

COURTESY OF THE PROVIDENCE CITY ARCHIVES



Researching Your House History At Providence City Hall

Researching your house history is an exciting way to learn more about your property's past and the development of your neighborhood. Using a variety of resources here at Providence City Hall you will uncover clues that will help you to construct your home "genealogy." The journey to discover your property's history can be fun but it does require some patience, persistence and a critical eye. Be objective. Sometimes a family elder's recollection may turn out not to be true.

You can start your quest with some basic questions such as who built my house? How old is it? Who lived in the house and what kind of lives did they live? Were they famous . . . or notorious? Was the house altered? In some cases a house's use may have changed over time from commercial to residential, for example. Some houses may have been moved while others were elevated to accommodate first floor commercial use. The staff here at the Providence City Archives is ready to assist you in creating your house history. Some basic tools to assist you include a camera (most cell phone cameras are fine for this purpose), a magnifying glass, and a laptop computer or notepad. So let's get started!

Step 1 Know Your Home

Start by taking a few exterior photos of your house. Get a feel for the general style of your house. Do you notice certain interior or exterior details? Does your house look like others in the neighborhood? This might be an indication that your neighborhood was developed at a particular time. Does it look like the house was altered? Even the window style or exterior detail can give you or others clues about the house's age. Perhaps even talking to neighbors who have lived on the street for some time may remember changes that were made to your home. They may also know the previous homeowner who could be a very good source of more recent information about your house. If you want to learn more about architectural styles you may want to pick up a copy of *What Style Is It: A Field Guide to American Houses* which is available for purchase or at most public libraries.

Step 2 A History of Your Home May Already Exist

During the past sixty years preservationists, volunteers, and historians have compiled thousands of local house histories. So before initiating your research you may want to check two sources of information:

The Providence Preservation Society (www.ppsri.org) maintains the Mary A. Gowdey database. This file contains hundreds of Providence house histories compiled by Mrs. Gowdey starting in the 1956 and carried on by a number of subsequent researchers. These files contain individual house histories organized chronologically along with citations. You may also find floor plans and photos in these files. The City Archives also has copies of these files.

It is important to note that many of these histories were compiled decades ago and these early researchers did not have access to records now available at the city archives as well as other new on-line resources. PPS also has a photo archive that might prove useful and you may want to ask about their historic marker reports.

The Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission (www.rihphc.state.ri.us) maintains a database of 19,000 properties listed on their Rhode Island National Register Property database. Also available in pdf format are historic neighborhood surveys for seven Providence neighborhoods. Brief house histories of National Register properties can be found in these surveys. If you have a historic home you may find their preservation library useful. Information on incentives such as the preservation easement program and low interest loans for rehabilitation can also be found here. Also potentially useful are the house survey forms used by staff in constructing house histories although many of these are now more than forty years old.

Even if you find a historic profile on your house you may want to confirm the information contained in the existing history or update the information.

Step 3 Assessor's Office

City Hall itself is a historic property that began its life as the center of municipal government in 1878. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Before going to the Assessor's Office you can find some basic information about your house such as house size and lot dimensions by accessing their web site at www.providenceri/assessors. Now go to the **Assessor's Office** on the 2nd floor and the staff there will help you with the following:

- Converting your street address into a plat and lot number. You can do this using the public computers in the office. If you are not the current owner, note his or her address.
- Now print out a copy of the "chain of title". This is simply the list of property owners for your particular plat/lot. These computer listings may go as far back as the 1890s. This will also give you a head start when following the "chain" back into time because they often identify deed book and page numbers for real estate transfers. Your lot number may have been changed over time and the card may refer to your lot as "dropped." If this is the case, ask the archives staff to search your dropped lot.



Step 4 City Archives

Now take the elevator to the 5th floor. The offices of the Recorder of Deeds, Probate and the City Archives are on this floor. **Go to the archives and sign in.** You will also be asked to place bags, backpacks and briefcases in one of the lockers there. Only pencils can be used for research.

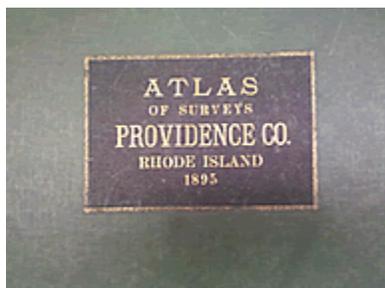
- Ask for the plat map for your lot and take a photo of the lot. This will give you the dimensions of your lot, the lot numbers of nearby lots, and the lot dimensions.

