriate for any location.

BOOKS

Check your local library or online bookstores such as Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com.

Discovering the History of Your House and Your Neighborhood

by Betsy J. Green

Santa Monica Press (May 2002)

Included in this step-by-step guide on how research the history of your home are instructions on how to identify the names of past residents, how to locate them or their relatives and learn facts about their lives, as well as obtain old photos of your house.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: E159; Dewey:907/2.

SEARCH RESOURCES

Resources that will aid you in your research

Internet Resources

Former Owner Research

About.com's Genealogy: House Histories – Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home or Other Building

<http://genealogy.about.com/library/weekly/aa062202a.htm>

Article discussing the architectural and historical facts surrounding a building's history

Genealogy Research Associates' US City Directories

<http://www.uscitydirectories.com/>

Repositories of city directories nationwide are listed with their location at local or regional libraries. (Note: this is an ongoing project, so not all directories from all cities are listed).

NETR Real Estate Research and Information

<http://www.netronline.com/>

Real estate research and information services, including historical environmental chain of title reports, condition of title reports and public records directory online.

Property Legal Issues

Wikipedia.org: Building Code

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Building_code

Information about building codes that may be useful in researching the construction and occupancy of your home

Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) – Skillbuilding: Analyzing Deeds for Useful Clues

<http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/skbl951.html>

From the newsletter *OnBoard* from the BCG, an article on analyzing property deeds.

Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet: Land Records, Deeds, Homesteads, Etc.

<http://www.cyndislist.com/land.htm>

A list of resources and web links to find information on land records.

Courts Records: National Center for State Courts:

http://www.ncsconline.org/D_KIS/info_court_web_sites.html

A directory of courts (county, circuit, etc.) in each state with links to their web sites, most of which have search capabilities to trace people and places.

International Society of Appraisers

<http://www.isa-appraisers.org/>

County Government Property Appraisal web sites hold a wealth of information about the sales history of your home and those homes around you. The best way to find your county's property appraisal site is by searching by county (example: Fulton County Property Appraiser or Jackson County property appraisals).

State and Local Government on the Net

<http://www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm>

A directory of state, county and city government web sites.

Geography & Maps

City and county maps may show you your home with the owner or resident's name written beside it. Maps can also show roads or other landmarks that may no longer exist. These are pieces of your home's history and can be helpful in putting together the pieces of the puzzle.

Digital Sanborn Maps 1867-1970

In 1867, the Sanborn Map Company of Pelham, New York, produced a collection of maps of American cities and towns to aid fire insurance companies in their assessment of properties. For the purposes of researching a home, these maps can be very helpful when tracing the changes in cities and towns. (Unfortunately, rural areas are not well-represented in this collection).

Digital Sanborn Map Collection

<http://sanborn.umi.com/> and your local library (see library resources below)

Ancestry.com's Research with Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

<http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/news/articles/1422.asp>

Library of Congress - American Memory Maps Collection

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gmdhome.html>

Historical maps for cities and towns throughout the US (not all cities are included).

Wikipedia.org: Gazetteer

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gazetteer>

A gazetteer is a geographical dictionary, which can be helpful, when used with an atlas, for information about places and place-names.

Census Records

Census Records

<http://www.censusrecords.com>

A database with historical maps, census records, and links to other sources of information. This database does not list every city in every state, but most major cities are listed and quite a few smaller cities are, as well. Maps date as far back as 1865.

Obtaining Enumeration Districts from the Census

<http://www.stevemorse.org/census/>

If you are using census records to locate former home owners, you may need to know the enumeration district (or ED) in which the person lived. This web site is helpful for determining the ED when you do not have access to a name index or cannot locate the owner by name.

Subscription Internet Services

Access to the information in these web sites is available for a fee and includes databases of city directories, U.S. census images, historic newspapers and other records of former owners.

Ancestry.com

<http://www.ancestry.com>

An abundance of databases for searching former owners of your home.

Genealogy.com

<http://www.genealogy.com>

A wide range of local family histories.

BOOKS

Books on this subject include those on architecture and local history. Check your local library or online bookstores such as Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com.

