



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)
- *Identifying American Architecture: a pictorial guide to styles and terms, 1600-1945* by John J. G. Blumenson (T 720.973 B658)
- *The Buildings of Main Street: a Guide to American Commercial Architecture* by Richard Longstreth (725.20973 L857-Central Library)

Home- Examine the physical evidence.

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

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

Suggested Sources:

- o *Wallpaper in America: from the seventeenth century to World War I* by Catherine Lynn (769.5 L989)
- o *Texas Houses Built by the Book: the Use of Published Designs, 1850-1925* by Margaret Culbertson (728.09764 C967)

Newspapers-Search for the property's name, address, or name of former residents on the Portal to Texas History.

Digital website that has digitized a large part of early Houston (and Texas) newspapers into the middle of the 20th century. Visit from any computer at www.texashistory.unt.edu.

Ask around.

Talk to the previous owners, their families, 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. By working backwards or forwards from the year you do not find the particular address you are researching listed, you can determine when the structure was constructed or first occupied.

- 1866-present
- Irregular collection for other Texas cities available in print & microfilm



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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 occupies 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.

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 houstonlibrary.org/clayton

Maps

The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps show the footprint for every building in the city; also indicate 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 online at <http://sanborn.umi.com/> (with HPL library card) or through <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/texas.html>

The Bracey block maps for the city of Houston were published between 1929 and 1953, with editions held by TXR 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 an Architectural Archives 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 <http://www2.houstonlibrary.org/hmrc/architectural.html>

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. Select finding aids for archival collections are available at Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO).

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



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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 (Texas Room Reference Desk)

Houston Architectural Survey (Texas Room Reference Desk)

HPL Scrapbooks

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/>

Check the Tax Rolls

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 Archives
11525 Todd Street, Suite 300, Houston, Texas 77055 (By appointment only)
713-274-9680 <http://www.harriscountyarchives.com/>

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/>