

A Guide to Discovering the History of Your House



Uncover the history of your house by investigating its architecture, its people, and its place in history.

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This guide will get you started by providing an overview of the process and a general checklist for the steps you will need to take.

Step 1: The History of Your Town

Understanding the history of your town is helpful when uncovering the history of your house. Most towns have a formal history, usually dating from the late nineteenth century. As the 1800's drew to a close many towns recognized the importance of documenting their early history. Most of these histories contain a genealogy section, which is very helpful with this project if you have an older home.

Ideas to consider while learning your town's history include:

1. When was the town chartered and settled?
2. Were its beginnings rooted in agriculture or was it established in response to the industrial revolution?
3. If the town has not maintained its original character, how and why did it change?
4. What important events occurred in your town's history, and who were the associated people?
5. Make copies of any historical photographs you come across that illustrate the use of your property as they will be a big part of your finished history.
6. Make note, or copy, any early town maps.

While conducting historical research on your town keep in mind how your property fits in with the town's history. Is it centrally located? Has the present center of town always been the town center? As you read, try to imagine how the town has expanded over the years. If there are different sections of town, were they developed for any specific purpose?

Step 2: The Architectural History of Your House: Exterior

House Overview: Stand back and take a good look at your house.

What architectural details do you notice?

Look at the: door (Changing the front door is the most common to update a property)

door frame

windows

steps

roof line

porch

type of building materials used

Look for any outbuildings or sections that may once have been outbuildings but are presently attached.

How does your house sit on the land: on a hill, flat lot, or slope?

How far from the road is the house?

Survey your site

1. Are there outbuildings?

Outbuildings served many purposes, such as a dairy, pig sty or outhouse.

Outbuildings can provide clues to the occupation of the previous owners.

2. Look for: abandoned foundations or pathways; trash dumps; water sources; stonewalls; plantings; man-made ridges or hollows.

Survey the exterior of your house

1. Asymmetry

- Was your house built in sections, prevalent from the 1790's-1820's? Was your house built prior to 1889, when the US standard for a 'foot' was established?

- Asymmetry was in vogue from 1880-1900.

2. Foundations

- Different construction styles and materials or lines of demarcation indicate that your house was constructed in phases.

- Do you have a full basement or are there footings?

3. Chimneys

- How many are there? How are they constructed? Where are they located?

4. Roof

- What is the roof style: gable, hip, gambrel, mansard, shed, a mixture?

- Of what material is it made? This will give you a clue but remember that roofing materials are frequently replaced.

- What is its pitch? Are there edge details, such as decorative face boards?

5. Walls

- With what material is it sided? If wood, is it clapboard, shingle, board & batten?

6. Doors

- Where are the doors placed? Are there transoms?
- Does the style of the door seem to match the frame? Remember that an easy way to update a house is to change the door.
- How are the doors constructed? Plank? Panel? Wide? Narrow?

7. Windows

- Placement: Are they wide apart, indicating the use of shutters? Is there any shutter hardware? Are they grouped in twos or threes, or single?

The grouping of windows occurred mostly after 1850. In early homes windows were often irregularly placed.

- What style is the sash? Casements swing out; if only the bottom moves it is single-hung, the top and bottom move in a double-hung window.
- Are there dormers?
- Are the windows of a particular style?
 - Palladian: three adjacent windows, center has a fanlight
 - Eyebrow: under the eave, early 19th century
 - Bay window: in vogue around 1840
 - Paired windows: Italianate style (1850-1890)
- Window trim: Does it match the door trim? Is it the same on all sides of the house?
- Window panes:
 - How many panes are in each window? Does the number differ from window to window? Do you have twelve over twelve; six over six; two over two; one over one? In general, the smaller and more numerous, the older the window.
 - What do the panes look like? Is there a bump in the middle, ripples or bubbles? These indicate age and manufacturing method. What is their color? Do you have stained glass windows?

