



Houston Metropolitan  
Research Center

500 McKinney | Houston, Texas 77002 | [www.w2.houstonlibrary.org/hmrc](http://www.w2.houstonlibrary.org/hmrc)

## HOW TO RESEARCH YOUR HOME

How old is my house? Who built it? Who has lived in it? 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 your home.

### **Try to identify the architectural style of your house.**

Knowing the architecture of your home may be helpful in determining its age. If you know the style of your home, then you can usually date it to within twenty years. Keep in mind that home improvements have always been popular and many homes have been updated one or more times.

Suggested Sources:

- *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia McAlester (917.3 M114)
- *Old House Journal*
  - online at [www.oldhousejournal.com](http://www.oldhousejournal.com)
  - in print at Houston Public Library
- *Identifying American Architecture: a pictorial guide to styles and terms, 1600-1945* by John J. G. Blumenson (T 720.973 B658)

### **Examine the physical evidence.**

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

- check the exterior of your home:
  - o foundation
  - o roof
- check the interior of your home:
  - o walls, trim, wall coverings
  - o floors, floor coverings
  - o sinks, toilets, bathtubs, cabinets, furnaces

Suggested Sources:

- o *Wallpaper in America : from the seventeenth century to World War I* by Catherine Lynn (769.5 L989)
- o *A documentary history of American interiors : from the colonial era to 1915* by Edgar de N. Mayhew (747.213 M469)
- o *Victorian interior decoration : American interiors, 1830-1900* by Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger Moss (747.213 W775)

**Ask around.**

Talk to survivors of the previous owners, neighbors, and anyone else who might know something about the house. Their memories might be faint, but someone may have an old photograph, a bill, or written correspondence that will help place your house in time.

**Consult written records:****Check the deed**

Each time that your property (lot and buildings) was sold, a record was made of that transaction. By searching these records (called deeds) back in time, you can obtain a list containing each owner of your property and the date of purchase.

- You'll need the legal description of the property (lot and block number), which is located on your deed.
- Visit your County Clerk's Office:  
Harris County Civil Courthouse  
201 Caroline, 3rd Floor  
Houston, TX 77002  
<http://www.cclerk.hctx.net/>

**Visit the Tax Assessor**

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 Tax Office  
1001 Preston  
Houston, Texas 77002  
713-368-2000  
<http://www.tax.co.harris.tx.us/>

**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.

- 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/>

**Check City Directories**

Cross reference names and addresses.

The Houston Metropolitan Research (HMRC)

has City Directories for Houston:

- 1867-1982 (print & microfiche versions)
- 1984 & 1986 (print version)
- Irregular collection for other Texas communities available in print & microfilm

**Check local newspapers.**

Stories on local events can provide a glimpse into community life and in turn into the life of your house.

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)
- Houston Public Library has Texas newspapers after 1900 (on microfilm)

**Check Census records.**

The federal census was taken every ten years beginning in 1790. Census records can provide further information on the families who owned and lived in your home. The census will provide the name of each person living in the house, their age, occupation, place of birth and more.

U.S. Federal Census 1790-1920 all states, and indexes available at:

- Clayton Library, Center for Genealogical Research  
5300 Caroline  
Houston, TX 77004-6896  
832-393-2600  
<http://www.hpl.lib.tx.us/clayton/>

**Consult 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/>

**Other sources available at the public library: Architectural Drawings  
(unavailable until late summer 2011)**

The Houston Metropolitan Research Center has a database of drawings of many Houston area houses. Generally, these are homes 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 house
3. name of the client for whom the house was originally built
4. architectural job number

Accessible through <http://www2.houstonlibrary.org/hmrc/>

(Collections and Resources-> choose Architecture from toolbar-> from here there is a link to Architectural Archives Database)

Select finding aids for architect's papers available at Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO) <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/index.html>

**Subdivision Files.**

HMRC has "Vertical Files" (newspaper clippings) and finding aids on many Houston neighborhoods that may contain background information on the area in which your home is located.

**Additional Sources:****Books (available at Houston Public Library):**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Call Number</b>
<i>Restoring Old Houses</i>	Nigel Hutchins	643.7 H974
<i>American Interiors</i>	Harold L. Peterson	747.213 P485
<i>House Histories</i>	Sally Light	728.37 L723
<i>How Old Is This House?</i>	Hugh Howard	728.028 H849
<i>Houston Architectural Survey</i>	Southwest Center for Urban Research and the School of Architecture, Rice University	720.97641 H843

**Websites:**

- "Understanding Old Buildings"  
Preservation Brief 35 from the U.S. Department of the Interior  
[www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief35.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief35.htm)