
Researching Your Historic Property

A User's Guide

Researching the History of Your Historic Property

You're intrigued by an old house and want to know its story. How can you find out when it was built, who lived there, how it may have changed over time? Maybe you want to learn about its architectural style and the development of the entire neighborhood.

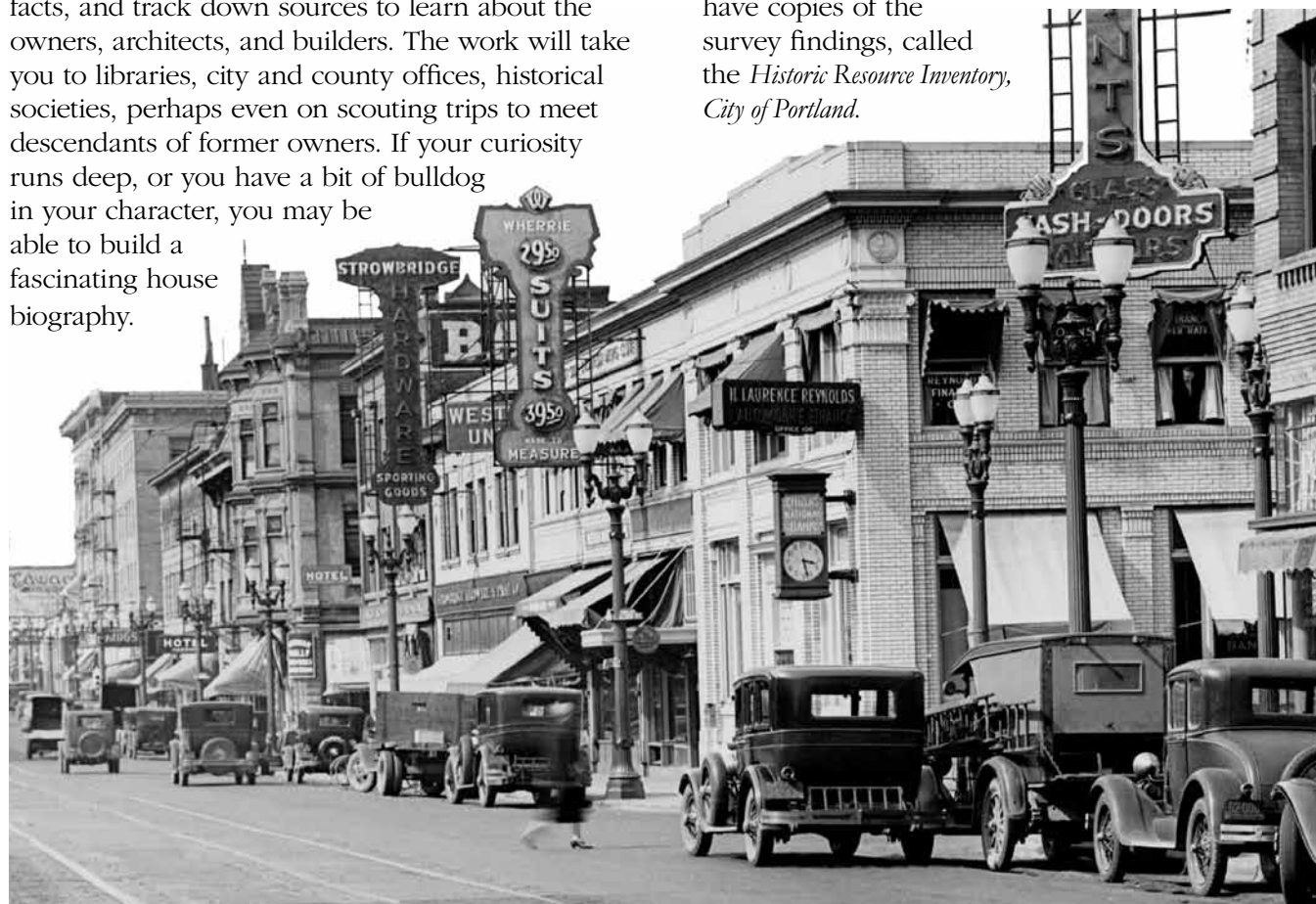
Historic house research resembles the painstaking aspects of detective work. All you need is patience, perseverance, and time. Luck also helps. The story of a house builds as you follow leads, crosscheck facts, and track down sources to learn about the owners, architects, and builders. The work will take you to libraries, city and county offices, historical societies, perhaps even on scouting trips to meet descendants of former owners. If your curiosity runs deep, or you have a bit of bulldog in your character, you may be able to build a fascinating house biography.

