

Property Tales

By David Votta and Lance M. Werner

Information generated by building and land research extends beyond the value of proof in property disputes. Sufficient demonstrated historic value garners federal and state tax incentives for work on structures meeting the criteria. Evidence such as historic photographs or detailed maps and sketches may be invaluable for an attorney representing a client involved with a local historic district board or commission.

Resources to prove your case for historic designation—or even if you are merely interested in researching the history of your home, building, or property—are widely available. This article is meant to serve as a description of these resources and a guide for conducting research on historic properties.

Auxiliary benefits of preserving older homes are environmental impact and cost reduction with now rare high-end construction materials. Restoration minimizes the waste of historic construction materials inhabiting landfills and abates new construction. The quality of materials in older homes is often superior to modern counterparts.

Resources documenting a property's history lay scattered among local, state, and national repositories. Government agencies, nonprofits, private corporations, and individuals hold details concerning the history of home and property. The first step is performing cursory research online through a relevant assessor or register of deeds and next contacting a local historical agency or archives to query what resources may be available.

On the federal level, the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management provides digitized land patents and surveys through its General Land Office. These records establish when the transfer of federal ownership to individuals occurred. Beyond original ownership, for some western states,

the General Land Office provides digital status records chronicling the ongoing status of a township's land lease, title, usage, and rights. The information online is not comprehensive. Researchers are encouraged to contact the General Land Office with queries not covered by the present online index.

Information pertaining to properties obtained by military bounty land warrants and other federal-to-private ownership is found at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Searching these documents can be cumbersome. NARA holds entries for more than 10 million individual land transactions. There are more than 40 separate acts regulating land entries on public lands. The information gathered by these acts from the "entryman" varies greatly. Start with the Record Group 49 General Leaflet, Number 67.

State agencies hold a disparate variety of resources. The Illinois State Archives provide resources to many of their land-tract sales, offering a searchable interface beyond the federal documents at NARA. The Colorado State Archives maintain a collection of state land leases and agricultural records

pertaining to land use. Departments of transportation periodically maintain collections brimming with photographs and diagrams. State historic preservation offices may already have a case file.

The State Archives of Michigan retain architectural plans and drawings and have begun publishing online Michigan's rural property inventories. These documents were produced by the Works Progress Administration and contain information concerning land ownership, buildings, and the surrounding area. Researchers should familiarize themselves with holdings at their state archives and libraries. Often the subject specialist archivist/librarian will direct researchers to appropriate holdings at other state agencies.

The Michigan Department of Labor, Energy and Economic Growth provides a searchable database for subdivision plat maps. In addition to the map, these plats often include anecdotal information such as prayers recited at the subdivision's inaugural ceremony. The documents date to the 1821 territorial act for recording town plats.

Local resources are a prudent starting point for research. Assessors and registers

Historic Resources

- **General Land Office**
<http://www.blm.gov/es/st/en/prog/glo/glo.html>
<http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/beta/>
- **National Archives and Records Administration**
(Record Group 49 General Leaflet, Number 67)
<http://www.archives.gov/publications/general-info-leaflets/67-land-entry-files.html#intro>
- **State Archives of Michigan Rural Property Inventories**
<http://seekingmichigan.org/discover-collection?collection=p129401coll0>
- **Michigan Department of Labor, Energy and Economic Growth**
http://www.dleg.state.mi.us/platmaps/sr_subs_adv.asp
- **American Memory at the Library of Congress**
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

of deeds hold such data as legal description, lot number, sales history, and often a built date. Increasingly, assessors provide a searchable database and registers of deeds have a searchable index. This information is needed for discovering the records held by federal and state agencies.

Concerning built dates, beware of round numbers. Buildings dated 1900, 1875, or the like indicate the built date is a guess. Records are routinely lost or destroyed. Historically, as cities annexed rural property, they frequently did not incorporate township records. Natural disasters, human error, and degradation of original copies before migration to microfilm or other stable medium are habitual catalysts for the loss of official records.

Myriad complementary resources exist to assist in research. Historical state gazetteers cross-index businesses by location and type via the proprietor's name. City and rural directories, which date back to the mid-nineteenth century, document the owner or occupant of a business or dwelling. For dwellings, early directories provide the owner's occupation and place of employment. Note that street addresses changed intermittently around the turn of the twentieth century. When dealing with addresses before 1910, researchers should consult plat or Sanborn Fire Insurance maps to verify locations. In the first decade of the twentieth century, most cities adopted the current Philadelphia or block system.

Atlases, plat maps, and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps complement the resources above. Hard-copy Sanborn maps are color coded and provide information about construction materials and often include notes. Plat maps reveal land ownership. Historical atlases routinely show elements of both. Atlases vary greatly in detail. Nineteenth century bird's-eye-view maps were created by artists at the behest of the local business community, predominantly showing an accurate image from an aerial vista. Many of these are available from the American Memory Project at the Library of Congress.

Collections held by building, planning, fire, and police departments may contain relevant information. Council minutes may contain discussion of building and land issues. By establishing previous owners

through early directories, researchers can contact these companies, private citizens, or their decedents. Longstanding real-estate offices may have files. All of these collections and more may be under stewardship of local archives and historical organizations.

Contact with local historical agencies may be the most important connection. They are subject specialists and can suggest additional resources. The preponderance of local history collections are not online, and only through direct contact can researchers access their holdings.

There are some costs for official copies, photographs, or other image reproductions depending on the repository or agency. However, most resources and usable downloads are gathered for free. Some subscription-based resources are available through databases at public libraries. We encourage anyone interested in historic property research to check out the resources mentioned in this article, visit your local and state archives, and utilize the reference expertise of the librarians at your local public library. ■



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