

Squeaky floor boards, layers of wall paper, broken steps, and chipped bricks all create the character of an old house. But who put these characteristics there? Your house had a life of its own defined by the people who lived in it.

Do you want to know more about the people who lived in your house? Or do you want to know more about the house itself? Was that porch original with the house? When was the kitchen remodeled, and by whom? Do you want to find out who owned the initials T.K. carved in the wooden floor of the back porch? Do you wonder who originally owned the land? Do you want to find out who built the home? Is there an old story of an historic happening in your house?

These are a few of the many reasons why people research the history of their house or their ancestor's house. Learning more about the homes of our ancestors can help us to learn more about their daily lives and their values. Looking beyond the names and dates of genealogy research, a house history can add depth to a family history.

Don't stop with the history of your house. Research the history of the neighboring houses, and the community in which your house sits. Just as each of your ancestors wasn't an island, the house isn't an island either. How did the house and its residents fit into the community? These relationships are important to fully understand your ancestors, and they might even help you break through a brick wall.

THE SEARCH

You will want to begin your house history search as you would any other genealogy-related search: begin with what you know and work backward. Are you the present owner of the house, or do you know who the owner is? It's fairly easy to find the names of current property owners. Tax records are public records and many

jurisdictions have searchable online databases. Begin with your deed and work backward. Your deed indicates who you purchased the home from. When and from whom did they purchase the home?

Most searches will begin with a deed search. A search of the tax records (often found online) will give the parcel number. Then you can go to the Register of Deeds and pull the deed. The deed will identify the grantor (seller) and grantee (buyer) and a physical description of the property.

If you live in the house or have access to the house, search the basement, attic, floorboards, and walls. A visit to the local

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THE SEARCH

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historical society or museum could net some information. Ask the society and museum workers if they might remember some of the history of your house. Interview the townsfolk. If you don't currently live in the house, can you interview the current owners? It's possible they've inherited some old photos or documents from previous owners.

As you trace your house's history back through the generations, keep in mind that the person who lived in the house may or may not have been the owner. It's possible the home was rented. Searching city directories and censuses will reveal who actually lived in a home at a given point in

time. Compare these records to the land records for the same time period to determine if the home was rented.

Deed research may lead a straight line back to the beginnings of a house. It may also be a broken chain. Other documents will come into play then when there is a gap in the deed chain, such as tax records.

Are you researching the people as you go as well as the house history? Can you determine the relationships between the buyers and sellers? Was the home transferred by will from father to son, or was it sold to a non-related person? If the property was a farm, was it farmed by a tenant farmer or the owner?

SOURCES THAT WILL HELP YOU IN YOUR SEARCH

CENSUS RECORDS are perhaps the most popular tools to search for our ancestors and their place of residence. Most censuses beginning in the 20th century provide a street address for all entries. Census records can help you locate your ancestors' residences, and build the community in which your ancestors lived.

FIRE INSURANCE MAPS were created in the late 1800s through the first half of the 1900s, these maps were created by the Sanborn Company to help insurance companies insurance premiums. They are very detailed and can indicate building materials, dwelling use, street widths, address and lot lines, and building height. They show

houses within the context of the community as a whole.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW, or panoramic, maps were created between the years 1847 and 1920, panoramic maps show a bird's eye view of streets and individual buildings. These maps, while not drawn to scale, provide a valuable reference to the community as a whole. Buildings and other features are drawn on the maps and a legend will often indicate the occupancy of larger, more prominent buildings. Some maps include features, such as railroads, topographic features, churches, and cemeteries.

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COUNTY HISTORIES and atlases were popular in the early 20th century. County histories provide a wealth of information about many locales across the United States. If your house is historic, you might find specific information about it in a county history. County histories provide detailed descriptions of communities; if your house is not historic, this resource will provide information about the surrounding area.

CITY DIRECTORIES are a valuable tool in placing your ancestors at a certain place at a certain time, whether or not they were land owners. A city directory can provide a street address, identify neighbors, and provide information about the community in which your ancestor lived.

