



How to Research Your House History

Researching a building's development, occupation, and use is a rewarding experience in and of itself. But, the information gathered can help guide the owner of an older or historic property in preparing a maintenance regimen or in planning restoration or rehabilitation work. Owners of income-producing buildings that are eligible for listing or are listed on the National Register of Historic Places can receive federal tax credits for qualified restoration or rehabilitation.

Some Questions You May Want To Answer:

How old is the building? If it was constructed of salvaged or reused material (as is often the case with farm structures), how old are the materials?

What style(s) is it?

What did it originally look like? How does it look differently today?

Is it architect-designed? Who built it? Are there significant features, such as a staircase, that are the work of a master craftsman?

If there are additions or alterations, what is the building sequence? Which parts are original?

Were there additional outbuildings that are no longer present on the property? If the property has been subdivided, how large was it originally? Are there buildings nearby which are strongly associated with this one?

Was the building ever damaged by fire or flood?

Who has owned and/or lived in the building (or what businesses have operated there)? Has it historically been rental or owner-occupied?

Is the building associated with important individuals, an historic event, a prominent architect, or a pattern of historical development?

Was it part of a planned neighborhood or similar development?

How does the building relate to the overall development pattern of the neighborhood or area?

What the Building Can Tell You

Age and style(s) – Stylistic elements are good clues in guessing a building’s approximate age. Different styles on different parts of the building indicate a chronological sequence of additions. Other clues to age include the type of wood framing and joinery, type of saw marks on wood parts, the presence of cut nails, “wavy” or bubbly window glass, dimensions and spacing of floor joists, size of windows, or even species of wood.

Sequence of additions and alterations – It may be useful to sketch a plan of the building, identifying major additions. Creating drawings of the floor plan or exterior elevation (front or side) allows you to see the structure in a new way, often leading to the discovery of new information. Keep in mind that the most common alterations to the exterior include the addition/removal/enclosure of porches, replacement of siding material, and replacement of doors and windows. The most common alterations to the interior of a residential structure include kitchen and bathroom overhauls. Systems such as heating, plumbing, and electrical may not be original to the building.

See “suggested reading” for resources to help in identifying styles or otherwise dating a building.

Research

Begin with the abstract of title: if you’re lucky, it’s complete and you can assemble a condensed chain of title. If it’s not complete, you can track down the public records yourself at the county clerk’s office. For Tompkins County, the courthouse is on the corner of Court and Tioga streets in Ithaca. Tompkins County was created in 1817, so if you are able to (or want to) trace your property’s history before that date, you’ll need to visit either the Cayuga or Seneca county courthouse for earlier records.

If you wish to research a building and don’t know the name of the current owner, you can look it up by street address in the document software at the clerk’s office. Or, you can find the tax parcel number in the online search software of the Tompkins County Department of Assessment. (<http://www.tompkins-co.org/assessment/>, click on “Image Mate Online”)

Work backwards through the deeds : Each deed usually gives information about the previous sale, for example “being the same property conveyed to John Q. Homeowner on 12 August 1921 and recorded on page 123 of book (or liber) 456...” Search back through the deed books or in the computer database (Tompkins County is in the process of digitizing all of its deeds). If you encounter a snag (for example, the deed you’re looking at doesn’t give information on the previous sale), try using the Grantor/Grantee indices, or ask one of the helpful staff.

Read deeds closely for clues. Although deeds seem to contain a great deal of legal jargon and excess verbiage, you can gather interesting and important facts from reading deeds closely.

For example, when a property is sold by the heirs of a deceased owner, the deed may give the date of death. Family relationships are often noted in such deeds. If you're lucky, the deed will mention something extra or unusual about the property. For example, recent research on an early nineteenth-century barn yielded a deed that listed farm equipment included in the sale – valuable clues to what types of farm activities took place at that time.

In addition, sometimes an owner sells a portion of his/her property but retains a parcel for him/herself or heirs. Only through careful reading of the deed will you be able to use these details to assemble an accurate history.

You can also obtain survey maps at the clerk's office – surveys are often undertaken before the sale of a property. They can indicate location of outbuildings, property boundaries, etc. Search by the street address or current or past owners' names in the computer database. Many of these have been digitized as well.