Don't reinvent the wheel

Launch your old-house investigation by finding out if the information you seek has already been compiled. A file may exist in the local history collection of your community's library, historical society, particularly if a prominent person built your house.

If the house is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it has already been researched as part of the nomination process. Contact the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for a listing of Oregon properties in the National Register and to obtain a copy of the nomination form.

Check with the SHPO to find out if a survey of historic properties in your city or county has been completed. Funded by grants from the SHPO, the City of Portland Bureau of Planning conducted a citywide survey of historic resources in 1984. While by no means exhaustive, the survey included approximately 5,000 properties within Portland's boundaries. Multnomah County's Central Library, the Oregon Historical Society Library, and the City Archives have copies of the survey findings, called the *Historic Resource Inventory, City of Portland*.



Intersection of E. Alder and Grand Avenue, circa 1930. (OrHi PGE 130-89)

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While survey findings typically include only basic information on a property, they will provide an approximate date of construction and may offer helpful historical background.

If a very rough range of construction dates would satisfy your interest, a basic physical examination of the house and a brief study of its architectural style might provide the answer you seek. (See *Where to go for help* for helpful books on recognizing architectural styles.) You can generally arrive at a 10- to 30-year range for the construction date of a house by recognizing the style and checking reference works to determine the period of that style's popularity in the region. If you don't already know the year your house was built, narrowing the window in this manner will save research time in legal documents, city directories, and other sources.

Using legal documents

If you want to know more than the architectural style and a rough date, consulting legal documents will allow you to develop a chain of title—a list of owners of the property from the patentee (original purchaser from the U.S. government) to the present. You may be fortunate to find an abstract for your house. If not, you will have to conduct deed research to establish the chain of title.

Although the activity recorded in an abstract—and the information you will find if you pursue deed research—refers to the land rather than the structure, these documents will reveal the names of owners and details that will help in dating your house. Mortgages, probate records, and liens often give concrete facts about the house and lead to other sources of information. You should keep in mind, though, that this path of research will lead

you to the *property owner*, who is not always the *property's occupant*.

Abstracts

Most parcels of land have been subject to a variety of legal transactions over time. An abstract is a summary of all such transactions—deeds, wills, mortgages, tax sales, probate proceedings, litigation—that have affected a particular piece of property. Abstract companies—forerunners to today's title insurance firms—prepared these documents in order to certify that sellers held clear and valid title before a sale.

An abstract generally contains the date and names of people or business entities involved in each property transaction, type of transaction, and reference numbers for the original record—for example, the estate docket number in a probate court case, or the warranty deed record and page number entered at the time of a sale. You may be fortunate enough to locate an abstract in the house itself. Don't forget to look in cupboards and attic and basement rafters, in the collections of previous owners, or in the possession of the mortgage holder. If you have an abstract, it is not necessary to conduct deed research up to the date of the abstract.

The transactions detailed in an abstract refer to land rather than structures, so it is not likely the abstract will tell you the date of your home's construction and the architect's name. Instead, you will have to interpret, infer, and follow leads offered by the abstract to other sources, and crosscheck in order to zero in on such facts. For example, a leap in the value of a property between consecutive sales might suggest a major improvement, such as the construction of a house on the property. This is by no means a foolproof assumption—inflation or reassessment could have caused the increase—but you can confirm it by using building permit and sewer construction records, newspaper articles, and other sources.



