



Researching Your Historic Home

Whether your home is very old or more recently built, it can be fascinating to discover its history.

Step 1: Check the Form B

If your home has a Mass. Historical Commission (MHC) Form B, then *some* research has already been done. MHC creates forms for all historic resources in the state. Form Bs are for buildings, and having a Form B does not add any additional restrictions on a home—it is merely a record of a historic resource.

The Society website has a link to the MHC MACRIS database (which has all of the Form Bs on it) on our website (Go to “Learn More” > “Search For Old Homes”). [HERE](#) is a direct link to the database.

Not all old houses have Form Bs, but they should. If your house doesn’t have a Form B and you believe it should contact the Society and we will notify the Commission who will create a form for your home and submit it to MHC. The Historical Commission is obligated by the State of Massachusetts to create Form Bs for all architecturally- or historically-significant homes in town, but having a Form B does not give a property any official historic designation.

If your house *does* have a Form B, it will probably reveal who lived there previously. You may be able to skip Step 2 if there is a reference to maps on the form.

Step 2: Check the Maps

Norwell has the following maps that show the location of houses in town:

- 1831—Map of Scituate (Norwell was part of Scituate in 1831). This map shows the location of homes with dots. No names are associated with the dots on the map. This map is located at the Historical Society Archives, and if you can’t come in to see the map, you can email the Society and we can look up your home. There aren’t too many houses shown on this map, so it is quite useful to determine if a very old home was built prior to 1831 or afterward. [HERE](#) is a link to an online version of that map that can be enlarged to view neighborhoods, but because streets are not labeled, you have to know where you want to look.
- 1857—Map of South Scituate (Norwell was South Scituate from 1849-1887). This map shows the location of homes with dots and names of residents (note: names are of residents, not necessarily owners). This map is available online at the Society website (Go to “Learn More” > “Old Maps of Norwell”). [HERE](#) is a direct link to the online version of that map.
- 1879—Map of South Scituate. This map shows the location of homes with dots and names of residents, and the Town Center inset map shows the shape of the homes and outbuildings. This map is available online at the Society website. [HERE](#) is a direct link to the online version of that map.
- 1903—Map of Norwell. This map shows the location of homes with the shape of the house and outbuildings (helpful for determining age of additions and outbuildings) and names of residents. This map is available online at the Society website. [HERE](#) is a direct link to the online version of that map.

FYI, if a house has a Form B and on the form is given a date of “1857-1879,” that means that the house is on the 1879 map, but not on the 1857 map and was, therefore, built between those years. Typically, deed research can pinpoint a more exact date.

Step 3: Check the Deeds

Every house/plot of land has a deed. In a perfect world, one would trace their house's deed from the current owner to the original owner—but this can take a long time and a lot of effort (reading old deeds...). If you are certain of who owned your home at a particular date (for example, on the 1857 map), then it is often easier to trace the deeds backward from that point in time. In the description of the property, you are looking for a deed that does NOT mention a dwelling. For example, a deed might read "9.5 acres of land with a dwelling thereon." If a previous deed only mentions "9.5 acres of land," then you know that the house was built during that owner's tenure.

The Norwell Historical Society has a link to the Plymouth County Registry of Deeds on its website (Go to "Learn More" > "Research Deeds"). Remember: if you are looking for a deed in Norwell prior to 1888, you must search in Scituate! [HERE](#) is a direct link to the Registry site.

Interesting Information/Resources:

The Norwell Historical Society Archives has the following resources which can be helpful in dating houses:

- *The Norwell of Fifty Years Ago* by Joseph Foster Merritt: this booklet goes through Norwell street by street (only missing a few areas such as River Street) and discusses the origins of each home. The book was written in the 1930s, so it mentions most historic homes and it talks about homes that were demolished, burned, or moved. *There are copies of this book in the Society Archives.*
- *The History of Ridge Hill* by Carol & John Meshau: this book has a fairly accurate map of Washington Street, High Street, and Oak Street and is a good resource for information on the West End of town. *There are copies of this book in the Society Archives.*
- *Historic Homestead of Norwell* by the Norwell Historical Society: this booklet features the complete history of many prominent historic homes in town. *There are copies of this book in the Society Archives and it can be purchased for \$15 from the Society.*
- *History of Scituate, Massachusetts* by Samuel Deane: this book has "family sketches" of many old Norwell families, which is helpful to determine lineage. Much of the information is probably available on Ancestry.com. *There are copies of this book in the Society Archives and it is available for purchase on www.amazon.com.*
- The Norwell Public Library and the James Library both have subscriptions to www.Ancestry.com, which is useful for looking at census data to determine where people were living, with whom, and if they owned or rented.
- *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia & Lee McAlester: this book is very helpful to identify the architectural details of homes. When a house has been altered over the years, it is helpful to note trim styles and window styles to give an approximate date to the alterations. *There are copies of this book in the Society Archives.*
- *Barns in the Highland Communities*: this online pamphlet was written by The Trustees and describes barn styles and gives approximate dating clues. [HERE](#) is a link to the piece.
- Often homes are dated with "circa" because there isn't mention of a specific date of construction in any of the records. For example, if deed research shows a house was built during the time of John Smith's ownership and Mr. Smith owned the house for 50 years, it is difficult to determine when, exactly, the house was constructed. In this case, we often look to marriage dates. If Mr. Smith bought the land in 1850 (only acreage with no mention of a dwelling) and was married in 1855, we would probably give the house a circa date of 1855 because it is logical that he needed a house to live in with his new wife.

More questions about dating a house? Please email the Society at info@norwellhistoricalsociety.org or Wendy Bawabe directly at bawabe@gmail.com.