

TRACING THE HISTORY OF YOUR HOUSE

A Brief Portable Guide



House history can be divided into two parts – the history of the house itself, and who lived in it. Guiding you are the clues left behind in the house, as well as by occupants. This brochure is a guide to put these pieces together, forming a coherent story for you to share with all.



Pamphlet created by:

Ryan D. Hayward, Preservation Consultant

Introduction

Every House IS Unique

Congratulations! You have made a commitment to research your home's past, be it twenty or two-hundred years old. The task is often daunting, but this guide is meant to help assist you in putting all the pieces together, step-by-step. Your house is unique; although it may share common bonds with others in the neighborhood, it has its own style and own set of occupants and therefore, requires its own avenue of research. The end result will be a story worth sharing!

Rules for Research

Use the following rules as a quick guide to success:

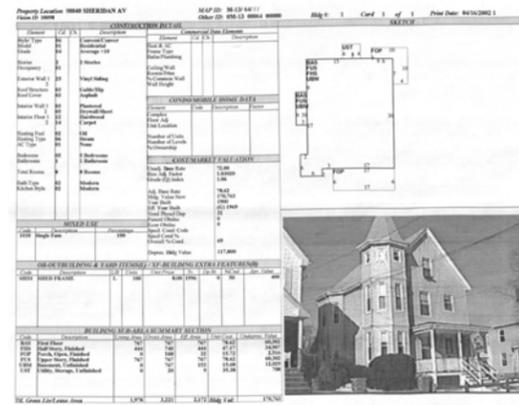
- ❖ Don't believe everything you read
- ❖ Expect conflicting data
- ❖ Document all info (*sources, dates, books, page numbers, web sites*)
- ❖ Print, copy or photograph most everything – it's evidence!
- ❖ Don't repeat work – use what has already been done!

Gather Basic Existing Information

Before you begin, collect as much information as you can about your house. Many of the following you already have, or is accessible online or at your local government office:

- ❖ The deed to your house, including plot plans and subdivision surveys.
- ❖ Plans of your building, which can be sketched if you do not have the original drawings
- ❖ Photographs of the existing building (and outbuildings) on the property
- ❖ Assessors card which often contains a sketch plan, deed reference, and photograph.

Once you have this basic information, you some of the many of the keys you need to begin your history search.



Sample Assessor's Record from the City of Medford. Note the sketch plan and building photo, which can be useful.

Checking Existing Repositories

Historic Inventory

All states are required to keep an inventory of historic resources within communities across their state. Many of these have been input into searchable databases. The Massachusetts Historical Commission, for example, provides theirs through MACRIS (the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System: <http://mhc-macris.net>). Researchers should contact their state preservation body to check if a history has already been compiled. Even if a form exists, it may not be a complete history, but rather an overview; it will contain data worth collecting, and therefore is worthwhile to check out.



Sample MHC inventory forms prepared for a typical building.

State Preservation Offices:

Massachusetts Historical Commission
220 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, Mass. 02125
<http://www.sec.state.ma.us/MHC/>

Maine Historic Preservation Commission
55 Capitol Street
65 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333
<http://www.state.me.us/mhpc/>

New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources
19 Pillsbury Street, 2nd Floor
Concord, N.H. 03301-3570
<http://www.nh.gov/nhdhr>

Rhode Island Historic Preservation & Heritage Commission
Old State House
150 Benefit Street
Providence, R.I. 02903
<http://www.preservation.ri.gov/>

Vermont Division for Historic Preservation
National Life Building, Second Floor
Montpelier, Vt. 05620
<http://www.historicvermont.org/>

Dating Your House

Reading Architectural Style

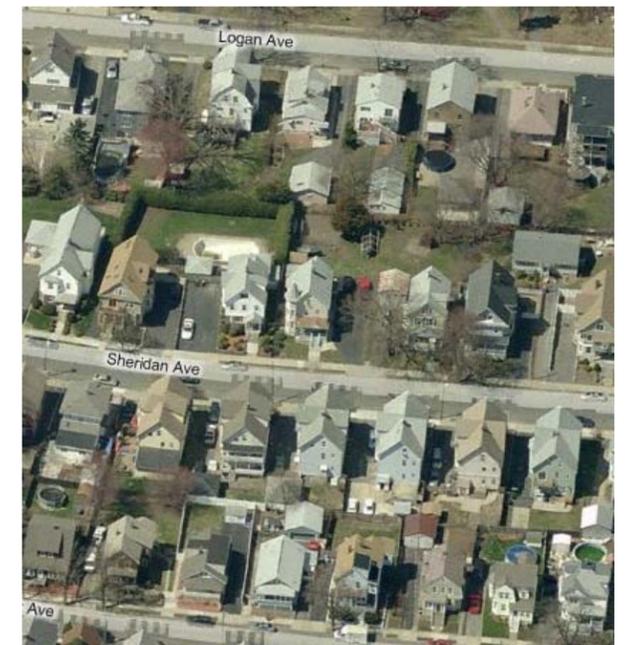
Style is one way to approximate a building's construction. They change regularly, and are often discernible from others by character defining features. Because they are living, however, they are subject to change. Sometimes they might represent more than one style. There are far too many styles to list here; we suggest the book American Homes by Lester Walker, which is an illustrated guide to historic styles to the present day.



This group of buildings represents the evolution of late 19th and early 20th century styles. Style is useful for approximation only.

Understanding Context

Context provides another valuable clue as to when your building was constructed. Keep a keen eye on what lies around you. If the styles don't match up, your building could be earlier, or later, than those around it.



An 1891 Queen Anne House is centered in a group of early 20th century identical two family structures.