1825 SE 12th Avenue.



Interior view of a baby clinic held at the Neighborhood House, a designated landmark. October 1930.

Deed Research

If you are unable to locate an abstract, deed research will allow you to build the chain of title. To begin tracing the chain, you will need the legal description of the property and the name of the current owner. The legal description is different from the mailing address and includes references to a section, township, and range. In the case of Portland properties, the legal description usually also includes a subdivision name and lot number.

For example, the legal description for the John Palmer House (a National Register property in Portland) is Lots 10 and 12 of Block 1, Multnomah Addition to the City of Portland, Multnomah County, Oregon. If you don't know the legal description and current owner's name, contact the county assessor's office. The legal description is always on the annual property tax statement, so check *your* statement if you are researching your own property.

Armed with the legal description and name of the current owner, you can begin the process of deed research in the county recorder's office. To save valuable time and frustration, find a helpful staff member or someone in your community who has conducted such research and can offer directions, introductions, guidance, and shortcuts on the process. (See *Where to go for help*).

Although counties vary in the organization and availability of records, the following process is common in deed research. To build the chain of title or ownership history, you will trace backward in time beginning with the current owner, using transfer books in the public research room of the Multnomah County Assessment and Taxation Office (see *Where to go for help*).

Deeds—the proof of property ownership—are indexed by grantee (the buyer or recipient of the property) and grantor (seller or disposer of property) in transfer books. Look for the current owner's name in the most recent index; s/he will be listed as a grantee. (You will note that the alphabetical order in these books may be

A page from a transfer book, known locally as "block books."

loose.) The grantor's name will also be listed, along with the amount of the transaction and reference number to the page and book where you will find the deed. As you proceed, be sure to keep complete notes on each transaction, source, and reference number.

Repeat the process using the previous owner's name. Remember, the *grantor* of the deed you are looking up is the *grantee* in the preceding sale. If you do not know when transactions occurred, check grantor-grantee indexes for every year.

Once you've constructed the chain of title, use the reference numbers to look up the actual deeds and copy any pertinent information you find there. In each case, check to verify that the legal description refers to the property you are researching, since many people have owned and sold several lots in their lifetimes. Transaction amounts shown on deeds, as in an abstract, may offer clues to construction; a large increase in property value may indicate the building of a house or an addition. In addition to property owners' names and amounts of sale or consideration, the deed may provide birth, marriage, divorce or death dates of owners and associated individuals and, in some cases, lists of household contents or other tangible assets, and information about buildings on the property. Deeds will also record restrictive covenants and easements.

Watch in the grantor-grantee indexes for special deeds such as mortgages and references to court records, mechanics liens, and other encumbrances such as leases and tax delinquencies, all of which may be filed separately from warranty deeds. Since a mortgage is an owner's means of raising money, it may signal a construction project—the building of a new house or a remodeling.

Building permits and tax records are public documents that may yield information of interest. Building and other permit records are available from the Records Management division of the Bureau of Development Services, SW 4th Avenue, Portland. Multnomah County tax county records

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are available at the Assessment and Taxation Office, 501 SE Hawthorne Boulevard, Portland.

Mechanics liens—claims filed by construction contractors for unpaid bills—may also be filed separately from the deeds. Since they indicate building activity, these records can be worth tracing; they may describe the construction project, and even detail materials and products, in addition to listing the names of builders or craftsmen and the amount of the claim. Court records referred to in the grantor-grantee index are also significant sources of house information. Lawsuits, wills and probate proceedings, and divorce and insanity cases may contain relevant descriptions of the house and its contents.

Using Historical Documents

Local and state libraries and historical societies are great sources for historic house research. City directories, old newspapers, fire insurance maps, volumes of biographical sketches, corporate and club histories, photographs, and memoirs, can put flesh on the skeleton developed through deed research.