8. How many stories are there?

- Pre-Revolution: generally, one and one-half stories for the common person; two full stories for the wealthy.
- Post-Revolution: two and one-half stories were common.

9. Are there wings or ells?

- Do the windows match? Is the siding the same? How are the doors positioned? Could a back door once have been the front door?

The Architectural History of Your House: What to look for Inside

The Interior Overview

When inspecting the interior of your house, look for the different types of building materials that may be present. Are the walls plaster, wallboard, knotty pine or paneling? Also take note of the construction techniques and finishes that were used, paying particular attention to the woodwork. Remember that the interior of a house is renovated and updated more frequently than the exterior. In many cases only *evidence* of earlier construction techniques can be found.

Survey the interior of your house

1. Take note of the following features inside your home:
 - Floors: type of wood, wide or narrow, painted, stenciled, linoleum, etc.
 - Walls: plaster? Wallboard? Wood? Any evidence of old paint or wallpaper?
 - Ceilings: are they tin, plaster, dry wall, acoustical tile? Any exposed beams?
 - Trim: look for wainscoting, crown molding, baseboards, chair/picture rails.
 - Doors: Do you have pocket doors, French doors, solid/hollow/paneled wood?
 - Hardware: notice the hardware on doors, windows, cabinets, floor registers, hooks, shelf brackets, etc.
 - Fireplaces: check out the number, placement, and location as well as the design of mantels and inserts.
 - Stairs: take note of newel posts, balusters, handrails, tread bracket designs.
 - Cabinetry: built-in or free standing?

2. What mechanical systems are present or evident?
 - Heating: Wood, coal, oil, propane, electric, solar? Are there radiators, or evidence of radiators? Hot air ducts? Franklin stoves?
 - Plumbing: lead or copper pipes, sink/bathtub/toilet design, evidence of an attic storage tank.
 - Electrical: circuit breakers, fuse boxes, conduits, junction boxes, wiring.
 - Lighting fixtures: wall sconces, gas lights, ceiling fixtures, lamp shades.

People History

Knowing the history of the people who lived in your house can shed light on the building use and social heritage. Some of the questions to ask are: Who was the original owner? What role did he (usually) play in the community? Did any historical events take place within the walls of your house or on the grounds? Often the changes made to a house indicate changing family needs, usually occurring at the time of a marriage, birth or death. Investigating the people associated with a property may provide clues for those breaks in the title chain. For many people the social history of a house is more important than the architectural history.

A. The Paper Chase

1. Deeds – Chaining the title of your property
 - Information found on a deed: grantor/owner; grantee/purchaser; cost; description of property; how it changed hands (inheritance, sale, gift, foreclosure); date of transaction; number of acres sold; book and page.
2. The Process
 1. Locate deed and (preferably) get photocopy for reference.
 2. Extract the above information.
 3. Record source of information (Example: Sullivan County Registry of Deeds, Newport, NH Book 165, Page 78, 5 May 1860)
 4. Create a timeline, tracing the owners back from your purchase.
 5. Critically assess your data by asking questions such as:
 - Were the parties related? (Middle initials can indicate family names.)
 - If an administrator or guardian is cited, is there a relevant obituary around that date?
 - How was the property paid for? Was it purchased by a single man, but a wife's name appears when sold? Was the property sold at public auction?
3. Glitches that may cause breaks in the title chain.
 - Deeds may only be recorded when a property passes out of a family.
 - Multiple deeds may be involved, as people often owned half shares.
 - Boundary descriptions of early deeds can be unclear: get to know the neighbors.

B. The People Chase

1. Begin by interviewing past owners; they may also share photographs
2. Talk to neighbors and older residents of town.
3. Wills, found at County Probate Court, may give more specific information such as names of people inheriting, a list of furniture, trade tools included. They also provide a date of death
4. Look for other court records such as: tax records; creditor records; insolvencies; tax foreclosures; name changes; guardianships; adoptions.

