

If These Walls Could Talk: How to Research Your Home

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As family historians, we truly love stories. Underneath every layer of paint, wallpaper, or linoleum flooring of every house or apartment building there is the story of generations of people's lives that we have yet to uncover.

Documents to Look for to Get Started:

- Census
 - Use Steve Morse's website to determine the Enumeration District:
<https://stevemorse.org/>
- City Directories & Phone Books
- Newspapers
 - Real estate transfers
 - Building permits
 - Information about residents
- Deeds
- Maps
 - Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps
 - Plat maps
- Wills & Probate Records

Basic Tips:

- Take note of all the relevant numbers:
 - Lot number
 - House number (both current and any previous)
- If you aren't finding much in the newspapers:
 - Look at the real estate transfers section of the newspaper in that era and make a note of the exact verbiage used in that section. This will help you determine exactly what search terms you should be using to get better results.
- Deeds:
 - Try to collect as many deeds for the property as you can – this will establish a firm chain of title for you to work with.
 - You will need names to work with, so utilize the census, city directories, and the newspaper together to determine who the potential owners are.

- *Don't forget that not everyone who lived in your house necessarily owned the property.*
 - **What to do if you have the name of an owner (specifically a "grantee") to look for, but you are still unable to find an entry in your county's deed index:**
 - Try looking for the real estate transfer announcement in the newspaper.
 - This will at least help narrow down when the deed was recorded (which didn't always happen immediately) and it will give you a name of a grantor to look for.
 - *Be patient!* Not every deed index (assuming there is an accessible index) is easy to work with. It might take browsing an entire volume of the index a few times to find what you're looking for.
- **Research the Residents, Owners, and the Community!**
 - Regardless of how ordinary, people are at the heart of every building, so it is important (and often helpful) to dig into the stories of the people attached to the house.
 - Important questions to ask:
 - What was happening in the world, the state, and the local community that a family might experience while living in the house?
 - Where did residents work? How does that inform us on their economic status?
 - What kind of joy or sadness could a family have experienced while living there?
 - Look for vital records for family members, but don't forget to look at the local newspapers' society pages. You never know what you'll find in the newspaper!
 - Looking at the neighborhood or community:
 - Where did people shop, worship, work, send their children to school, or have fun?
 - If your house is in a neighborhood or a subdivision, take a look into the history of the formation of the neighborhood. Was the land a part of someone else's larger estate?
 - If your house is in a rural community, research the settlement of the area!
- **Don't forget to talk to the house's current neighbors or others in your community!**
 - You never know what legends might be attached to your home.

Online Resources for Researching the Style of the House:

- *Radford American Homes– 100 House Plans* (1903):
 - <https://archive.org/details/radfordamericanh00radfrich>
- House Catalogs/Books of House Plans on Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/>)
 - Search results for 1885-1926: <https://bit.ly/3xZFYN3>
- Bandon, Alexandra. "American House Styles." This Old House, January 3, 2021. <https://www.thisoldhouse.com/21018307/american-house-styles>.
- Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey (Library of Congress):
 - This collection contains over 581,000 measured drawings, large-format photographs, and written histories for more than 43,000 historic structures (houses, windmills, one-room schools, etc.) and sites dating from Pre-Columbian times to the 20th century.
 - <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/>
- Google Lens
 - <https://lens.google/>
 - This is a great tool for reverse image searching things that you don't recognize
- Old House Facebook Groups!

Other Recorded Programs to Check Out:

- Using Tax Records in Genealogical Research:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-0_IWplg-w&list=PL8AE558B5D8661B31&index=4
- "A Nation Talking to Itself": Intro to Newspaper Research:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTZTYOqkBII&list=PL8AE558B5D8661B31&index=21>

Useful and Interesting Online Resources:

- Atlas of Historical County Boundaries:
 - <http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/>
- State Historic Preservation Offices (this links to all of them):
 - <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/state-historic-preservation-offices.htm>

- Library of Congress Farm Security Administration Photo Collection [filter by location]:
 - <https://www.loc.gov/search/?in=&q=farm+security+administration>

How to Find County Tax Lists, Land/Deed, and Wills/ Probate Records on FamilySearch:

- Starting on the homepage, click search
- Click catalog
- Search by place and type the county in the search box
- Availability
 - I liked to filter this to “online” to exclude items physically located elsewhere
- On the search results page, you should see a list of record categories. Click “Land and Property” (or whatever subject category you need).
- Look at the titles of each set of digitized microfilm and select the one that makes sense based on the time frame you are researching
- On the record page, scroll down, find the reel you need, and click on the camera on the right-hand side.
 - Note: If there is a key symbol above the camera, that means you will have to access this from inside a family history library or an affiliate library (the Genealogy Center is a FamilySearch affiliate).

