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LOCAL HISTORY & GENEALOGY

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Researching Your House's History

Research Guide

SCOPE

This guide is intended to assist you in locating information about your house using resources available in the Local History Division of the Rochester Central Public Library. We are glad to provide these materials for your use; however, because many of them are old and fragile, we ask that you refrain from using these materials on the copy machine. Instead, you may bring a digital camera to photograph any information that you might find, or, for a fee, the library may be able to provide a scan of the information you need. Materials on researching your house history that are available for checkout from other divisions are also listed below. Ask at the reference desk if you have any questions about a particular item. For more of the library's holdings on researching your house history, check with other divisions.

For information about specific neighborhoods, see the "Neighborhood Resources" Research Guide.

INTRODUCTION

"How can I find out about my house's history?" In a few words: With a little work, you can make an educated guess. Although various houses have been described in newspaper architectural columns and various historical works on our area, in absolute terms, the number of houses so described is not very large. If one house (or building) in several thousand is documentable in print, that would be a generous estimate.

Even one hundred years ago, Rochester was a flourishing city. Numerous houses were built containing beautiful woodwork, stained glass windows, handsome staircases, etc. Although these features were often lovely and are very much appreciated today, they were typical of many middle- and upper-middle-class houses of the day and reflected the styles of the time. The existence of such appointments does not guarantee that these houses have an existing recorded history. Most do not.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

The following questions will give you a historical context in which to place your house:

- WHO:** Who were the owners? Were they factory workers, self-employed artisans, professional people, merchants? What kind of a house or building did they need? If you know who lived at a certain address at a certain time, you can then use sources such as the newspaper index and county land deed records to flesh out a picture of the structure as a family's residence rather than just as a monument of wood or stone.
- WHAT:** Is the structure commercial or residential? Large or small? In good condition or poor?
- WHEN:** Can the house be dated by its architectural style? (e.g., Art Deco, Victorian, etc.)?
- WHERE:** Is the house in the city? Near the old canal or a highway? Suburban or rural? Neighborhood or farm? What is the "land lot" number, not the house or street number? Land lot numbers never change; street numbers frequently do. So do street names.
- WHY:** Was the area a housing development for factory workers, or part of the old "Silk Stocking" gentry districts? Was it the result of quick development, or as part of the planned growth of an area?
- HOW?** Was the structure built by skilled craftsmen working from architects' plans, or by anonymous laborers working for a large development association, or on their own?

GENERAL TIPS

Researchers should learn to examine written records, oral testimonies, visual sources, and the house's surroundings. Also, think about housing patterns, the individual characteristics of houses in different regions, construction techniques and materials, household technology, and family lifestyles. Most homeowners probably haven't given much thought to who owned their homes two or three generations ago, what color it was, or whether they once had different street addresses.

If you're looking for old photographs of your home, and you live on a main thoroughfare, check out photos of parades that might have passed by. If you're looking for information on previous owners, make sure to check for variant spellings of their surname in the relevant documents. Also, keep in mind that the name of your street may have changed. The librarian at the reference desk can check to see if your street name has ever been different.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

Q: Are there pictures of my house?

A: For most houses, no. Rochester never did a house-by-house, street-by-street picture-taking project which some other American cities have done.

Q: Can you do the research for me?

A: We regret that we cannot. However, there are businesses that will perform this service for a fee.

Q: Where do I start?

A: The best place to start your research is by looking at the deed for your house and then work backward...

HOW TO GET STARTED

This guide offers some suggestions on how to find more information about your house's history; however, it does not contain all of the resources that one might use. Be sure to bring lots of paper and pencils and take careful notes on what you find. These notes will save you a lot of repeat work if they are kept in order.

If you have or can get access to the "chain of title" that was updated when the property was purchased, that document will give you the names of the buyers and sellers over the course of time. (Note that they may differ from the actual residents of the property.)

The property abstract (another name for the chain of title) is a very useful document that lists owners, times, and actual property descriptions. It does not give the exact date that the building was constructed. These documents can be compiled at the Monroe County Clerk's Office, 101 County Office Building, 39 West Main St., Rochester, NY, 14614 (585-753-1600).

