

How to Research Your House

Taken from Older and Historic House Answer Book: Everything you needed to know & never knew whom to ask

After purchasing your old house, you may want to find out as much about it as possible. Researching the history of your house can be a fun and rewarding endeavor. Finding out when it was constructed and who were its early occupants can generate a sense of continuity and an attachment to your house, your neighborhood, and your community. Sometimes, the answers to your questions will come easily. In other cases, it may take considerable effort to uncover your home's past.

As you conduct your research, remember that historic records were created by humans and are therefore subject to human error. It is best to substantiate your findings in as many sources as possible. These sources can include tax and deed records, city directories, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, newspaper articles, and oral and local histories.

If you live in a home that was once owned by a prominent individual or is of a distinctive architectural style, your work may already be done. As you begin the process of researching your home, it is advised that you begin with the records of the Tarrant County Historic Resources Survey. In the 1980s and early 1990s, surveys were conducted in Fort Worth and selected communities in Tarrant County to identify historic resources worthy of preservation. The findings of these surveys were published in book form and are listed in the bibliography of this resource guide. Each of the books provides a photograph and brief description of the resource that includes an estimated date of construction. Copies of the books are available at the Fort Worth Public Library or can be purchased at Historic Fort Worth, Inc., a private nonprofit preservation organization.

Historic Fort Worth, Inc. also is the repository of the survey material gathered on each of the resources included in these books. An individual file was created for each property that includes information on early owners and a brief physical description. Depending on the resource, some files contain a wealth of information and others only a minimal amount. If your house falls into the later category, some of the tips offered below will be of use to you as you try to find out more about your house.

Of course, not every house could be included in the original surveys and much work remains to be done identifying and documenting Fort Worth's historic houses. It is strongly encouraged that any research you do on your house be shared with the City of Fort Worth, Historic Fort Worth, Inc., the Tarrant County Historical Commission, and the Fort Worth Public Library so that future generations can benefit from your work.

Before you begin research on your house, you may wish to study some of the architectural guides mentioned in this booklet's bibliography. These guides can familiarize you with your home's architectural style and the period when that particular style was popular. That will give you a clue as to when your house was constructed and help you to narrow the era in which to confine your search for information about your

house.

Once you are ready to begin your research, a good way to get basic information on your house is to pay a visit to the Tax Assessor's Office at the Tarrant County Administration Building (Courthouse Annex). Request a copy of the Tax History Card for your home. These cards, first created in the 1930s, will provide a shortcut for finding the early owners of your house. On the front of each card is a list with the name of the owners, the volume and page numbers in which the deed transactions were recorded and the date the deeds were recorded. The back of the cards usually have a date of construction and information on the physical qualities of the building such as roof type and material, exterior wall material, and interior finishes. If more than one date is given, the other dates may be when improvements were made to the building or when other buildings such as a garage or servant's quarter were constructed on the property. Often the dates for these other buildings are written with a colored pencil so you should request to see the original copy of the tax card. The back of the tax card may also have a footprint of your house. This can be an important piece of information to have to determine if any alterations or additions have been made to your house. Some of these cards also list building permits that were issued for repairs or alterations.

The first individual or party listed on the tax card may not be the original owner of the house. To discover if there were any prior owners, take the name of the first listed individual as well as the volume and page number of the deed record to the County Clerk's Office in the basement of the Tarrant County Courthouse. The deeds are available on microfilm. Ask one of the clerks to assist you with finding the correct reel for the deed record you want. When you find that deed record, look to see who was the "grantor" or seller of the property. When you have that individual's or party's name, you can then trace the deed one step back by using that name as the buyer or "grantee" for the previous transaction. You can then look at the "Grantee Index" to see when that person bought that piece of property. You may have to repeat this step numerous times to arrive at the original owner of the property. It should be noted that deed records typically only trace the chain of ownership and rarely have information about when a building was constructed. A parcel of land could change ownership numerous times before anything was ever constructed on it. However, a significant increase in the value of a property between one transaction and another can be a strong indicator that improvements were made during that time period.

Mechanic's Liens can reveal the name of the contractor and/or architect that designed or constructed your house. When searching for these liens use the property owner's name as the "Grantor." Prior to 1927, Mechanic's Liens were listed in the general indexes. After that date, they were organized in a separate index.

If the Tax History Card contained a date of construction for your house and you weren't able to confirm that date through the deed records or Mechanic's Liens, there is another quick method you can use to verify that date. This method can also be used if you do not have a date of construction with which to start. The Genealogy and Local History Department of the downtown branch of the Fort Worth Public Library has nearly a

complete run of City Directories from 1926 to the present. City Directories published prior to 1926 are available at the library on microfiche and microfilm. Most of the directories are divided into two main parts, an alphabetical listing of residents, and a list of addresses that are organized alphabetically and numerically by street name and address.

