

Tracing a Home's History

By Trail End State Historic Site Curator Nancy McClure; from *Trail End Notes*, April 2005 & July 2005; updated April 2013

When Trail End staff begin work on any new exhibit, particularly one relating to the construction of the Kendrick Mansion, we utilize the wealth of documents we have in our collections: blueprints, plans, letters, receipts, photographs, recollections and others. We are extremely fortunate to have such a well-documented history.

Even if you are not lucky enough to have such a paper trail on your own home, you can still piece together a rich history of a house through locally available resources. Especially if you own an older home, you may want to research its history to guide restoration work, or simply to enrich your knowledge of its past and those who lived there before you. Here are some resources you'll want to utilize in your investigation.

Detail, Federal Census, 1920 (Ancestry.com)

LEGAL DOCUMENTS

Start at the courthouse to begin your search. Your block and lot number will help you as you deal with legal documents. Find them in a deed, building permit record or plat book. If you don't already know the date of original construction, records at the courthouse should help you discover it.

- Grantee-Grantor Index** Trace the chain of title by looking through the Grantee-Grantor Index to find out who has owned the property through the years. These are deed indexes that record the name of the buyer (grantee), seller (grantor) and date of each sale. Work backward by looking for the name of the person who sold you your house, finding out who he or she bought it from, and so on. Be sure to verify each time that the entry refers to your particular property. Work back to the original owner.

- **Land Deeds** To zero in on your home's construction date, look for two specific deeds: the first deed that mentions the structure, and a previous one that does not. Infer an approximate date of construction between these two sales. Be careful; you will want to continue searching for other evidence that verifies the date, and that the structure mentioned is indeed your house and not an earlier one torn down and replaced by another.
- **Building Permits** Many other ordinarily dry legal documents at the courthouse and city hall can help you find out tidbits of history. Building permits can tell you the date a permit was issued, the name of the property owner, the name of the builder and the cost of the project. Armed with the approximate construction date from the Grantee-Grantor Index search, you may be able to pinpoint the date from the building permit. Keep in mind that a permit would be issued for original construction as well as for major alterations or additions.
- **Tax Records** Tax records can also provide valuable clues. A noticeable increase in the tax assessment from one year to the next can indicate improvements made to the property. But remember: an increase could also reflect a reassessment of taxes by the city or a real estate boom. Learning about the broader context of the history of the local economy can help you interpret what occurred.
- **Plat Maps** Plat maps showing each land parcel for tax purposes may also show building footprints on lots; this can help you verify by the shape of the footprint that you are looking at records of your current house and not an earlier structure once located on the same lot.
- **Probate Records & Wills** Consider also that property is sometimes conveyed by means other than a straight sale. Probate records and wills can help you here. Following the death of the owner, a property may be sold through probate or inherited by a descendant or other relative - or sometimes by someone completely unrelated to the deceased. Files on these types of transactions may even contain a household inventory drawn up in preparation for a division or sale of the estate. This information can give you interesting insights on the contents of the home at a specific point in time, and even hints on household activities, room use and the social status of the occupants.

THE STRUCTURE ITSELF

Clues to the history of your house can also be found within the structure itself. Look at the style, keeping in mind that many houses contain a variety of elements from different styles due to the preferences of the original builder, the fashion of the day and later "facelifts" as tastes changed. A physical examination of the building may reveal the existence of additions and alterations as well as maintenance and restoration needs. While you may not be lucky enough

to find a dated cornerstone, you will become more familiar with the unique qualities and idiosyncrasies of your own home.

PUBLIC LIBRARY

- **Fire Insurance Maps** Fire insurance maps, most notably those produced by the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company between 1880 and 1920, contain detail beyond the expected location and footprint. Designed to compile fire-risk information, these maps recorded all sorts of data:
 - Materials used in foundations, siding and roofing
 - Dimensions and number of stories
 - Existence of outbuildings
 - Notable features such as porches
 - Location, address and function

While the originals have color coding for certain features, many libraries have black and white copies that will still give you much information.

- **Census Records** When you're ready to learn more about former inhabitants of your house, several sources are available. With the exception of the 1890 census, most of which was destroyed by fire, federal census records are available on microfilm through 1940. The information recorded for each occupant will help you reconstruct the household as it existed at the ten-year intervals recorded by the census. Although the forms changed for each census, collected data normally included:
 - Names and ages of all residents
 - Relationship to homeowner
 - Marital status
 - State or nation of birth
 - Occupation
 - Military service
 - Date of immigration and/or years in America
 - Education and/or knowledge of English
 - Whether one rented or owned the property
 - Acreage, farm status, etc.

Even without a name to start from, you can find your house's occupants in the census by looking on the census enumeration map, which will give you an enumeration district number with which to pinpoint your house.

- **City Directories & Telephone Directories** Other records usually held by the public library will help you augment information on past residents. City directories from the late 1800s and early 1900s, for example, listed individuals, often by name and address, and included information on family and occupation.
- **Vital Records** Many libraries have microfilm or digital access to birth, death, marriage and/or divorce records. If you are lucky, you may find that a wedding was held "at home" rather than in a church.
- **Local History Books & Newspapers** Community or county histories, especially if the former residents were prominent citizens, will provide more social history, but keep in mind that many of these publications carried a current of boosterism that focused mainly on the positive. Somewhat more reliable are newspapers. Early society columns and "Who Did What Today" columns are excellent sources for personal information. Oddly however, obituaries are often missing for all but the most prominent of residents and birth announcements are spotty at best.
- **Archival Materials** If you are exceedingly lucky, you may even find family papers or diaries of former residents in a museum or library archive. Church, school and cemetery records housed at the library may also provide information.

ORAL HISTORY

Do not overlook an obvious source of historical information: oral history. Now that you have surnames to guide you, check the local phone book or the internet for descendants. Politely inquire by letter or phone if these people - or their parents or grandparents - have recollections of life in your house. When thinking of former occupants, remember to include lodgers or housekeepers or cooks (if you have their names). These folks are likely to have a different perspective than the former owner and can only add richness to the history you are compiling. Ask about room use, furnishings and changes. Inquire about the intangibles, too, such as how holidays and birthdays were celebrated.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Finally, some of the most valuable and interesting sources for researching your home's history are photographs. Check with neighbors, the public library, and antique shops to locate snapshots, formal photographs and photo-postcards (especially popular in the early Twentieth Century). All can reveal invaluable information. Look at details that might now be missing, such as the railing on a now-enclosed porch. Look at the landscape for evidence of long-lost gardens

or trees. Look at color values; even black and white photos will provide clues to past paint schemes. Include in your research photographs in which your home is not the main subject. A neighbor's snapshot of a backyard barbecue may reveal your home in the background.

When you have searched all of these resources, you will probably end up with a much more thorough and fascinating history of your home than you ever thought possible. After you have compiled all of the information, write up the history for your own interest, and for those who will come after you asking the same questions.



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