Research Technique Articles in PERSI (<https://www.genealogycenter.info/persi/>)

- Land Records: https://www.genealogycenter.info/results_persihowto.php
- Deeds: https://www.genealogycenter.info/results_persihowto.php
- Maps: https://www.genealogycenter.info/results_persihowto.php
- Tax Records: https://www.genealogycenter.info/results_persihowto.php

Allen County Community Album: <http://contentdm.acpl.lib.in.us/>

Books on Federal Land Records

McMullin, Phillip W, ed. *Grassroots of America: A Computerized Index to the American State Papers, Land Grants and Claims: 1789-1837*. Salt Lake City: Gendex Corp., 1994. ACPL Call #: 973.4 UN3AA

Smith, Clifford Neal. *Federal Land Series: A Calendar of Archival Materials on the Land Patents Issued by the United States Government, with Subject, Tract, and Name Indexes*. Baltimore, MD: Reprinted for Clearfield Co. by Genealogical Pub. Co., 1999. ACPL Call #: 973.004 SM5FB

Yoshpe, Harry B., and Philip P. Brower. *Preliminary Inventory of the Land-Entry Papers of the General Land Office*. Washington, 1949. ACPL Call #: 973 UN32Y

Additional Books Suggestions:

Beyond Vital Records. Logan, UT: Everton Publishers, 1983. ACPL Call #: 929 B468

Blanchard, Gill. *Tracing Your House History: A Guide for Family Historians*. Pen & Sword Family History, 2017. ACPL Call #: Available digitally on Hoopla

Clifford, Karen. *Digging Deeper: Using Essential Pre-1850 Records: An Intermediate Genealogy Guidebook*. South Jordan, UT: Genealogy Research Associates, 2011. ACPL Call #: 929 C612DI

Davenport, Linda Haas. *Taking the Mystery out of Land Records: Using Land Records in Genealogical Research*. Broken Arrow, OK: L.H. Davenport, 2008. ACPL Call #: 929 D273TA

Eichholz, Alice, ed. *Red Book: American State, County & Town Sources*. Provo, UT: Ancestry, 2004. ACPL Call #: 929 AN17A

Elliott, Wendy L. *Using Land Records to Solve Research Problems*. Bountiful, UT: American Genealogical Society, 1987. ACPL Call #: 929 EL5U

Green, Betsy J. *Discovering the History of Your House and Your Neighborhood*. Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2002. ACPL Call #: 929 G82DI

Hatcher, Patricia Law. *Locating Your Roots: Discover Your Ancestors Using Land Records*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub. Co, 2016. ACPL Call #: 929 H282LO

Hone, E. Wade. *Land & Property Research in the United States*. Provo, UT: Ancestry Pub., 2008. ACPL Call #: 973 H7552

Larkin, Jack. *Where We Lived: Discovering the Places We Once Called Home: The American Home from 1775 to 1840*. Taunton Press, 2006. [ACPL Call# 973 L32W](#)

Lathrop, Elise. *Historic Houses of Early America*. New York, R.M. McBride & Company, 1927. [ACPL Call #: 973 L34H](#)

Massey, James C. *House Styles in America: The Old-House Journal Guide to the Architecture of American Homes*. New York, NY: Penguin Studio, 1999.
[ACPL Call #: 728.37 M38H](#)

Waterfield, Marjorie. *Petition to Partition Land Records: A Valuable Document for Genealogists*. Bowling Green, OH: M. Waterfield, 1988. [ACPL Call #: 929 W29P](#)



"Loos Grocery Store with buggy," Allen County Community Album

If you've researched your home and you'd like to share those stories with us, feel free to send us an email!

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