City Directories: Armed with your new knowledge of the previous owners of your property, you can turn your search to the Ithaca City Directories, which go back to the late 1800s, available at the Tompkins County Public Library, the History Center, or Historic Ithaca. These directories are extremely useful because they not only give the names of persons (including renters) living at a particular address, but also their occupations.

After 1898, the reverse directory, sometimes on pink pages at the back of each book, allows you to look up your property by street number in order to find the names of people living there. If the names in the directories match the owners, you can assume your house was owner-occupied. However, if there are names that don't match the owners, your house was a rental. Even when the house is owner-occupied, these directories are essential in revealing the names of other family members living there. For commercial buildings, the reverse directory gives the name of the business. City directories also help you sleuth out old house numbers or street names. If the property is listed as vacant for a period, it may indicate an event such as a fire, or the closing of a business. These facts can be corroborated with further research.

For properties outside of the City of Ithaca, you may be able to locate directories at the corresponding town historical society.

Historic Maps can be found in the collections of Historic Ithaca and the History Center of Tompkins County. Several are available online on the Tompkins County website, <http://www.co.tompkins.ny.us/maps/index.aspx>. You may also wish to search the Library Of Congress' maps , <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/ListSome.php?category=Maps> .

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps were produced for cities and towns across the U.S. from 1867-1970. Originals are held in the collection of the History Center of Tompkins County. Digital maps are available online, accessed through Cornell University's library catalog (you must have a Cornell net id to access them, or visit Cornell libraries in person). 1888 is the earliest year for Ithaca, but Sanborn maps were also made for Dryden and Groton. They give detailed

information on building materials, number of storeys, the shape of the building “footprint,” location of porches, and use. Comparing maps made in different years can be helpful in determining building sequence.

Historic Ithaca Property Files. Historic Ithaca maintains files on individual properties in Tompkins County. These can include newspaper clippings, correspondence, photographs, drawings, or “blueforms”, aka New York State Building-Structure Inventory Forms. When available, blueforms contain physical descriptions of buildings as well as historical information, including a chain of title.

Cultural Resource Surveys. Historic Ithaca has copies of surveys for the towns of Caroline, Danby, and Lansing, as well as the Village of Dryden. These include building photographs and overall town/village histories.

Local/Regional Histories are often published by town historical societies and contain useful information on prominent families and individuals as well as major events in local history. They can be found in the collections of Historic Ithaca, the History Center of Tompkins County, Cornell University, and local libraries.

Oral histories can be obtained from past owners and occupants or neighbors.

Scrapbooks can be found in the collections of Historic Ithaca, the History Center of Tompkins County, and the Kroch archives at Cornell.

Google: Search the names of previous owners and occupants, or company names. You’ll be surprised at what turns up! Online genealogical resources can be very helpful here.

Other repositories of information:

Town Historical Societies: Family histories, farm and school records, photographs, and more.

The History Center of Tompkins County houses an extensive collection of archival materials including scrapbooks, historic photographs, postcards, local histories and more. The collection is easily searchable. The History Center also has a copy of the Balloting Book, useful for finding the original drawer of your lot if your building is located in the Military Tract, an area that was surveyed in the late eighteenth century and portioned into lots which were given by lottery to New York veterans of the Revolutionary War. The Military Tract contained the present-day towns of Ulysses, Enfield, Ithaca, Dryden, Lansing, and Groton only. Caroline, Danby, and Newfield were part of the Watkins-Flint land purchase.

Public Libraries: Books on local history, microfilm of old newspapers (articles about fires, floods, or other catastrophic events; development of a speculative housing tract, etc.)

Cornell Library, particularly Kroch archives for family papers or business records.

Rootsweb and other online genealogical databases, cemetery records, church records, birth and death notices.

If you have a “kit” house, you may be able to track down photos of how it would have looked originally, and find out more details on interior finishes. You may even find original plans or blueprints!

Suggested Reading *all of the following titles are available in Historic Ithaca’s non-circulating library*

“A Field Guide to American Houses” by Virginia & Lee McAlester. This easy-to-use field guide includes all of the most common styles in Tompkins County. The illustrations and pictorial key are very useful in learning to identify individual stylistic elements.

“How Old Is This House? A Skeleton Key to Dating and Identifying Three Centuries of American Houses” by Hugh Howard. Discusses chronological development of building styles, but also identifies different types of nails, doors, saw marks, and other clues to age.

“How Old Is Your House? A Guide to Research” by Joan Webber. Concise and easy-to-read, with great illustrations.