HOW TO RESEARCH A HISTORIC PROPERTY

When researching a business, home, or any other type of property you will be looking for answers to a few basic questions. How old is the structure? What did the structure originally look like on the inside/outside? Who built it? Who has lived in it or owned the property? What businesses operated at this site? 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 the building or home you are researching.

Before your visit to HMRC:

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

Suggested Sources:
- A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia McAlester (917.3 M114)
- Identifying American Architecture: a pictorial guide to styles and terms, 1600-1945 by John J. G. Blumenson (T 720.973 B658)
- The Buildings of Main Street: a Guide to American Commercial Architecture by Richard Longstreth (725.20973 L857 at Central Library)

Home- Examine the physical evidence.
The building materials and construction methods used for your home contain many clues to determining its age or other significant details.

- check the exterior of your home- (foundation, roof)
- check the interior of your home- (attics, walls, trim, wall coverings; floors, floor coverings, sinks, toilets, bathtubs, cabinets, closets, furnaces)

Suggested Sources:
- Wallpaper in America: from the seventeenth century to World War I by Catherine Lynn (769.5 L989)
- Texas Houses Built by the Book: the Use of Published Designs, 1850-1925 by Margaret Culbertson (728.09764 C967)

Newspapers-Search for the property’s name, address, or name of former residents on using digital newspapers.

Houston Chronicle Historical Archive 1901-2017 and the NewspaperArchive [with select Texas newspapers such as the Daily Court Review (Houston)] are available through the Houston Public Library. HPL MyLink library card required to use both remotely. Available on the HPL Houston & Texas History page at https://houstonlibrary.org/houston-texas

The Portal to Texas History hosts hundreds of Texas newspapers and resources, including a large part of early Houston newspapers into the mid-20th century. Visit from any computer at www.texashistory.unt.edu.
Ask around.
Talk to the previous owners, their families, neighbors, and anyone else who might know something about the house or building.

Resources Available at HMRC:

City Directories
Cross reference names and addresses. The Houston Metropolitan Research (HMRC) has City Directories for Houston. The city directories provide a street address index (resident/business index only prior to 1908) for properties in Houston, and in some cases, the surrounding areas.

Choose a year to begin and then work backwards or forwards through the directories. This may help determine when the structure was constructed or first occupied
- 1866-present
- Irregular collection for other Texas cities available in print & microfilm

Local newspapers
Stories on local events can provide a glimpse into community life and in turn into the life of your house, or the business that occupies the building you are researching. In addition to the digitized newspapers mentioned above HMRC and HPL have microfilm versions of many Houston-area and Texas papers that you can access at the Ideson Building or the Central Library.
- HMRC has 19th and early 20th century newspapers for many Texas cities and towns (on microfilm)
- The central library- Jesse Jones Library has Houston newspapers after 1900 (on microfilm- 3rd floor).

Genealogical Records
There are several biographical dictionaries, gazetteers, and clipping files on various individuals. Also, there are a number of helpful genealogical databases accessible through the HPL catalog such as Heritage Quest and Ancestry, which can provide further information on the families who owned and lived in your home, as well as information about business owners.

The Clayton Library’s holdings include county and state histories, as well as abstracts of records such as wills, deeds, marriages, court minutes, vital records, church, cemetery records, funeral home records, and colonial collections of several states. This library also has one of the most extensive collections of published and unpublished family histories in the southern United States. The collection contains over 15,000 cataloged volumes and extensive vertical file materials.

Clayton Library, Center for Genealogical Research
5300 Caroline, Houston, TX 77004-6896
832-393-2600  houstonlibrary.org/clayton

Maps
The 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 https://houstonlibrary.org/houston-texas (requires HPL MyLink library card) or through https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/texas.html

The Bracey’s Block Maps for the city of Houston were published between 1929 and 1953, with editions held at HMRC published in 1929, 1946, 1947, and 1952. They contain line drawings of additions, blocks, and lots, including the names of the owners of lots.

**Architectural Drawings**
The Houston Metropolitan Research Center has an Architectural Archives Database of drawings of many Houston area buildings and residences. Generally, the homes found in this collection were 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 property
3. name of the client for whom the house was originally built or the name of the business/building/property
4. architectural job number

Accessible through https://hmrc.houstonlibrary.org/architecture/

**Archival Collections**
Collections comprised of architects’ papers, developers’ materials, family and personal papers, business records, civic association and organization files, etc. are helpful for property research. Keyword and subject binders for identifying relevant archival collections are available at the reference desk. Finding aids for archival collections are available at https://hplarchives.lyrasistechnology.org/.

**Photographs**
An ever-growing inventory of photographic materials housed in archival collections at HMRC. While individual properties will only rarely be captured or identified, this is a great resource to check especially for streets, businesses, and neighborhoods. Database available at https://hmrc.houstonlibrary.org/photos/.

**Vertical Files**
HMRC has “Vertical Files” (newspaper clippings/subject files) and finding aids on many Houston neighborhoods that may contain background information on the area in which your home is located, as well as for buildings and businesses. Also, occasionally there will be a vertical file for a particular home (usually indexed by the earliest known resident).

**Houston Architectural Guide**
Published by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Houston to highlight significant buildings across the Houston area. Available widely including at many HPL locations for both reference and check out (720.97641 G794 3ED)

**Houston Architectural Survey**
City-wide architectural survey completed in 1981 which features historically or architecturally important buildings. It provides images, building descriptions, and the buildings history. (Texas Room Reference Desk)
HPL Scrapbooks  
Volume 103a Texas homes & landmarks  
Volume 4 Buildings  
Volume 5 & 5a Monuments and parks  
Volume 19 Buildings and architecture A-H  
Volume 20 Buildings and architecture I-W  
(Other specific buildings or buildings by category are also found in various volumes—ask for index at ref desk).

Resources available outside of HMRC:

County Clerk  
Each time that a residential property was sold, a record was made of that transaction. By searching these records (called deeds) back in time, you can determine the owner of your property and the date of purchase. The Harris County Conveyance Records Index can be used to find earlier deeds for a property. When you request a microfilm index of the actual Conveyance Records, you need to give the clerk the last name only of the individual and the year they lived at your address. These records provide a Book Page and Document (Entry No.), which can then be used to request the actual deed on microfilm. Records 1961-present available online.

- Harris County Civil Courthouse  
  201 Caroline, suite 460  
  Houston, TX 77002  

Check the Tax Rolls  
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 Archives  
  11525 Todd Street, Suite 300, Houston, Texas 77055 (By appointment only)  

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. These only go back to 1988 for commercial and 1970 for residential.

- Dept. of Public Works and Engineering, Code Enforcement Office  
  3300 Main, Houston, TX 77002  

Harris County Appraisal District  
- Harris County Appraisal District  
  13013 Northwest Freeway, Houston, Texas 77040-6305  
  (713) 957-7800 [http://www.head.org/](http://www.head.org/)