In addition to these documents, there are various resources available to you in the Local History Division to help you determine your house's history, including city and suburban directories, and city and county plat maps. If the house or its previous owners were well-known or prominent, there may be information available in our pamphlet, picture, and newspaper clipping files, or in the newspaper index.

A note about blueprints

The Local History Division does not have blueprints or building plans for local houses in its collection; the plans by and large were kept (or destroyed) by the builder. However, the University of Rochester Rare Books Department does have some in their collection.

RESOURCES IN THE LOCAL HISTORY DIVISION

Architectural and Historical Building Data (compiled by the Landmark Society of Western New York)

The library holds data sheets for some (but not all) structures on Alexander Street, Averill Avenue, Bond Street, Clinton Avenue, South Clinton Avenue, Comfort Street, Gregory Street, Hamilton Street, Mt. Hope Avenue, Stebbins Street, Van Street, Walton Street, and Whalin Street. Check the binders to see if your house is there.

Directories

There are two basic kinds of directories: *alphabetic* (or name) directories, which list persons by last name, tell what their job is, and where they lived; and *house* (or street) directories, which are arranged alphabetically by street and by house number. The following directories may be found in the public area of the Local History Division:

- City (alphabetic, or name) Directories. These begin in 1827 and appear until the current date. Starting in 1924, the house (number) directory is printed at the end of these directories. The City Directories from 1827 to 1930 may also be accessed on the library's Web site: <http://www2.libraryweb.org/orgMain.asp?orgid=468>. Note: the city borders have expanded a great deal since 1827, and this affects the inclusion of streets in the directories. Also, house numbers may have changed.
- City (house, or street) Directories. These exist from 1892 to 1920. After that date, they are included in the back of the regular city directory. They do not exist before 1892.
- Suburban (alphabetic, or name) Directories. These start in 1930 [a century later than the city directories] and appear until the current date. They include the house (number) directory starting in 1930. Only Brighton, Gates, Greece, and Irondequoit appear in the early editions. Other towns were added later.
- Suburban (house, or street) Directories. These start in 1930. While more towns were added throughout the following years, many towns within Monroe County are not included.

Maps

There are hundreds of maps in the Division's collection. All of the city and county plat maps mentioned below have been digitized and are available on the library's Rochester Images Web site: <http://www.rochester.lib.ny.us:2080/cgi-bin/cw/cgi?doSearch+24820+716>. You can also check the library's pathfinder for digital maps: <http://www.libraryweb.org/rochimag/maps/home.htm>

- ***City "plat" maps***

These exist for 1875, 1888, 1900, 1910, 1918, 1926, 1935, and 1911-1955 (updates to the Sanborn fire insurance maps are in the form of "paste-overs"). The Sanborn Map CD-ROM behind the reference desk also has city maps for 1892, 1911, and 1912.

- ***County (townships) "plat" maps***

Plat maps can be used to locate the actual placement of a structure on a specific property over the course of time. These are available for 1872 (Beers County Atlas), 1902, 1924, 1931 (on microfiche), and 1941. County plat maps for 1924 and 1967 are available at the Ogden Farmers Library. A few suburbs have 1959 and 1963 updates. Houses now in a suburban tract housing subdivision are probably going to be traceable back to a farmer who originally owned the property. The Sanborn Map CD-ROM behind the reference desk also has maps for Brockport (1885, 1892, 1898, 1904, 1909, 1914, 1927), Charlotte (1912), Churchville (1915), Despatch (1900, 1906), East Rochester (1910, 1925), Egypt (1910), Fairport (1890, 1892, 1898, 1905, 1909, 1915, 1924), Hamlin (1914), Honeoye Falls (1884, 1890, 1897, 1904, 1911, 1927), Mumford (1903, 1907, 1914, 1927), Scottsville (1885, 1897, 1903, 1912, 1927), Spencerport (1887, 1905, 1911, 1927), and Webster (1906, 1912, 1924).

Ready Reference File

Check the card file for “Architecture,” “Neighborhoods & Localities,” and “Architecture, Domestic.” Also, try looking under the street name.

Newspaper clipping file

The clippings under “Architecture” might talk about styles or individual houses. You can also try “Localities & Neighborhoods” and “City Planning—Buildings.” Keep in mind, though, that there is only a very slight chance of finding most houses.

