

# TRACING THE HISTORY OF YOUR HOUSE

*A Brief Portable Guide*



House history can be divided into two parts – the history of the house itself, and who lived in it. Guiding you are the clues left behind in the house, as well as by occupants. This brochure is a guide to put these pieces together, forming a coherent story for you to share with all.



Pamphlet created by:

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## Introduction

### Every House IS Unique

Congratulations! You have made a commitment to research your home's past, be it twenty or two-hundred years old. The task is often daunting, but this guide is meant to help assist you in putting all the pieces together, step-by-step. Your house is unique; although it may share common bonds with others in the neighborhood, it has its own style and own set of occupants and therefore, requires its own avenue of research. The end result will be a story worth sharing!

### Rules for Research

Use the following rules as a quick guide to success:

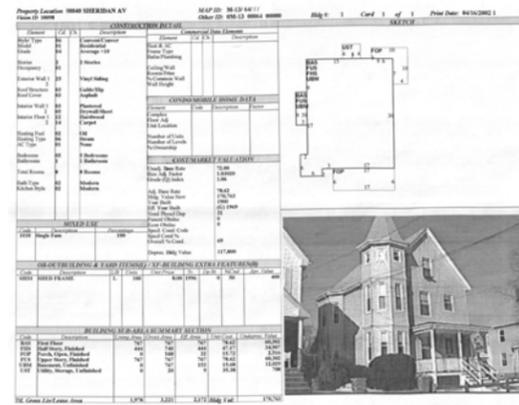
- ❖ Don't believe everything you read
- ❖ Expect conflicting data
- ❖ Document all info (*sources, dates, books, page numbers, web sites*)
- ❖ Print, copy or photograph most everything – it's evidence!
- ❖ Don't repeat work – use what has already been done!

### Gather Basic Existing Information

Before you begin, collect as much information as you can about your house. Many of the following you already have, or is accessible online or at your local government office:

- ❖ The deed to your house, including plot plans and subdivision surveys.
- ❖ Plans of your building, which can be sketched if you do not have the original drawings
- ❖ Photographs of the existing building (and outbuildings) on the property
- ❖ Assessors card which often contains a sketch plan, deed reference, and photograph.

Once you have this basic information, you some of the many of the keys you need to begin your history search.



*Sample Assessor's Record from the City of Medford. Note the sketch plan and building photo, which can be useful.*

## Checking Existing Repositories

### Historic Inventory

All states are required to keep an inventory of historic resources within communities across their state. Many of these have been input into searchable databases. The Massachusetts Historical Commission, for example, provides theirs through MACRIS (the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System: <http://mhc-macris.net>). Researchers should contact their state preservation body to check if a history has already been compiled. Even if a form exists, it may not be a complete history, but rather an overview; it will contain data worth collecting, and therefore is worthwhile to check out.



*Sample MHC inventory forms prepared for a typical building.*

### State Preservation Offices:

Massachusetts Historical Commission  
220 Morrissey Boulevard  
Boston, Mass. 02125  
<http://www.sec.state.ma.us/MHC/>

Maine Historic Preservation Commission  
55 Capitol Street  
65 State House Station  
Augusta, Maine 04333  
<http://www.state.me.us/mhpc/>

New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources  
19 Pillsbury Street, 2nd Floor  
Concord, N.H. 03301-3570  
<http://www.nh.gov/nhdhr>

Rhode Island Historic Preservation & Heritage Commission  
Old State House  
150 Benefit Street  
Providence, R.I. 02903  
<http://www.preservation.ri.gov/>

Vermont Division for Historic Preservation  
National Life Building, Second Floor  
Montpelier, Vt. 05620  
<http://www.historicvermont.org/>