Before you use this method, check to make sure that the name of your street has not changed over the years. It was not unusual for the names of streets to be changed as the city grew and more additions and communities were annexed into the city limits. For example, portions of Vickery Boulevard have had at least three different names over the years. To see if the name of your street has changed, locate a copy of the original plat map of the addition where your house is (the name of your addition will be included in the legal description of your house that is found in your abstract or on the Tax History Card). However, it should be noted that early county deed and plat records were destroyed when the courthouse burned in 1876. Many of the deed records were recreated after the fire but plat maps for some early additions were not.

After you have confirmed the name of the street, pick a City Directory to see if your address appears in that year. If it does, then chose a directory from a year earlier to see if the address also appears in that directory and repeat this process until you find that the address does not appear. For example, if the address appears in a directory published in 1927 but not in one published in 1926, then you may be able to assume that your house was built around 1926 or 1927. However, some areas of the city were not covered by the city directories even though there were houses on those streets. That is why it is important to verify the date of construction in as many ways as possible. Also, it should be noted that house numbers could be changed as more houses were built on a block so you should try to confirm the house number as well. Another fact that you should remember is that it was not uncommon for a house to be moved from one location to another (a practice that continues today). If you use City Directories to date your house, there is the possibility that it could actually be older than the date when it first appears in the directories due to it having been moved to that location or because earlier directories did not cover that block or street.

Another way to confirm the general time period when your home was constructed is to look at Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. These are available on microfilm at the Genealogy and Local History Department at the Fort Worth Public Library as well as the Special Collections Division, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries. Maps for the city were created in 1885, 1889, 1893, 1898, 1911, 1926, 1927, and 1949/1951. The Fort Worth Public Library also has copy of a Sanborn Map on microfilm that was last updated in 1970 but the copy quality makes it difficult to see details with clarity. Bound copies of the maps that were updated in the early 1960s are available at Historic Fort Worth. Not all areas of the city were covered by these maps and some of the early maps for portions of the city are missing or were not microfilmed.

These maps show the footprint of a building and indicate its exterior materials, the number of stories, and any outbuildings located on the property. By looking at each of

these maps, you can trace any additions or alterations made to the house such as the enclosure of a porch, the addition of a second story, or changes in the exterior materials. The maps may reveal that an earlier house was once on the property. They can also be used to verify the house numbers as they typically noted changes in addresses and even street names.

Another source to use to find a date of construction for your house is to check the records of the Tarrant Appraisal District. You can find the data on your house on the Web by logging on to www.tad.org. The dates given in TAD are not always reliable, especially for houses built prior to 1925, but they can be used as a place to start if the methods mentioned above have not been fruitful.

The City of Fort Worth has old building permits that can reveal the cost of construction and the names of contractors and other vendors. These can be used to establish dates of construction and alterations. Although incomplete, the oldest permits date back to the 1920s. These records are not available to the public but searches can be performed by city staff in the Development Department at an hourly fee after filling out a request form..

Once you have a general date of construction, you can read old newspapers to see if there were any notices of building permits, real estate notices, or photographs of your house. The Fort Worth Public Library has old Fort Worth newspapers available on microfilm. It can be a tedious procedure reading old newspapers but you may find some wonderful information.

Historic photographs (and even old postcards) can provide invaluable information about a house and its appearance at a given time. These can be found in a variety of places including the public library, the Tarrant County Historical Commission, the North Fort Worth Historical Society, the Star-Telegram archives located in the Special Collections Division at the University of Texas at Arlington Libraries (UTA), other university archives, newspapers, and from family members of former owners. However, dates written on the backs of photos may not be reliable so keep that in mind as you conduct your research. Librarians and archivists may lead you to other sources of information about your house or neighborhood.

Besides the date of construction, you may be interested in learning about the people who lived in your house. City directories can provide the names of occupants. First look at the address section of the directories to see who lived in your house. Compare these names with the names you gathered in your tax and deed research. If the names differ, then it may be that the house was not owner-occupied but was rented to others. By looking in the alphabetical section of the directories, you may be able to find out the owners' or occupants' occupation, the name of their spouse or the number of other individuals living in the house.

Additional information about the occupants can be found in other sources. Obituaries published in local newspapers can provide a wealth of information about a person. Also, check the clippings files at the public library or the Star-Telegram archives at UTA as

there may be newspaper articles about these individuals. The staff of these institutions can help you find these sources. There also are numerous published histories and theses/dissertations about Fort Worth that may contain information about the owners of your house. These can be found at the public library and local and regional college libraries.