Pamphlets

Look under “Architecture, Domestic,” “House Tours,” “Localities & Neighborhoods,” and “Housing, General” in the pamphlet files. These provide descriptions of neighborhoods, architectural styles, and architects.

Newspaper index

The newspaper index covers 1818-1903, and might be useful for finding information on an early owner, the developing firm, etc. The index does not contain information about the dates of any specific house; it is much better for information on people. The index for 1818 to 1897 is available online at: <http://www2.libraryweb.org/orgMain.asp?orgid=650>.

Picture file

The picture file is not indexed by the actual street numbers. There are some photos of street level views, but they would have to be searched individually. Appropriate pictures would be under “Architecture, Domestic” and “Localities and Neighborhoods.”

OTHER LOCAL RESOURCES

City of Rochester:

Assessment Bureau Office (Room 101A, City Hall, 30 Church St., Rochester, NY, 14614-1299; Hours: M-F 9-5; (585)428-7221). This office has only the names of the current owner and the previous owner. A good place to start is with the office’s Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) Web site: <http://www.ci.rochester.ny.us/finance/assessment/faqs.cfm>.

City Maps and Surveys Office (Room 225-B, City Hall, 30 Church St., Rochester, NY, 14614-1299; Hours: M-F 9-5; (585)428-6873). Web site: http://www.cityofrochester.gov/des/index.cfm?id=201&KT_back=1

Municipal Archives. Holdings include a Register of City Streets for the years 1834-1921 and Field Assessment Cards for Rochester properties for the years 1927-1980. Researchers must fill out a Records Access Application with specific details about the records they wish to view (http://www.cityofrochester.gov/main/docs/records_access_form.pdf).

Property Search. The City of Rochester allows you to search online for tax parcel data, tax bill and water billing information for dwellings within the city limits: <http://geo.cityofrochester.gov/defmenu.asp>

Landmark Society of Western New York (133 South Fitzhugh St., Rochester, NY, 14608; Call for hours: (585)546-7029 or 1-888 546-3849). The Wenrich Library has a great deal of information on building styles, architecture, and donated data on many city and county houses and buildings. They keep files by address. The society has an Architectural Research Coordinator on staff, but be sure to call ahead to make sure someone will be there to help you, as most of the staff are volunteers. You may search their library from their Web site:

<http://www.landmarksociety.org/index.html>

Monroe County Clerk's Office (39 West Main St., Rochester, NY, 14614; Hours: M-F 9-5; (585)753-1600). The County Clerk is also the official registrar of deeds, mortgages, assignments of mortgages, satisfactions of mortgages, judgments, and liens, which are indexed. A search of public court and land records can be conducted at the Clerk's Office either in person or via telephone or fax request. Another option is to search records online at: <http://www.monroe.ny.us.landata.com/> (requires Internet Explorer 5.0 or later).

Rochester Gas and Electric Corporation (89 East Avenue, Rochester, NY, 14649; 1-800-743-2110). Records list a date that service began at an address; however, older records are stored out of town and require a subpoena to examine.

WEB SITES

The *Old House Journal* has information about housing types and styles:

<http://www.oldhousejournal.com/>

That's My Old House features contributions from individuals who have uploaded their own research on various houses and is searchable by state and city: <http://www.thatsmyoldhouse.com/>

Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet has a page dedicated to House & Building Histories: <http://www.cyndislist.com/houses.htm>

Cyndi's List also has links to businesses that provide research services:

<http://www.cyndislist.com/houses.htm#Professional>

In addition, try searching the Web using terms such as "house history" for other online resources about researching your house.

