Developing Your Research History Techniques

At Home

- Do your homework. Search online data bases to find out what archives out there relate to your investigation. See out local archival resources to find out which archives the area will be useful to you.
- Once you know where you want to do your research, see if their catalog of records is available online. Knowing the record number when you arrive at the archive can save you precious time.
- Archives often keep odd hours of opening. Know before you go.
- Prepare a list of what you want to learn from the materials. Then write, call or email the archivist and let them know your area of interest. They can help you with things you might not have thought of.
- Places like the Public Library have very useful Web sites that can give you a good jumpstart on research.
- Local historical societies and clubs in the community often have notable archives. Check the phone book or call the library in the locality you're interested in.

At the Archive

- If you're allowed to touch the actual materials, don't quibble if asked to use gloves. Some archivists believe gloves keep document-destroying oils from harming the originals. There are other archivists who believe that gloves do more harm than good.
- Remember, archivists are often thinly-stretched and their time is precious; don't be upset if you're only allowed to make two research requests at a time. It'll make it easier for you to focus anyway.
- Using public records is free. Sometimes, however, you will have to pay for photocopying of material.
- Archival research can be frustrating and at times, dull. You may have to chase a lot of dead ends before you find the nugget you're searching for.

Property Search

Purpose

To obtain historical data about a place and/or persons associated with it.

Method

A property search is often part of a larger investigation, perhaps for genealogical purposes, or to prepare for renovation of a home.

The main resources are legal documents (collectively referred to as land records) including original grants, deeds, mortgages, leases and tax records. Because these documents were the

legal proof of ownership and inheritance, all relevant facts were recorded, and archives were kept in standardized locations.

Using these land records and related sources, a property search can produce several types of historical evidence, including: biographical details about the owners, from first to last; construction information such as the building date, architect and builder, and sometimes the original plans and cost of construction.

Supporting data may be found in probate, tax and insurance records, building permits, old maps and atlases, census files, and other period materials.

Although a property search can provide critical facts, some researchers are put off by the problems. For example, it can be hard to navigate the archive levels (e.g. city, state, national).

Some material is indexed by number instead of name. Some transactions were recorded years after the event, or not at all. Above all, these are generally secondary-source documents, copied from originals retained by owners. If they were copied by hand, the records may have errors, and the writing can be difficult to decipher.

Despite these issues, land records are still a prime place to search for missing pieces of a historical puzzle.

Building Background

The #1 Rule of Architectural Investigations: lay the proper foundation. What you do in the beginning will greatly affect the final product of your research.

Create a research plan and take a methodical approach designed to hone in on the key facts. Use our list as a guide, and adapt it to your needs.

Get familiar

- Learn the Local History
 Get context. Read newspapers from the construction year. What were the big issues?
- Do Home Work Scrutinize house details. Record all clues. Additions? Artifacts? Construction? Quirks?

Get it in writing

- Chain of Title Research From first owner to you.
- Tax Assessment Rolls
 Watch for changes in value, indicating new construction/additions. Usually county level.
- Building Permits
 Construction details for all new buildings, and additions. City/county planning and zoning.

• Contractor (Mechanic) Liens Contains the contractor(s), detailed work description, cost. County or district court.

Get the support

- Fire Insurance Maps/Rate Booklets Sanborn maps of industrial areas; booklets for address, owner. Library or online.
- Architect & Appraiser Records Office blueprint copies; appraisals with photos, materials. Historical societies, et al.
- Plats (lot drawings) and Maps
 See original plats for drawings; city planners for maps and aerials.
- Photographs
 Interior and exterior. Ask historical societies, former owners, libraries, and county appraiser.
- County Histories and Atlases
 May include photos, drawings; often city plats. Library, historical societies.
- Newspapers Need construction/addition dates. May be fruitless or very productive. Local library.
- Old City Directories
 Biannual, owner's occupation. Pinpoints construction date. Library, historical societies.
- Site Files, Historical
 Files on historic homes, may include photos, clippings, and inventories. Historical societies.

Get personal

Add color and depth to your research. Learn who called your house their home. What were they like? Where did they come from? What were their jobs? Families or single? What became of them?

- Oral Histories
 Talk with neighbors, previous owners. Have your list of questions; record for transcription.
- Estate Records
 Use to reconstruct contents, lifestyle; also activities for sale of property. District Court.
- Personal Papers, Manuscripts
 Letters, journals, for clues to construction, furnishings. Library, archive, repository.
- Occupation
 Are there business records? Accounts? Newspaper articles. Union memberships?
- Vital Statistics
 Birth, marriage and death records, with county clerk. Also cemetery, church records.
- Census Records
 State or national. Gives names, ages, relationships, work, more. Library and online

Oral Histories

One of the most important aspects of genealogy is recording oral or spoken history before it is too late.

Many people become passionate about genealogy due to the influence of the older generation, especially family members. We are fascinated by what our ancestors may have lived through and their place in history.

Elderly relatives can be a valuable resource in recording family history so take advantage of their knowledge and their personal involvement in the past.