Now ask to use the **city atlases** and **Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps**. The archives has maps and atlases spanning the period from 1798 (the Henry R. Chace maps) to 1956. Start with the most recent map. Most atlases and maps have a street index. When you find your street location, the map will sometimes show the dimensions of your house, the type of construction, the lot size and possibly the owner's name. Other clues on the maps include--street name and address changes, the existence of sewer and water lines or streetcar lines. Continue to go back in time examining the 1937, 1926, 1918, 1908, 1895, 1882, 1875 and 1857 maps and atlases.

If you continue to find your house, it's a good idea to take a photo of each map as a reference point. Try to document the source of each photo (many researchers take photos of title pages just before or after the map image). Also note any changes like the addition of a garage or changes in the dimensions of the house or the lot. Caution: be aware that street addresses changed rather frequently in the 19th century as the city expanded. It might be a good idea to cross-check atlas and directory listings to pick up any changes in street address.

The atlases many times will show the owner's name across the house lot. There may also be a reference to a development Plat Map (different from the Assessor's plat maps). If you do find a reference to a development plat map, you can access the computers in the Recorder of Deeds office (Room 506) to view the map.

- If, for example, you find a house on your lot in the 1895 atlas but no house on your lot in the 1882 atlas that is a good indication that your house was built between those two dates.



- For the period from 1895 to present **Providence City Directories** and **Providence House Directories** can be very helpful in pinpointing the construction date of your house. More on this tool later.
- Also helpful for the period from 1854 to 1895 are the **Real Estate Tax Ledgers**. See below for more details.

Step 5 Recorder of Deeds

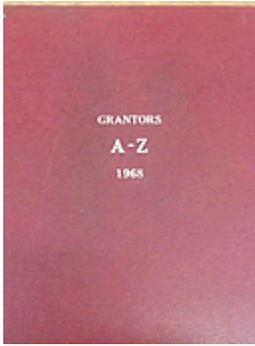
Now let's take a short walk to the **Recorder of Deeds** office (Room 506).

Here you will find the land evidence records. Use the chain of title sheet that you obtained in the Assessor's Office to begin tracing the ownership of your house beginning from the most recent entry and working backwards once again. This step is only necessary if you want to construct a complete profile of your house history and the record of ownership. Otherwise, you can focus your deed review on the time period that your research indicates the house was built.



You may want to confirm, for example, that no other house existed on the lot prior to the construction of your home. At the Recorders Office you will check the Grantee (buyer) and Grantor (seller) indexes. These are organized by name. Next to the homeowner's name in the index will be a deed book volume and page number. Simply find the referenced deed book and open to that particular page. Here you will find a detailed description of your property along with any easements or other encumbrances. Notice any references to buildings and/or improvements in the deed description. You will, in most cases, also find the name of the prior owner along with a prior deed and book number. This is the basic method of tracing the property's chain of title. Is the Grantor on your deed also the Grantee for the immediately prior deed? If not, why not? You may have missed a transfer or the property may have been transferred via a will or probate proceeding.

Early deed research can be challenging. Handwriting can be difficult to read. Early property boundaries may mention landscape features such as rocks or an old oak tree that no longer exists. Your house lot may have been part of a large farm that was subdivided more than a century ago. But don't get discouraged! The search is half the fun.



Land records recorded from July 1984 to present can be computer-searched in the research room. From August 2004 onwards you can search on-line on their free web based service (www.providenceri.com/deeds).

Remember too, while in the Recorder's office check out the **Development Plat Maps** that are available to view on the computer terminals there (located towards the back of the room). There is a fee of \$1.50 per page for copies of these maps.



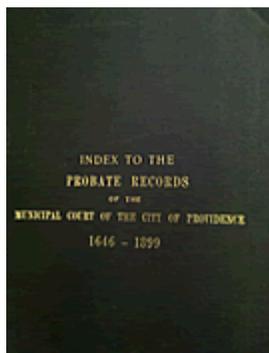
For the period prior to 1900, the Grantee/Grantor indexes are in the City Archives along with the deed book volumes 1 through 227 (covering the period from 1677 to 1864).



Step 6 Probate Records

Answers to gaps in your title chain might be found in probate and/or vital records. Most of these early records are housed in the **City Archives**. There the **Index to the Probate Records, 1646-1899** and subsequent indexes that cover the period through 1995 can be very helpful in locating wills,

guardianships, adoption records and the administration of estates. Once you locate the document number in the index the archives staff will retrieve the document for you. Probate docket and will books are other useful tools. Ask the archives staff about these potentially valuable research tools.