A Field Guide to American Houses

by Virginia McAlester, Lee McAlester, Juan Rodriguez, and Lauren Jarrett (illustrator)

Knopf (1984)

A thorough guide on the architecture of American homes mainly built in the 1600's to the 1940's. The book offers advice for determining the style of a house, which will in turn help to determine its age. There are many illustrations provided to aid in style identification.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: NA7205; Dewey: 728/.073

Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History (American Association for State and Local History Book Series)

by Barbara Howe

AltaMira Press (1995)

A good resource for documenting the history of a home, this book shows how to examine written records, oral testimonies, visual sources, and the house's surroundings. The author covers American housing patterns, the individual characteristics of houses in different regions, construction techniques and

materials, household technology, and family life styles.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: [E180](#) ; Dewey: [307.3/36/0973](#)

What Style Is It? A Guide to American Architecture, Revised Edition

by John C. Poppeliers, S. Allen Chambers

Wiley (2006)

A guide to determining the architecture style of a home with over 200 pictures and drawings, this is a good resource to use as a visual aid.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: [NA705](#) ; Dewey: [720/.973](#)

American House Styles: A Concise Guide

by John Milnes Baker

W. W. Norton & Company (2002)

This book offers historical details to explain architecture styles and how history has influenced our home's architecture. This guide teaches readers to recognize the architectural features of any house they encounter.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: [NA7205](#) ; Dewey: [728/.37/0973](#)

Old-House Dictionary: An Illustrated Guide to American Domestic Architecture (1600-1940)

by Steven J. Phillips

[Wiley](#) (1992)

This resource is a good companion to the detailed style guides, with over 750 definitions, often illustrated with drawings.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: [NA7205](#) ; Dewey: [728/.0973](#)

A Concise History of American Architecture

by Leland M. Roth

HarperCollins Publishers (1980)

An historical guide to American architecture, this book focuses on regional influences that dictated house construction and will give you a better understanding of why homes were built differently in different regions.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: [NA705](#) ; Dewey: [720/.973](#)

Encyclopedias

American Homes: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Domestic Architecture

by Lester Walker

A comprehensive work detailing every style of American homes in drawings emphasizing the differences that make a certain home or style unique.

Library Call Numbers: Library of Congress: [NA7205](#) ; Dewey: [728/.37/022273](#)

Library Resources & Historical Societies

Your Local Library

Your local library is a good starting point for beginning your research. While your library may have only limited materials to use to research a specific property, it is always advisable to ask what is available. Some libraries have archival holdings; others may direct you to a historical library. Your library's reference collection will probably have city directories, almanacs, and local newspapers. Some libraries have city and county aerial and plat maps. Census data can often be found for your area at the public library, as

well. If your local library does not contain collections in the time period you are interested in, consult your local archival and local history libraries.

The Digital Sanborn Maps collection may also be available at your local library.

Your local public Subject Headings will include “Dwellings” and “Architecture” for your state, including “Construction,” “History” and “Historic Buildings.”

To find your local library, go to <http://www.publiclibraries.com>

You can search this directory by state. It will give you a listing of every county and some cities. Select your county, or city if it is provided, and it will link you to your public library’s web site.

Another great site for finding your library is LibDex at <http://www.libdex.com/>.

Historical Societies

Historical societies often have their own libraries. This is a sampling of historical societies on the web that offer location-specific research guidance, but their tips may also be useful in your location. Use the first link to obtain a directory of societies by state.

US Historical Society Directory

<http://www.daddezio.com/society/hill/index.html>

National database of Historical Societies broken down by states. (Web sites included where available.)

Minnesota Historical Society – Building and House History

<http://www.mnhs.org/localhistory/bldghistory/bldghistory.htm>

For those in Minnesota this site is a real asset. For those outside Minnesota, there is still useful information, especially at the “How to: House History” link.

Maine Historical Society

http://www.mainehistory.org/library_overview.shtml

A list of the Maine Historical Library collections. Non-Maine researchers can also find guidance by reviewing the list heading for suggestions on places that can be searched in every community (i.e., obituaries).

Oregon Historical Society Research Library

<http://www.ohs.org/collections/library/index.cfm>

While specific to landmarks in the State of Oregon, this historical library collection may give you ideas for searching landmarks in your state.

New York Historical Society Architecture Guide

https://www.nyhistory.org/web/default.php?section=library&page=research_guides

An introductory guide to printed architectural resources, specifically those relating to New York City.

IPL's Genealogy Resources

Don’t forget to check out the Internet Public Library’s Ready Reference collections on Genealogy for great sources for finding former owners of your home. The Census Data and Demographics section in Ready Reference is also very useful and includes resources for finding facts about your city or county, population totals in current and past years, public records and maps.

- [IPL's Ready Reference section on Genealogy](#)
- [IPL's Ready Reference section on Census Data & Demographics](#)

What Else?

Information is not limited to the web or your local library. Ask neighbors who have been in the neighborhood longer than you have. Title companies maintain records that you can request a copy of or, at minimum, to view. You can purchase copies of deeds to other people's property as well, not just your own deed. Search your county's web site for public records. With perseverance and some investigative work you can find information on your house's history. There are volumes of information out there just waiting to be found.

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