



Houston Metropolitan
Research Center

500 McKinney | Houston, Texas 77002 | www2.houstonlibrary.org/hmrc

HOW TO RESEARCH A HISTORIC PROPERTY

When researching a business, home, or any other type of property you will be looking for answers to a few basic questions. How old is the structure? What did the structure originally look like on the inside/outside? Who built it? Who has lived in it or owned the property? What businesses operated at this site? There is no single place to find this information. This handout is designed to acquaint you with some of the historical records that are available, where they are located, and what they can tell you about the building or home you are researching.

Before your visit to HMRC:

Try to identify the architectural style.

Knowing the architecture of the structure may be helpful in determining its age. If you know the style of the building or home, then you can usually date it to within twenty years. Keep in mind that home improvements and renovations have always been popular and many buildings have been updated one or more times.

Suggested Sources:

- *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia McAlester (917.3 M114)
- *Old House Journal*
 - o online at www.oldhousejournal.com
 - o in print at Houston Public Library
- *Identifying American Architecture: a pictorial guide to styles and terms, 1600-1945* by John J. G. Blumenson (T 720.973 B658)

Home- Examine the physical evidence.

The building materials and construction methods used for your home contain many clues to determining its age.

- check the exterior of your home- (e.g. foundation, roof)
- check the interior of your home- (e.g. walls, trim, wall coverings, floors, floor coverings, sinks, toilets, bathtubs, cabinets, furnaces)

Suggested Sources:

- o *Wallpaper in America: from the seventeenth century to World War I* by Catherine Lynn (769.5 L989)
- o *A documentary history of American interiors: from the colonial era to 1915* by Edgar de N. Mayhew (747.213 M469)
- o *Victorian interior decoration: American interiors, 1830-1900* by Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger Moss (747.213 W775)

Ask around.

Talk to survivors of the previous owners, neighbors, and anyone else who might know something about the house or building.

Resources Available at HMRC:

City Directories

Cross reference names and addresses. The Houston Metropolitan Research (HMRC) has City Directories for Houston. The city directories provide a street address index (resident/business index only prior to 1908) for properties in the Houston, and in some cases, the surrounding areas. You can determine when the structure was constructed or first occupied by working with the city directories.

- 1866-present (up to 1923 is available online at the Houston Area Digital Archive site at digital.houstonlibrary.org)
- Irregular collection for other Texas cities available in print & microfilm

Local newspapers

Stories on local events can provide a glimpse into community life and, in turn, into the life of your house, or the business that occupied the building you are researching. The vast majority of newspapers are not indexed, making them difficult and time-consuming to use unless one knows the date of the event to be researched.

- HMRC has 19th and early 20th century newspapers for many Texas cities and towns (on microfilm)
- The central library- Jesse Jones Library has Houston newspapers after 1900 (on microfilm- 3rd floor).

Genealogical Records

There are several biographical dictionaries, gazetteers, and clipping files (e.g. Houston Chronicle Morgue Collection) on various individuals. Also, there are a number of helpful genealogical databases accessible through the HPL catalog such as Heritage Quest and Ancestry, which can provide further information on the families who owned and lived in your home, as well as information about business owners.

An associated special collection within the Houston Public Library System is the Clayton Library, Center for Genealogical Research. The Clayton Library's holdings include county and state histories as well as abstracts of records, such as wills, deeds, marriages, court minutes, vital records, church, cemetery records, funeral home records, and colonial collections of several states. This library also has one of the most extensive collections of published and unpublished family histories in the southern United States. The collection contains over 15,000 cataloged volumes and extensive vertical file materials.

Clayton Library, Center for Genealogical Research
5300 Caroline, Houston, TX 77004-6896
832-393-2600 <http://www.hpl.lib.tx.us/clayton/>

Maps

The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps show the footprint for every building in the city; they also indicate the type of construction, use of structures, addresses, and, sometimes, the names of businesses.

- HMRC has print and microfilm collections, as well as an index
- Various dates available through the HPL online catalog or at <http://sanborn.umi.com/>

The Bracey block maps for the city of Houston were published between 1929 and 1953, with editions held by the Texas Room published in 1929, 1946, 1947, and 1952. They contain line drawings of additions, blocks, and lots, including the names of the owners of lots.

Architectural Drawings

The Houston Metropolitan Research Center has a database of drawings of many Houston area buildings and residences. Generally, the homes found in this collection were built by prominent architects. However, a search can be done with one or more of the following pieces of information:

1. architect's name
2. address of the property
3. name of the client for whom the house was originally built or the name of the business/building/property
4. architectural job number

Accessible through the HMRC website at <http://www2.houstonlibrary.org/hmrc/> (Collections and Resources-> choose Architecture from toolbar-> from here there is a link to Architectural Archives Database)

Archival Collections

Collections comprised of architects' papers, developers' materials, family and personal papers, business records, civic association and organization files, etc. are helpful for property research. Keyword and subject binders for identifying relevant archival collections are available at the reference desk. Also select finding aids for archival collections are available at Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO).

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/index.html>

Vertical Files

HMRC has "Vertical Files" (newspaper clippings/subject files) and finding aids on many Houston neighborhoods that may contain background information on the area in which your home is located, as well

as for buildings and businesses. Also, occasionally there will be a vertical file for a particular home (usually indexed by the earliest known resident).

Houston Architectural Guide and the **Houston Architectural Survey** are available at the Reference Desk in the Texas Room at HMRC.

HPL Scrapbooks are available by requesting them in the Texas Room at HMRC.

Volume 26 Houston families & their homes

Volume 29 Houston Homes

Volume 103a Texas homes & landmarks

Volume 4 Buildings

Volume 5 & 5a Monuments and parks

Volume 19 Buildings and architecture A-H

Volume 20 Buildings and architecture I-W

Other specific buildings or buildings by category are also found in various volumes- ask for index at ref desk.

Resources available outside of HMRC:

County Clerk

Each time that a residential property was sold, a record was made of that transaction. By searching these records (called deeds) back in time, you can obtain determine the owner of your property and the date of purchase. The Harris County Conveyance Records Index can be used to find earlier deeds for a property. When you request a microfilm index of the actual Conveyance Records, you need to give the clerk the last name only of the individual and the year he lived at your address. These records provide a Book Page and Document (Entry No.), which can then be used to request the actual deed on microfilm.

- Visit your County Clerk's Office:
Harris County Civil Courthouse
201 Caroline, suite 460
Houston, TX 77002
<http://www.cclerk.hctx.net/>

Visit the Tax Assessor

The tax roll for your home will list each person who owned your property, and the value of the property. Over the years, the value usually climbs at a steady pace. An abrupt increase often means that new construction occurred. The year your property became more valuable may be the year your house was built on a previously empty lot.

- Harris County Tax Office
1001 Preston, Houston, Texas 77002
713-368-2000 <http://www.tax.co.harris.tx.us/>

Check building permits

These document any new buildings or additions. Permits often list type of structure, when constructed, construction details, names and addresses of owner; architect, and builder. Only go back to 1988 for commercial and 1970 for residential.

- Dept. of Public Works and Engineering, Code Enforcement Office
3300 Main, Houston, TX 77002
(713)535-7510 <http://www.houstontx.gov/pia.html>

Harris County Appraisal District

- Harris County Appraisal District
13013 Northwest Freeway, Houston, Texas 77040-6305
(713) 957-7800 <http://www.hcad.org/>

Helpful guides you can find online:

The **Houston History Association** offers *A Guide to Researching Your Neighborhood History*.

Land Record Research in Houston, Harris County, Texas is dated but still useful.