## Dating Your House

### Reading Architectural Style

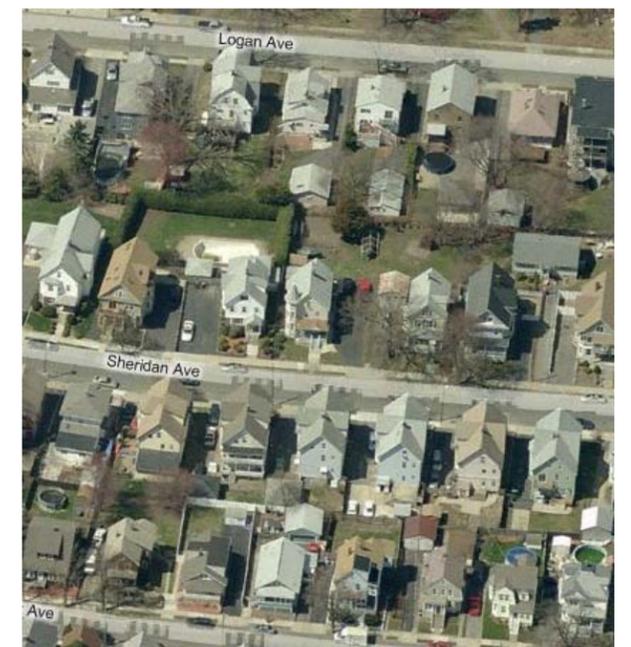
Style is one way to approximate a building's construction. They change regularly, and are often discernible from others by character defining features. Because they are living, however, they are subject to change. Sometimes they might represent more than one style. There are far too many styles to list here; we suggest the book American Homes by Lester Walker, which is an illustrated guide to historic styles to the present day.



*This group of buildings represents the evolution of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century styles. Style is useful for approximation only.*

### Understanding Context

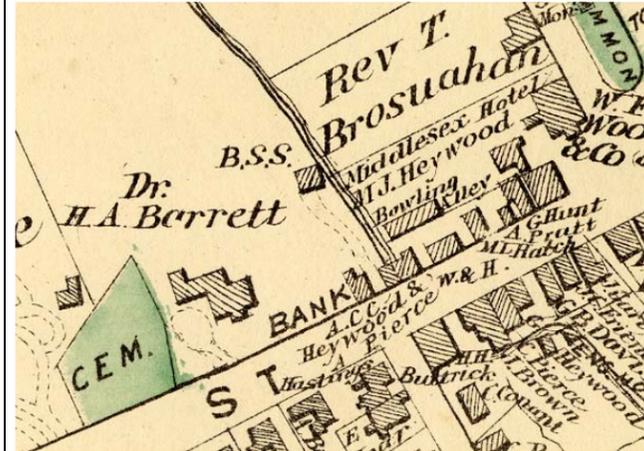
Context provides another valuable clue as to when your building was constructed. Keep a keen eye on what lies around you. If the styles don't match up, your building could be earlier, or later, than those around it.



*An 1891 Queen Anne House is centered in a group of early 20<sup>th</sup> century identical two family structures.*

## Commercial Atlases & Maps

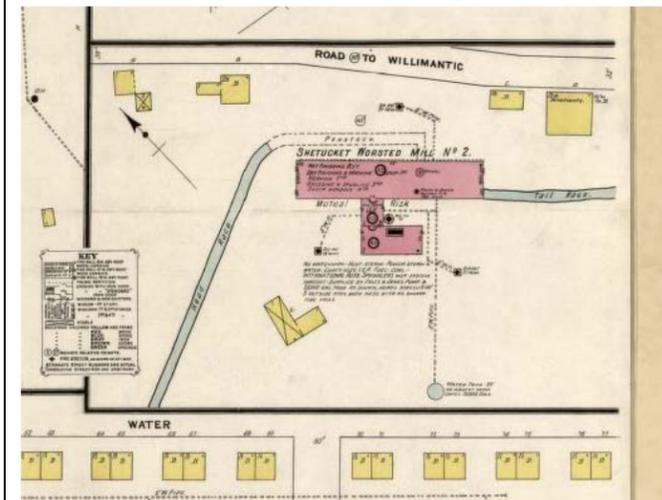
Most communities have a commercial atlas or map which was available for sale beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These detailed records noted dwellings, outbuildings, lot lines, owners and materials. They are also useful for establishing contextual information for the surrounding neighborhood. Some are available online through paid websites, but you also may find them stored at your local library or historical society.



Portion of the 1875 Beers Atlas of Middlesex County showing Concord Center.

## Sanborn Insurance Maps

Beginning after 1860, the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company mapped communities across New England, beginning with town centers and gradually expanded out. These often accurate maps were updated continuously until about 1950.



