

Documenting the history of your home

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Quick Facts

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Documenting the history of your home:

- provides information about the development of your physical environment and other people associated with it;
- requires perseverance and detailed accuracy;
- provides an opportunity for learning about architectural features and styles of housing;
- can provide a fascinating individual, family or group project;
- may lead to qualifying for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

In order to answer these questions, five research requirements are essential:

1. You will need an inquisitive mind and determination to locate answers to questions.
2. Study each bit of information for clues which may lead to other sources of information.
3. Deal with the information carefully and critically. Evaluate all sources for trustworthiness and remember that original sources (those written or stated during an event) tend to be more reliable than secondary sources (those written or stated after an event).
4. Avoid repeating the work of others. Check with local preservation groups, historic district boards, local historians and historical societies to see whether they already have information on your house and/or neighborhood.
5. Utilize the many resources available to you. In addition to those in #4, check with the local library for bibliographies on research materials, county histories and travelers' accounts.

Recognizing and preserving the diversity of richness existing throughout Colorado can partially be accomplished by researching and compiling the history of your home, particularly if the house dates back 30 years or more. Other structures such as commercial buildings, barns, grain elevators, bridges, etc., can also be documented. Such an endeavor can be a fascinating family project and also provide information about: the history of your neighborhood, community and town/city; others who have lived in your house; earlier building costs, architectural styles, construction materials and methods; and the structure, wiring and plumbing specifications of your home.

When researching your home's history, you are looking for answers to questions. Who built the house and when? What style is it? What did the house originally look like—inside and out? When and what changes have been made to the structure? Who owned and lived in it? What were the cultural forces when the house was built?



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Oral history, documentary sources and inferred data are three basic sources of historical information to aid in answering questions.

Oral history is talking to people who might know anything about your house in its earlier days. Begin with the most recent owners and trace the chain of ownership as far back as possible. Try to gather names of others associated with the house such as neighbors, friends of the families, housekeepers, etc.—they can often supply additional details. Some of the information you might collect includes: house colors—inside and out, type and placement of furniture, use of various rooms, decorations, how holidays were celebrated, etc. Ask for old photographs of the house that you can borrow and duplicate. In order to avoid interesting but irrelevant stories, consider using a checklist to guide your interviews. Before accepting anyone's oral descriptions as gospel, try to obtain verification from another source; memories can be fragile.

Documentary sources can usually be obtained from one or more local public offices. The single most valuable and reliable source may already be in your possession—the property abstract which provides a history of land transactions, relevant deeds, mortgages, wills, probate records, litigation and tax sales. It also contains names of owners, dates when property changed ownership and descriptions of property boundaries. Since the abstract is a summary, check the original documents for more complete information—for example, estate records that may be filed with wills sometimes contain personal property inventories including room-by-room descriptions of contents.

If an abstract is not readily available (title insurance may have replaced it in your area) try to locate the last abstract made on your property. Check with the previous property owners and the agency issuing the title insurance. If all else fails trace the title through county records. The county clerk's office will have the most recent deed. Each deed will usually refer to the prior property transaction. Deeds are indexed by the name of the seller (grantor) and buyer (grantee) with references to where they are located (book and page) in the county clerk's office.

Tax records (information on assessments, improvements and descriptions of buildings), building permits (original construction, alteration, additions, architect/contractor/builder, client, cost and date of work) and utility/public works records (dates of water, sewer and electrical connections) are also important documentary sources.

Inferred data from the house itself can be very helpful and may be mandatory, especially if sufficient written records cannot be located. Extreme care must be exercised since construction materials and methods became more uniform during successive decades of the 19th century. Look at the architectural details of the house separately,

inside and out, rather than concentrating on the total mass of the structure. Precautions should be observed in drawing inferences from architectural styles. Styles were in fashion at different times in different locations; and houses can provide "false" clues to their age. In identifying the style(s) and age of your home become familiar with the architectural peculiarities of your local area as well as knowledgeable of the standard style books.

Very few older houses remain exactly the way they were built. More often improvements have been made over the years—materials were removed or added, additions made, etc. Carpenters, builders and architects may have combined elements from several different building styles. Therefore, a single-style label may not be possible or accurate. Study each detail individually: windows, doors, cornices, porches, chimneys, roofline, siding, ornament, interior woodwork, etc. The styling and combinations of elements can provide age clues within 10 to 15 years.

Once you have collected the information about your house, what can you do with it? A few suggestions include:

- type a simple history for your own personal enjoyment;
- simplify the facts into an etched, engraved, or handwritten plaque or scroll, and use it for a wall hanging in your home;
- for a more detailed version, have the history printed and bound at a print shop; and/or
- make it into a guest registry by including signature sheets;
- a neighborhood history can make a treasured gift for friends or relatives living nearby;
- use it as a "fringe benefit" to potential buyers should you decide to sell the house;
- use it as a guide to begin a more thorough study of the physical needs of the structure. Once immersed in the history, people often feel differently about a building and are less eager to alter it without considerable thought.

As a result of your research you may believe that your house has historical significance to your community, state or nation. Certain economic benefits (i.e., tax credits, incentives, funding) may be available to you if your structure qualifies and is listed on a local, state and/or national register of historic buildings. For more information check with your local historical society, the Colorado Historical Society's preservation office or our regional office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

State Preservation Agency

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 has encouraged most states to establish a state preservation agency. These agencies are public bodies funded through tax revenues, or quasi-public organizations chartered by a state and may or may not be subsidized.

Colorado has a state and federally funded office which oversees preservation activities throughout the state. It maintains a staff for consultation on specific restoration problems, offers information on how to nominate properties to the National Register of Historic Places, reviews federally funded projects for impact on historic properties, and oversees federal income tax credits for certified restorations. It is also a source for federal and state publications on preservation.

All states have a state historic preservation officer (SHPO) to implement state responsibilities. Our acting officer is Barbara Sudler.

The Colorado Historical Society houses the Preservation Office in our state and is located at the Colorado Heritage Center, 1300 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203 (303) 866-3394.

National Trust

For Historic Preservation

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a private, non-profit organization chartered by Congress in 1949 to encourage the preservation of America's heritage.

It offers advice and assistance on preservation problems, works with individuals, groups and public agencies to help plan and carry out preservation programs. It also sponsors educational programs, issues publications, and develops materials concerning timely preservation issues.

The Mountain/Plains regional office was established in September 1982 to expand field and advisory services to a ten-state region including Colorado.

There are approximately 1,850 Trust members in Colorado—including individuals, organizations, corporations and libraries.

The regional office is located at 1407 Larimer Street, Suite 200, Denver, CO 80202

Further Reading

The History of a House: How to Trace It. Linda Ellsworth, 1976. From: American Association for State and Local History, 1400 Eighth Ave., South Nashville, Tennessee 37203.

How to Date a House. David M. Hart, 1975. From: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 141 Cambridge St., Boston, Massachusetts 02114.

A Field Guide to American Houses. Virginia and Lee McAlester, 1984. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Recording Historic Buildings. Harley J. McKee, 1970. From: National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

Write for a list of literature available from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

References

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"How to Compile a History of Your House." *Traditional Home Ideas*, 1978-79.

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