City Directories

City directories are an easy source to consult for the names of a home's occupants (as opposed to owners), as well as an approximate construction date.

As you begin researching through city directories, be aware that street names and numbering systems may have changed. In Portland, all addresses were changed between 1931 and 1933. If you are researching an early property, you should know that some street names and addresses were also changed in 1891. The *Directory of Street and Name Changes*, published in 1931, is an index of both old and new addresses. It is available at the Multnomah County Central Library and the

Oregon Historical Society library. Keep in mind, too, that directories do not provide up-to-the-minute data; their publication schedules often create a one- to two-year lag in information. For example, if your address does not appear in directories until 1921, the house might have been built between 1918 and 1921.

Beginning with the most recent edition and working backward, find your address and record the name of the occupant in each year's directory until you reach editions in which your address does not yet appear. In Portland, you'll be able to follow this process through 1930, the year city directories began indexing by both address and resident name. Before 1930, however, the directories were indexed only by resident name. If you don't know the names, research in pre-1930 directories becomes a tedious hunt down column after column of names as you search for your address.

Be cautious if a structure is continuously listed at your address from a much earlier date than your home's probable construction date. In such a case, consider the possibility that an earlier structure on the site was demolished or otherwise lost, making way for the building of your house.

Directories frequently contain spelling and other mistakes, so confirm your research with other sources. You can generally find city directories in the local library.

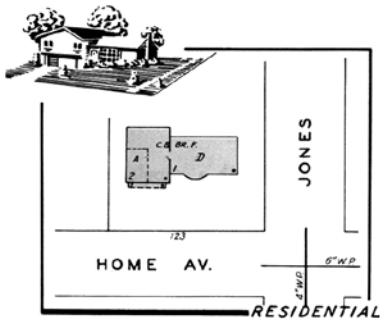
The oldest Portland City Directory on record is an 1863 edition. Multnomah County Central Library has directory editions regularly beginning in 1894 to the present. A Multnomah County Directory was published in 1935. Copies of the directories and phone books are available at most city libraries.



A page from a city directory.

Insurance Maps and Atlases

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, publishing companies began issuing maps and atlases of American cities and towns to assist the fire insurance underwriting industry in establishing rates. The Sanborn Map Company of New York grew to dominate the field. Depicting building outlines and color-coded materials, the



Detail from a Sanborn map.

periodically updated maps and atlases served the underwriting industry until after World War II.

Sanborn maps representing the period from about 1880 to 1955 are generally available for Oregon cities. By comparing maps produced over a series of years, you may note alterations in your house and outbuildings, new construction, and neighborhood development.

Copies of Sanborn maps for Portland are available beginning in 1879, continuing in 2- to 20-year intervals to 1970. Copies are available at the Multnomah County Central library and the Oregon Historical Society library, as well as online through the Multnomah County library website.

Bird's Eye Views and County Atlases

Aptly named bird's eye views—maps drawn from aerial perspectives—were popular in the nineteenth century for large and small communities. Although neither as common nor as frequently issued as fire insurance maps, bird's eye views are valuable for their scope and detail. They show buildings and outbuildings in three-dimensional perspective and offer valuable evidence of building relationships and major landscape features such as orchards and wooded areas.

County atlases from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries are another valuable source in historic house research, particularly if your home is in a rural area. These atlases contain maps of the county's townships drawn to indicate land ownership and usually showing the position of residences on the lots, along with the name of each parcel's current owner and the amount of his or her acreage. Maps of the county's larger cities may be included, but they do not usually provide the names of property owners. Most of the atlases contain renderings of prominent farmsteads, sometimes inset with portraits of the owners. If the subject of your research is a farmhouse, an atlas may provide an owner's name, help you narrow down the construction date, show if the house has been moved—not an uncommon occurrence in rural areas. An atlas may even show what the property looked like.



