



House History Checklist

It is fun and interesting to learn the history of what happened between the walls where you live. Most house historians continue their research beyond the bricks and mortar into the lives of the folks who lived there. Their aim is to reconstruct as nearly as possible life in the house and how it changed over time. The following resources will help you piece together the stories of your house's people. Many records are also valuable for biographical research.

Below is a checklist of resources to look at as you begin the journey to find the history of your house.

□ Deed Research

The best way to begin learning about your house is to start by completing research on the deed transfers for the property. Establishing a chain of those who owned the property backward from yourself will help with looking at other resources in the course of your research.

1. You'll need the legal description of the property (Section, Block and Lot number can be a start). This description will be on your deed. You can also contact the County Real Property Tax Service office for this information.
2. The next place to look will be at deed indexes. These can be found in the County Clerk's office at the County Office Building (these may also be available on FamilySearch.org). Deeds are indexed by Grantor (party selling property) and Grantee (party purchasing property).
3. After checking the deed indexes, you can now access the deeds themselves. These will generally list the grantor, grantee, date, amount paid, and legal description of the property (this description will generally remain the same as you trace the transfer of land between owners...)

Establishing chain of title will narrow your focus somewhat, but you still only know who owned the land and when. You'll need to consult other resources to discover more detailed information.

□ Tax Assessment Rolls

Since taxes are assessed annually, we can use these records to trace valuation increases and/or decreases over short periods of time. A jump in valuation from one year to the next might indicate new construction or an addition. House historians might also find personal property tax rolls helpful as they inventory certain kinds of personal possessions. These records are usually organized by township and/or city and therein by legal description. Check with either the county clerk or county treasurer for access to these records.

□ Building Permits

These document any new buildings or additions. Permits often list type of structure, when constructed, construction details, address and owner. These are sometimes arranged by address, but more often are filed chronologically by filing date which can make them difficult to use. Most often these can be found with city or county planning and/or zoning offices.



□ **Fire Insurance Maps**

Fire insurance maps created by the Sanborn Company have proven quite valuable to building historians. Sanborn maps for Montgomery County began in 1884 and continued through 1926. Unfortunately for house historians, Sanborn maps most often cover only the industrial (and fire prone) areas in towns. Houses in the vicinity of industrial areas are shown as are their construction type (frame, stone, etc.). Additionally, these maps were created intermittently and are not available for every town for every year. Generally, they are not available for the rural areas.

□ **Records of Architects and Real Estate Appraisers**

Records that are in the hands of private business should not be overlooked. Blueprints created by architects can be useful, though rare. Be sure to check with state and local historical societies as well as university schools of architecture and architects' organizations about the existence of these records.

□ **Atlas Maps**

These maps identify locations of buildings and their property owner or occupant. Montgomery County has atlas maps available for 1853, 1868 and 1905.

□ **Photographs**

Photos can be great sources of information on both the interior and exterior of your house. Check with the previous owners, folks in the neighborhood and with both the state and local libraries and historical societies. The County Real Property Tax office may also have photos of residences.

□ **County Histories**

County histories also include photos or illustrations and sometimes discuss the construction of particular houses. These histories often contain biographical sketches of mostly prominent citizens but may also include family histories and/or photos of long-time residents.

□ **Newspapers**

If you can narrow construction and/or addition dates to a window of time, newspapers can be consulted. Newspapers can be a mixed bag. You may find a detailed description over several issues of the construction of a residence or you may find nothing at all. Birth, marriage and death announcements were often printed in the newspapers. Additionally stories on local events can provide a glimpse into community life and in turn into the life in your house. Old Fulton Postcards is a website, www.fultonhistory.com, which has a great collection of digitized images of newspapers across New York State.

□ **City Directories**

City directories, mostly available for larger cities, can prove invaluable to house researchers. Directories were usually taken at least bi-annually if not every year and list address and occupation of the head of household. Later directories will include names and occupations for other occupants in the household. Occupation information can often lead to other research (e.g. are there extant business records or photos of that). Directories are generally cross-listed with entries indexed by name and address. A particular benefit of city



directories is the ability they provide the researcher to pinpoint construction date (i.e. the first date in which the address appears).

□ **Estate Records**

Estate records document the final settlement of an individual's estate. If the person dies intestate (without a will) the court will order an inventory and appraisal of the decedent's possessions. These records can help researchers reconstruct the contents of a house. Also any estate actions that involve the sale of property can be helpful. Estate records can be found at the Surrogate's Court office for each county.

□ **Physical Examination / Material Culture**

It can be easy to get lost in the paper trail, but don't forget to take a close look at your house. What hints does it provide about its history? Are additions apparent? Have you located artifacts in or around the house (bottles, nails, etc.)? How is the house constructed? Does it blend or stand out in relation to other houses in the area?

□ **Oral Histories**

Neighbors, previous owners and others can be a goldmine of information for the house historian. Inquire about previous owners, additions to the house, any fire, and flood or tornado damage. You might find some just plain fun stories as well. Any event, it's a good idea to record these stories with either tape recorder or on paper.

□ **Manuscript Material (Letters, Diaries, etc.)**

Although difficult to locate, personal letters and diaries of folks who lived in the house, visited or lived nearby might contain information on the appearance, construction or furnishings of the house. Repositories who collect and preserve these kinds of records usually will not catalogue each individual entry or topic discussed. So, if you are lucky enough to find the diary of an individual associated with your house, it may take a good amount of work to extract any information.

□ **Site Files**

Some local historical societies have files on historic homes. These files may include photos, news clippings, building inventories, etc. If your house is on the state or national register, you should check with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (SHPO) or check their online portal the Cultural Resources Information System (CRIS) at <https://cris.parks.ny.gov> for access to the nomination and supporting documents.

□ **Vital Statistics**

Records of births, marriages and deaths for the years 1880-1973 can often be found with city and town clerks (please note, birth records are available after 75 years while marriages & deaths are available after 50 years). Other avenues for this information would be church and cemetery records.

□ **Census Records**

Available statewide for the years 1855-1860 and every five years thereafter through 1925 (with the exception of 1790). Census records list members of the household, ages, family relationship, occupation and various



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other information depending on the year. State and federal census can be found. Researchers should contact MCDHA for local census records.

□ **Artists' renderings**