PATHFINDERS

The Rochester Public Library Web site features several guides to local architecture:

<http://www.libraryweb.org/rochimag/architecture2/ArchIntro.htm>

BOOKS

Key: L/H = Local History Division (these materials do not circulate)

ART = Arts, Music & Recreation Division – 2nd floor, Bausch & Lomb Public Library Building (these materials circulate and may be checked out)

BUS = Business & Social Sciences Division – 4th floor, Bausch & Lomb Public Library Building (these materials circulate and may be checked out)

HIS = Science, History, and Travel Division – 3rd floor, Bausch & Lomb Public Library Building (these materials circulate and may be checked out)

General House Research

- L/H
Rr907.2
G795d Green, Betsy J. *Discovering the History of Your House and Your Neighborhood*. Santa Monica Press, 2002.
Also in HIS
- L/H
Rr973
H842h Howe, Barbara J. *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History*. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, c1987.
- L/H
Rr338.7407
K41L Kerr, K. Austin. *Local Businesses: Exploring Their History*. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, c1990.
Also in BUS
- L/H
Grq929.1072
H772L
(DESK REF) Hone, E. Wade. *Land & Property Research in the United States*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry, 1997.
- ART
728.3709
L723h Light, Sally. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*. Spencertown, N.Y.: Golden Hill Press, c1989.
- L/H
Rr917.3049
M114f McAlester, Virginia. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Knopf, 1984.
Also in HIS
- ART
728
W371h Webber, Joan. *How Old is Your House? A Guide to Research*. Chester, Conn.: Pequot Press, c1978.

Rochester-Specific

- L/H
Rqr974.789
D238n Daughters of the American Revolution. Irondequoit Chapter (Rochester, N.Y.). *Century Old Homes of Rochester, and Vicinity*. Historian's Committee of Irondequoit Chapter D.A.R., 1937-1938.
- L/H
Rqr974.788
H357o Hastings, Helen M., comp. *Old Houses of Monroe County*. Brockport, N.Y.: Monroe Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, [1946?].
- L/H-ST
Rrq974.789
A673a Landmark Society of Western New York. *Architectural and Historical Building Data*. [Rochester, N.Y.: South Wedge Acting Together, 1980?]. [Data for various structures on Alexander Street; Averill Avenue; Gregory Street; Bond Street; Comfort Street; Hamilton Street; Mt. Hope Avenue; Stebbins Street; Van Street; Walton Street; Whalin Street; South Avenue; South Clinton Avenue]

- L/H
Rr974.789
L439ro Leavy, Michael. *Rochester's Historic East Avenue District*. Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.
Also in HIS
- L/H
Rr974.789
L439r Leavy, Michael. *Rochester's Corn Hill: The Historic Third Ward*. Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia Publishing, c2003.
Also in HIS
- McIntosh, W. H. *History of Monroe County*. Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign and Everts, 1877. Available only as e-Book:
http://www.libraryweb.org/~digitized/books/McIntosh_History_of_Monroe_County.pdf
- L/H
Rrq974.788
M152h ind.
1966 *See also:*
Name Index to the History of Monroe County, 1788-1877. Rochester, N.Y.: Monroe County History Office, 1966. (This index provides name and page citations for McIntosh's *History of Monroe County*).
- L/H
Rqr720.92
R676c Rochester Society of Architects (Rochester, N.Y.). *A Chronicle of Architecture and Architects in Rochester*. [Rochester, N.Y.: The Society], 1939.
- L/H
Rr720
S349aa Schmidt, Carl F. *Architecture and Architects of Rochester, N.Y.* [Rochester]: Rochester Society of Architects, 1959.
Also in ART
- ART
720.9747
G327e Schmidt, Carl F. *The Early Architecture of the Genesee Valley*. Geneseo, N.Y.: Distributed by The Council and The American Life Foundation, Watkins Glen, N. Y., 1975.
- L/H
Rrq717
S349f Schmidt, Carl F. *Fences, Gates, and Garden Houses*. Rochester, N.Y., 1963.
Also in ART
- L/H
974.7
T949h
1976 Turner, O. *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*. Geneseo [N.Y.]: James Brunner, 1976.
Also in HIS
- L/H
Rr974.7
T949h
1973 IND *See also:*
Index to History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase.
Also in HIS-ST

DIRECTORIES

Year	Address (if different)	Home (h) or Business (b)?	Name(s) of Occupants	Occupations	Notes

CHAIN OF TITLE

Present Owner (from Assessment Bureau Office): _____

Previous Owners (from Monroe County Clerk’s Office; City Maps and Surveys Office; Property Search):

Date	Seller (Grantor)	Buyer (Grantee)

OTHER INFORMATION

Permits: _____

Construction: _____

Architect: _____

Utilities Records: _____