PLAT BOOKS provide graphical representations of property. Some will show structures on a property while others will indicate property lines and neighbors. A sense of community can be gained from researching plat maps.

NEWSPAPER RESEARCH can yield a wide variety of helpful information for your house history search. Sale and rental notices have routinely appeared in newspapers since the late 1800s. Small-town newspapers often posted lists of people moving within the community; this activity often occurred in the spring.

DEEDS show the transfer of property ownership and usually include a physical

description of the property. However, a deed for a property does not necessarily indicate who lived on the property. When doing house history and property history research, comparison with other resources will help to verify the residents of a certain property.

WILLS often transfer property and indicate the location of that property. An accompanying estate inventory can provide a room-by-room description of the contents of a house.

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION SOCIETIES often have files and create publications about historic houses complete with photographs and written histories.

PHOTOGRAPHS can show the house at different points in time and often identify previous owners. You may find photographs with family members, in local publications, or at historical societies, museums, and libraries.

VITAL RECORDS (birth, marriage, and death records) often list the places of residence.

VERTICAL FILES are commonly found in libraries and historical or genealogical societies. These vertical files, filled with family papers, newspaper clippings, and other miscellanea, can be a valuable tool in your search for your ancestor's home.

BUILDING PERMITS were commonplace after 1900. A building permit can help to identify the location and type of dwelling your ancestor owned.

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

GOTHIC REVIVAL (1840-1880) ♦ This style borrowed features from Gothic cathedrals and were ornate and castle-like in appearance. Most often constructed of masonry or stone, common characteristics of this style were: pointed windows, pinnacles, flat roofs with gabled ends, leaded glass windows. There were also wood Gothic Revival homes that featured steeply-pitched roofs and gingerbread trim.

GREEK REVIVAL (late 18th to early 19th centuries) ♦ This style was a reflection of the Greek temples. This style went well beyond an architectural style for homes and became the most popular style for public buildings during this time period. Common characteristics: columns, a symmetrical shape, and low roof lines.

ITALIANE STYLE (1840-1855) ♦ This style was inspired by Italian Renaissance villas. Common characteristics: two- or three-story structures, flat or hip roofs, symmetrical rectangular shape, wide over-hanging eaves, tall narrow windows, and double doors.

SECOND EMPIRE (1855-1885) ♦ This style was modeled after the opulent architecture of Paris during the reign of Napoleon III. Common characteristics: mansard roof, small porch entry, paired columns, and tall windows on the first story.

QUEEN ANNE (1880-1910) ♦ This style became very popular after the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. Common characteristics: round or square towers, wrap-around porches, dormers, bay windows, steep roofs, asymmetrical shape, and rich in ornamentation.

Look at the architectural style of the house to help place it in a particular time period. Keep in mind that major renovations may have altered the original style of the house.

GEORGIAN COLONIAL (1690-1830) ♦ A stately and symmetrical style that began during the colonial period. Common characteristics: square symmetrical shape, five windows across the front, medium pitched roof, minimal roof overhand, and decorative crown over the front door.

FEDERAL STYLE (1780-1840) ♦ The Federal style in America was based on the Adamesque style in England. Common characteristics: low pitched roof, fan light over door, classical detailing of entryway, symmetrical styling, delicate moldings, and smooth facades broken by small porches.

SALTBOX (1650-1830) ♦ Another style that carried over from the colonial period and is defined by a sloping gable roof. The Saltbox is a two-story home with a one-story addition across the back of the house.

AMERICAN CRAFTSMAN (late 19th through early 20th century) ♦ This style features handcrafted work in stone and/or wood. Common characteristics: tapered and squared columns, low-pitched roof lines, deeply overhanging eaves, exposed rafter, and a covered front porch.

CAPE COD ♦ This architectural style originated in New England during the 17th century. Common characteristics: low broad building, one and a half stories, steep pitched roof, large central chimney, clapboard siding, and little or no exterior ornamentation.