5. Genealogy research provides vital statistics: birth, marriage, death records.
 - Libraries and historical societies have local histories and genealogies.
 - Use Federal census data (compiled every ten years since 1790) to build a family tree of all who lived in the house.
 - Other information available from census records: neighbors, values of real estate, if the home was owned or rented, occupation of occupants, heritage.
 - Consult special Manufacturing or Agricultural census schedules.
 - The State census can provide information for years not covered by Federal.
6. Other sources to check are: county histories; town directories; business directories; telephone books; newspapers (articles, ads, obituaries); photographs; postcards; fire insurance maps; early town maps; road lists; tax lists; local building permits; cemetery records; funeral homes; church records.
7. Maps
 - Insurance maps and early town maps often give names of owners and may indicate the use of buildings.

The following resources were used to compile this information:

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

House History Checklist. Kansas Historical Society.

Light, Sally. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*.

McAlester, Virginia. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Knopf, 1984.

Suggested Resources

Historical/Genealogical Societies: State and Local

Goshen Historical Society email - gnhhistory@gmail.com

NH Historical Society 30 Park Street, Concord, NH 03301, 603/228-6688

<http://www.nhhistory.org/>

Historical Society of Cheshire County PO Box 803, Keene, NH 03431

<http://www.hscnh.org/>

American-Canadian Genealogical Society 4 Elm St. PO Box 6478

Manchester, NH 03108 603-622-1554 <http://www.acgs.org/>

Libraries: State, Local, College

NH State Library 20 Park Street, Concord, NH 03301,
Reference Desk 603/271-2144 <http://www.nh.gov/nhsl/>

Olive G. Pettis Library 36 Mill Village Road North Goshen, NH 03752603-863-6921
<http://www.newport.lib.nh.us/>

Dartmouth College Library Hanover, NH 03755 Evans Map Room, Berry Library
2nd Level 603/646-2579 <http://library.dartmouth.edu/>
The Evans Map Room at Dartmouth College has a set of the actual Sanborn maps for most of the towns and cities in New Hampshire.

State Resources

NH Division of Historical Resources 19 Pillsbury Street, Concord, NH 03301-3570
603-271-3483 <http://www.nh.gov/nhdhr/>

NH Department of State, Division of Vital Records Administration
71 South Fruit Street, Concord, NH 03301 603/271-2410
<http://www.sos.nh.gov/vitalrecords/>

County Resources

Sullivan County Registry of Deeds 14 Main Street, 603/863-2110
<http://www.nhdeeds.com/slvn/web/start.htm>

Sullivan County Probate Office 22 Main Street, Newport, NH 603-863-3150
<http://www.courts.state.nh.us/courtlocations/sullprobdire.htm>

Cheshire County Registry of Deeds 33 West Street Keene, NH 03431
603-352-0403 <http://co.cheshire.nh.us/Deeds/>

Online Resources

A Brief History of Lighting. Craftsman Outdoor Lighting.

<http://www.outdoorlite.com/us-lighting-history.html>

House History Checklist. Kansas Historical Society.

<http://www.kshs.org/genealogists/househistorychecklist.pdf>

Langenberg, David. *Researching the History of Your House: A Bibliography*

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

Paradis, Dr. Tom. *Architectural Styles of America.* <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~twp/architecture/>

CHECKLIST

Architectural History

Outbuildings and Site

Exterior

Foundations

Chimneys

Roof

Walls

Doors

Windows

Placement

Sash/Panes

Style

Stories

Wings/Ells

Interior

Floors

Walls

Ceilings

Trim

Doors

Hardware

Fireplaces

Stairs

Cabinets

Closets

Heating/Plumbing/Electrical/Lighting

People History

Chain of Title

Past Owners/Neighbors/Older Residents

Probate Records

Genealogy

Census Schedules: Population/Manufacturing/Agricultural

Other Sources:

Newspapers

Business Directories

Funeral Homes

Telephone Books

Church Records

Building Permits

Maps

Photographs

Postcards

Published Histories