
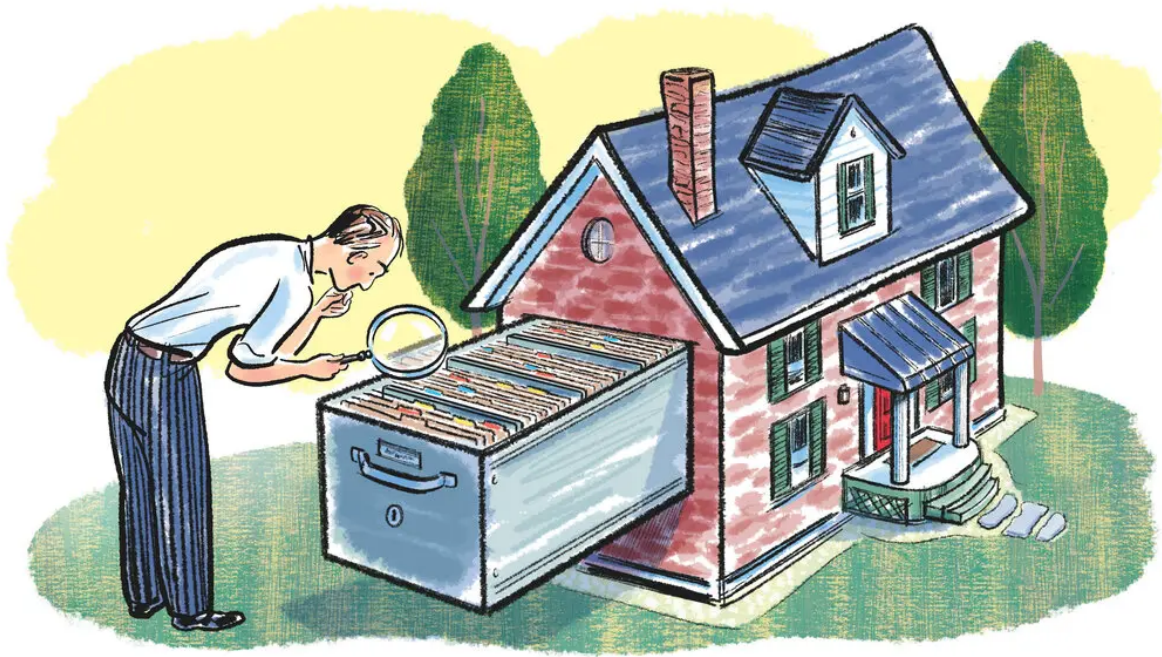


How to Learn More About the History of Your Home

 [nytimes.com/2021/09/17/realestate/house-history-research.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/realestate/house-history-research.html)

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Houses are secret keepers, witnesses to history, be it everyday milestones like the spot a baby takes first steps to significant historical events like the porch, which provided shelter so we could wave to neighbors during a pandemic.

They may not talk, but if you know how to look, your house will share its stories, tell you whose footsteps you're following in, maybe even help to give you roots.

"Every person who lives in a house leaves their mark on it. Whether it's, 'Oh we're the people who put in this bathroom, or planted this tree or painted this weird color,' that's what makes your house interesting to live in," said Chelsea Mitchell, director of the Woolworth Library at the Stonington Historical Society, in southeastern Connecticut.

The historical society is one of many organizations around the country that work with homeowners to trace the histories of their homes. But it's also possible to research your house's history on your own.

Don Allison has been restoring an 1835 house in northwest Ohio for 15 years. Mr. Allison, who was a daily newspaper editor, has spent time digging into the house's history. He looked through area library files, read local history books and pored through county tax and property records. Along the way, he learned that his home is likely the oldest brick house in Williams County, Ohio, and was built by John Perkins, a War of 1812 veteran and one of the initial circuit judges appointed to the region.

“Learning this rich history about our home has been extremely rewarding,” Mr. Allison said. “I often sit in the various rooms and imagine the previous occupants going about their lives. I feel very connected to them, and there is nothing our search uncovered that we in any way regret learning.”

Here’s how you to start researching your house’s history:

Establish a chain of title. The first thing you’ll want to do is trace the owners of the property. Start at your local assessor’s office. You can ask for the information contained on the property card, which will include your name as the owner, the name of the person you bought it from, the property address and an assessor’s property map. In many towns, this information is available online.

Follow your house’s past. Most town clerks’ offices keep copies of property deeds, which you can follow back. Start with the person you bought the house from, trace who they purchased the home from, and so on. Again, much of this information, especially recent records, is available online, but at some point, you’ll likely need to call the town or county clerk to find where property deed records are kept. Sometimes this is in a town hall, other times it might be with a local library or historical society.

Ask for help. You’ll likely encounter everything from land records to probate records — court documents that show how an estate was distributed after an owner’s death, to warranty deeds — which guarantee clear title and the right to sell a property, to quitclaim deeds — which are often used to transfer property between family members, and more. Making sense of these documents can be tedious. You’re looking for records that show the people and families who lived in the house and anything that shows how old it might be. Chances are you’ll get stuck at a certain point.

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“The most important thing you can do is reach out for help,” Ms. Mitchell said. “Local historical societies, local libraries, town hall, even genealogists could probably help. Every person I’ve reached out to for help has been more than willing.”

Check Your Preconceived Notions. Unless you bought your home from the person who built it, it’s best to start with a bit of skepticism for anything you may have already heard about your house — a recorded year may not make sense, for example, if the house’s style doesn’t match that time period. According to Ms. Mitchell, when she’s runs into dead ends, she sometimes changes her approach, such as looking into the females who lived in the property.

“Typically in history things were done by the man, and there’s more information around the man, but I’ve had luck when I get stuck somewhere by pivoting to the female,” she said.

Follow The People: Once you've established a chain of title, the fun part, Ms. Mitchell said, is exploring the social history of the people who lived in the house. You'll likely have better luck with the older families than with people who are still alive. Search old newspapers for records either at your local library, historical society or even online. The Stonington Historical Society has digitized newspapers from the area going back to the 1820s. Other resources include: area churches which often have records; sites like Ancestry.com to trace the families; and local history books, if they exist.

Maybe you'll discover a War of 1812 veteran built your home, or that the first woman to graduate from the Philadelphia College of Medicine lived in your house. Or that the reason your home is laid out sort of like an American bungalow but not entirely is that a Lithuanian immigrant built it and melded his home country's building style with his new home country's style.

"You really learn the importance of different people moving into a town, especially immigrants and the role they played in the development of the culture and the society and the economy," Ms. Mitchell said.

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