Informal encounters such as family gatherings and visits are a wonderful way to get started, but to truly record oral history you must take a more formal approach.

Plan your interview carefully; remember this is essentially a conversation that will increase your knowledge, so try to make it as pleasurable an experience for the subject as possible.

Before the interview, be realistic about the demands you can make on a subject's time. Have clear goals about what you want to know and write a list of things you would like to learn. Use a template if necessary to keep yourself on track.

Assess what you already know, writing questions based on names, places of origin, dates, births, marriages or deaths. Some people like to send these in advance so the subject is prepared, and others like to be more informal.

Once you have your questions prepared, you may find it useful to practice your interviewing skills on a close friend or immediate family member. One of the most important things to remember is to put yourself in the place of the person you are interviewing and empathize with their story. Be diplomatic and patient, and don't be too inflexible. Let the interviewee go in a different direction if they want to--often this is when you find out the most interesting tidbits.

A cooperative subject is a happy subject, so make your interviewee feel at ease and in control of the situation.

Another useful trigger is a photograph. Be sure to bring any photos you have questions about, and ask your subject to bring along family pictures too.

You may only get one chance to interview someone, so make your questions count. Do some pre-planning, be prepared and the interview should go smoothly.

If you are not able to interview someone face-to-face, you should consider doing it through a letter or email. The first thing to do is make contact with the subject, and explain who you are and what you are trying to achieve. If they are willing to be involved, send them a basic questionnaire and then follow up with a more detailed list of questions if they are helpful

Reassure them of your good intentions and let them know how the information will be used.

Genealogy Checklist

- Have a basic stationary kit that includes pens, pencils, an eraser and a ruler.
- Create a three-ring binder with sections that hold your research notes and copies of your primary sources.
- Always have paper with you, especially when traveling.
- Label all your notes with a name, date, location, the surname of the family it relates to and the source.
- When taking notes from a document, be sure to note the title, date, author, location, catalog reference number, and library classification number if possible.
- Keep a separate contacts file containing the name, number, email and mailing address for your contacts.
- Keep a chronological record or diary of your research including places visited, people you spoke to and where documents were housed.
- One of the best places to start you search is at your local library.
- Interview the older members of your family about their history, making sure you tape record or video tape it to have a permanent record.
- Write down your questions before the interview and work through them.

Written Item Check List

Every historical manuscript is unique. But whether you've got a letter, diary, or other handwritten item, the main questions are the same: who wrote it, when, where, and why. You may be able to answer some questions immediately, or you may never find solutions. Adapt your investigation to the item at hand, and enjoy exploring a personal artifact from the past.

Planning

- Prepare to take careful notes of your investigation. You may want to have separate categories for manuscript topics, dates, people, and places.
- Keep a chronology or timeline of significant events and places mentioned in the text. It will help you visualize the sequence and relationship of facts.
- Investigate as if a court will view your written report. Think like a detective, and be sure your conclusions are based on fact, not speculation.

Materials

- Where was the manuscript found? When and how? Note the physical surroundings and nearby objects. This may help date the manuscript.
- What are the materials? Itemize the feel, color, condition and appearance of the writing surface and any binding. Note variations within the item(s).
- What was the writing instrument? Pencil, quill pen, steel pen? Ink characteristics may help an expert date the manuscript.
- What does the handwriting look like? Neat or scrawled? Does it seem young and strong, or old and shaky? Are there many errors?
- Are there stains or dirt? Look closely for clues of inky finger prints; blood, red clay soil, etc. [Do not clean the manuscript in any way!]
- Note the exact location and placement of any loose enclosures (e.g. photos, pressed flowers) tucked into the pages. Give each a separate investigation.
- Look for written dates on the binding, envelopes, covers, etc. Use a strong light and magnifier to look for dates in embossed leather, paper watermarks.

Integrity

- Is the volume or collection complete? Are there other diaries and letters in the set? Are any pages missing? Either lost, or torn or cut from a diary?
- How frequent are the entries? Are diary entries daily or irregular? Are letters bunched by seasons, or written every Sunday? Look for patterns.
- By reading the text, can you find any clues or signs that the manuscript was written as a draft? Are there edits by the author? References to copying?
- Does it appear that someone has handled, marked or edited the manuscript previously? Perhaps the author, a family member, or someone else?
- If faded ink is impossible to read, a qualified expert may be able to help by using UV and IR light techniques, or chemical treatments.

Content

- What can you deduce about the author's motives or intentions? Is it a travelogue for friends at home? A love letter hidden behind formal prose?
- Are any obvious topics or events ignored? Are there peculiar silences? What might be the reasons (e.g., calming worried parents) for avoiding issues?
- What motivates the writer? Can you find patterns of events (e.g., time of day or week, or emotional states) that prompted the author to write?

Support

- Seek corroborating primary sources, e.g., photos, land records, military service records, newspaper articles, or other documents by the same writer.
- Consider consulting an archivist or manuscript historian to discuss document dating, historical or monetary value, and long-term care of manuscripts.