Bird's eye view of Portland, 1889.

County histories

You may find information about early owners of your property in a volume of county history. Like atlases, county histories were generally first published in the 1880s, with updates in the early twentieth century. The Work Projects Administration (WPA) Writer's Project compiled an index of each county history, a helpful tool if you're looking for references to a specific family. In Portland, the WPA Writers' Project also produced a history of the city. In addition to having a copy of the county history, the Oregon Historical Society Library has vertical files containing pamphlets, news clippings, and brochures on historic buildings.

In addition, Genealogical Forum of Oregon, Inc. (see *Where to go for help*) has compiled information on early settler families in Multnomah County. They also have census records and various other historic publications.

Newspapers

Most local libraries maintain copies of historic newspapers; many are on microfilm. Portland's libraries have historic Portland newspapers on microfilm from 1850 to the present. Although there are some missing issues, they are a terrific resource. In addition, the Oregon Historical Society and local colleges have newspapers on microfilm. Very few of these old newspapers are indexed; however, the time spent in front of a microfilm reader may be worthwhile, particularly if previous research has provided you with specific or general dates.

If you know when an early owner died, for example, you might look for the obituary; nineteenth and early-twentieth century obituaries are often lengthy accounts that offer much more information than today's brief notices. If the house belonged to prominent people, or is located in what was originally an affluent neighborhood, the newspaper might have run a long feature article on the home's architecture and décor. Such features might have appeared in a "House and Garden" or "Real Estate" section of the Sunday paper.

Biographical and other historical resources

Your local library and historical society are also good places to look for biographical information on architects, builders, and previous owners. In addition to consulting the previously mentioned county histories for such information, consult biographical indexes for other leads. Ask for help in locating other helpful resources—scrapbooks, diaries, memoirs, business and professional directories, church and club histories, and uncatalogued materials such as clipping files on architecture.

Census data

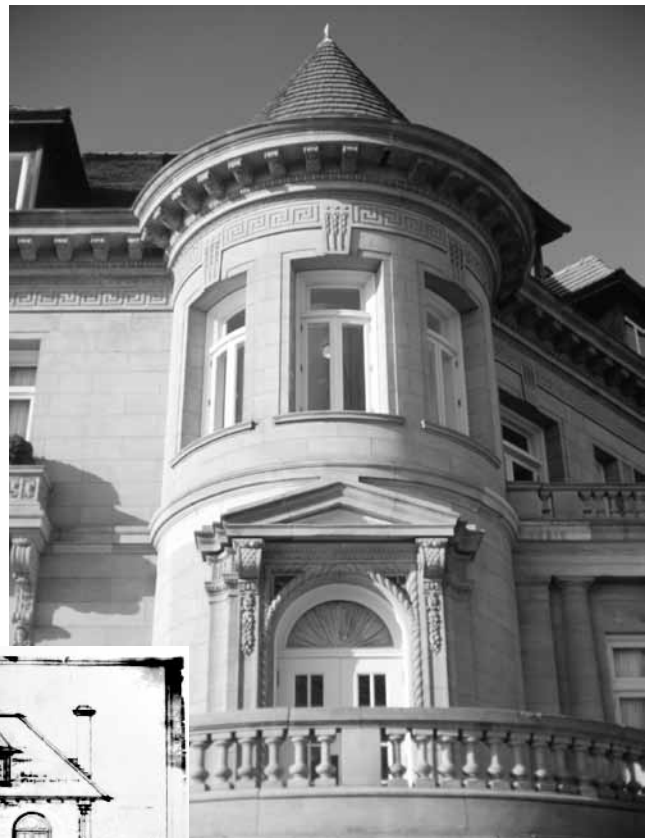
Beginning in 1850, census records include the names and number of people living in a house. In addition to revealing where inhabitants were born, their race, sex, age, and marital status, later records sometimes tell their occupations. The census records at Multnomah County Central Library and the Oregon Historical Society library are on microfilm and indexed for the following years: 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, and 1920. The 1890 census was destroyed by fire in 1921 and therefore was never microfilmed. The Genealogical Forum of Oregon, Inc. also has indexes to many marriage, birth, death, and divorce records. Family histories in their collection may provide information on property and possessions in addition to people.