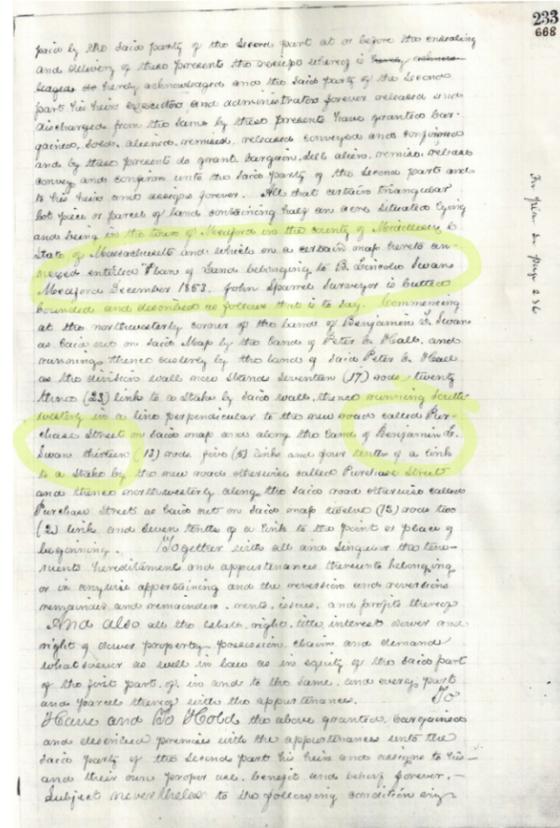
1911 Sanborn atlas for Baltic Connecticut. Note the use of color to indicate materials: the mill is brick while wood dwellings are noted in yellow.

## Understanding Ownership

### Chain of Title

Searching your Registry of Deeds is the easiest way of determining ownership. Each state county has at least one keeper of records dating back to the earliest holdings. Beginning with your current deed, you can follow the transfer of your property from owner to owner, often back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; older properties require cleverer searching.

Each index systems vary, but generally it is by Grantor (seller) or Grantee (buyer). Your deed should reference an earlier sale, with a book and page. This chain can be followed back. In addition to the deeds, you may also find documents related to plot and subdivision plans, mortgages, foreclosure, leases, tax liens, probate, divorce complications and other situations. Keep an eye out for specific wording within the deeds, as well as dollar amounts paid. \$1 often indicates a mortgage or sale among family, while increases in amounts may mean an improvement, such as a building, was recently constructed.



Typical 19<sup>th</sup> century deed from the Middlesex County Registry of Deeds. Circled is a reference to an older deed, grantor and grantee.

## Finding Out Who Lived Here

### Directories

Directories, often in alphabetical order, list persons, their address, occupation and sometimes age. They are also filled with advertisements for companies. Most towns have them from 1860 onward; some were combined with other towns, so where one city may not have an original, the other might.



1890 advertisement for real estate from the Melrose City Directory. These books often feature dozens of ads.

### Poll Tax Listings

Prior to the 24<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1962, some states charged a poll tax and published listings of those who paid to vote. These lists, often arranged by street, listing names of voters, age, occupation, as well as their residence the prior year.

### Real Estate Tax & Assessment Records

Municipalities generally keep records of real estate values and personal taxes, often published in annual reports every year. Increases in amounts paid can indicate improvements (such as buying or building a structure).

### Census

The Federal Census has been taken every decade since 1790. It provides a good overview of heads of household and their families until 1840, where-after significantly more detail was added. Also from 1850 through 1870, non-population census' were taken to document the industrial, manufacturing and agricultural landscapes of America. Privacy laws dictate that these records can only be released after 72 years.

### Newspapers

Thousands of newspaper operations once called this region home; because reporters were often local, they captured tidbits of information which might otherwise have gone unnoticed. They are also a great source for advertisements.

## Completing the Story

### Filling in the Blanks

Armed with an armada of information, you should be able to search online for additional information, including names, events and places. Do not underestimate the power of Google, including their Google Books site, which has many searchable copies of books from around the world (<http://books.google.com/>).

### Sharing the Fruits of Your Labor

Finally, the last step is to take all you have learned and share it! Write up your house's history in a narrative and donate it to your local historical preservation commission or society. They will both be glad to take it; your house makes an important contribution to your community and is worthwhile preserving it.

## Online Resources for Research

### Ancestry - [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

Ancestry.com is a wonderful genealogical site. Although it is a paid subscription service, it offers searchable digital copies of maps, directories, census' family histories, photos, family trees and much more! It is well worth the investment. Many local libraries maintain subscriptions with their membership.

### Historic Map Works - [www.historicmapworks.com](http://www.historicmapworks.com)

Historic Map Works offers many town commercial atlases and maps for sale. They also offer a subscription service for researchers who wish to pay for small format maps.

### Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps - <http://sanborn.umi.com/>

Database, available through Proquest subscriptions, which has digitized all of the historic atlases from 1860 through 1950. They show footprints, lots and change over time.

### Historic American Newspapers - Available through the Boston Public Library

A searchable index to three hundred years of newspapers across America. This invaluable resource provides access to advertisements, detailed stories and captures the heart of many small and large towns. Recommended for search after you have gathered a majority of information.

## Acknowledgements

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