The Ayer-Shea House at 1809 NW Johnson Street.

Books about architectural styles

- Blumenson, John J. G. *Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms: 1600-1945*. 2nd ed. Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1981.
- Clark, Rosalind. *Oregon Style: Architecture 1840 to 1950s*. Portland, OR: Professional Book Center, Inc., 1983.
- McAlester, Virginia and Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
- Poppeliers, John C. et al. *What Style Is It?* Revised ed. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2003.
- Vaughan, Thomas, ed. *Space, Style & Structure: Building in Northwest America*. Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society, 1974.



Books about historic house research

- Howard, Hugh. *How Old Is This House?* New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.
- Howe, Barbara J., et al. *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History*. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1987.
- King, David E. and Marty Myron. *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1982.
- Light, Sally. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*. Spencertown, NY: Golden Hill Press, 1989.
- Webber, Joan. *How Old Is Your House? A Guide to Research*. Chester, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1978.



Drawing and detail of the Pittock Mansion at 3229 NW Pittock Drive.

Books about local Portland history

- Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Gateway to the Northwest*. Northridge: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1985.
- DeMarco, Gordon. *A Short History of Portland*. San Francisco: Lexikos, 1990.
- Gaston, Joseph. *Portland, Oregon: Its History and Builders, vols. 1-3*. Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1911.
- MacColl, E. Kimbark. *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*. Portland, OR: Georgian Press, 1979.
- . *The Shaping of a City: Business and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1885 to 1915*. Portland, OR: Georgian Press, 1976.
- Snyder, Eugene E. *Portland Names and Neighborhoods: Their Historic Origins*. Portland, OR: Binford & Mort, 1979.
- . *We Claimed This Land: Portland's Pioneer Settlers*. Portland, OR: Binford & Mort, 1989.

Where to go for help

Architectural Heritage Center/
Bosco Milligan Foundation
701 SE Grand Avenue, Portland
www.architecturalheritagecenter.org
503-231-7264



Multnomah County Assessment & Taxation Office
501 SE Hawthorne Boulevard, Suite 175, Portland
web.multco.us
503-988-3326



City of Portland
Archives and Records Center
1800 SW 6th Avenue, Suite 550, Portland
www.portlandonline.com/auditor/archives
503-865-4100



City of Portland,
Bureau of Planning and Sustainability
1900 SW 4th Avenue, Suite 7100, Portland
www.portlandonline.com/bps
503-823-7700



City of Portland,
Bureau of Development Services
1900 SW 4th Avenue, Suite 5000, Portland
www.portlandonline.com/bds
503-823-7300



Historic Preservation League of Oregon
24 NW 1st Avenue, Portland
www.HistoricPreservationLeague.org
503-243-1923



Bureau of Land Management
333 SW 1st Avenue, Portland
www.blm.gov
503-808-6026



Genealogical Forum of Oregon, Inc.
1505 SE Gideon, Portland
www.gfo.org
503-963-1932



Multnomah County Central Library
801 SW 10th Avenue, Portland
www.multcolib.org
503-988-5402



Oregon Historical Society
1200 SW Park Avenue, Portland
www.ohs.org
503-222-1741



Oregon State Historic Preservation Office
725 Summer Street NE, Suite C, Salem
www.oregon.gov/OPRD/NCD/SHPO
503-986-0671



Oregon State Library
250 Winter Street, NE, Salem
<http://oregon.gov/OSL/>
503-378-5009



National Trust for Historic Preservation
1785 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC
www.preservationnation.org
202-588-6000



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*Portland's first house, Front and Washington Streets.
Courtesy Oregon Historical Society*