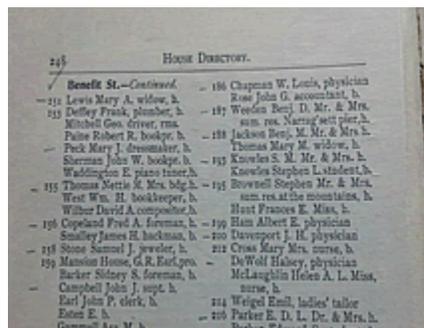


Step 7 Directories

City and House directories can also be very useful in determining the construction date of a house and provide useful information on its occupants over the years. **The Providence City Directory** began publishing lists of Providence residents in 1824, and after 1850 these were published annually to the present day. The listings are alphabetical by individual's name. Many entries also include occupation, whether a boarder or homeowner, and in some cases, an associated business and address. Between 1892 and 1894 and from 1938 onward, the city directory also included a separate section (usually on colored pages) organized by street address.

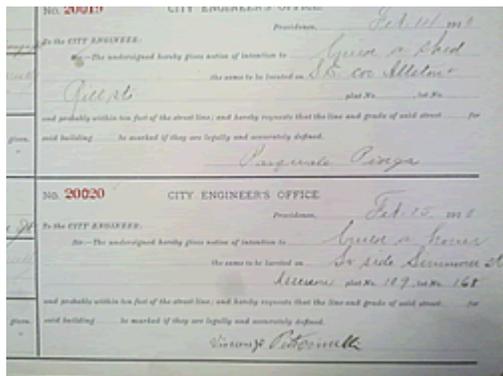
The **Providence House Directories** were published generally every other year between 1895 and 1935. They are organized by street in ascending address order. They are particularly useful in locating associated family members within a house. If you have found your house in the 1908 atlas but not in the 1895 atlas, check each house directory to see whether the house is listed. If the house is listed in 1900 but not 1899, this is a good indication that the house was built between those two dates. Remember, however, before 1892 you will need the owners name to trace the address in the city directories. Remember, though, that not all houses were owner-occupied. The "h" next to the name may also mean "head of household."

Another simple way to learn more about your home's previous occupants is to search the names found in the house directories on the genealogy website www.ancestry.com. This resource is available at the Providence Public Library and the Rhode Island Historical Society Library. Searching this massive database might uncover photos, stories, or vital records about previous owners.



Step 8 Intentions to Build

The City Archives has this large group of records covering the period from 1859 to 1946. The Intentions prior to 1878 are found in the Board of Aldermen Papers and generally provide very basic information such as owner's name, address and proposed construction date. Organized in 10 boxes and 66 bound volumes, the Intentions (1878-1946) provide valuable information that can include the name and address of the owner, street line and grade, date of filing of the intention to build, type of improvement to be constructed, builder and estimated cost of construction. There is a card index organized by street address.



Recently the City Archives also acquired approximately 137,000 **Building Permits** covering the period 1908, 1910 and 1914-1950. These are accessible in a card index by owner's name. We also have Building Permits on microfilm for the period 1951-1985 organized by permit number and date. These building permit records are useful not only to identify a house construction date but also to trace alterations to your home.

Step 9 Tax Books and Ledgers

The town began printing annual town **tax books** in 1827 and these can also provide clues as to the construction date of your home. These books are also located in the City Archives and contain listings alphabetically by owner's name with real estate and personal assessment amounts along with the amount of tax. The limitation is that they list only the total assessment and tax liability of the individual and provide no breakdown by individual property owned.

After 1887 the city in its annual **City Tax** books began listing taxes assessed on property by individual plat and lot. House researchers find these books very useful.

Remember, we mentioned earlier (Step 3) that your chain of title sheet obtained from the Assessor's Office is good for tracing your property as far back as the 1890s. But what about the earlier period?

Starting in 1854 and continuing through 1896 the city produced **Tax Ledgers** organized into 5 series (A to E). Although these ledgers are in alphabetical order by name, you will need to access these books by using the **Plat Index** volumes and looking up your property by its plat/lot. The index will provide citations to the Tax Ledgers. These ledgers often contain information such as lot dimension, valuation of land and/or building, and may list the addition of a building on a parcel of land.



Other Resources

The **Rhode Island Historical Society Library** (www.rihs.org) on 121 Hope Street has an extensive photo archive as well as a nearly complete collection of city and town directories and local newspapers on microfilm.

The **Providence Public Library** (www.provlib.org) has a very extensive card index of the Providence Journal (approximately 1900-2004) located in the first floor reading room. The Providence Journal Online (covering the period 1983-present) can also be accessed at the library. The library's Rhode Island Collection also has 10,000 books and 7,000 photos many of which are now on line.

Have questions? The staff at the Providence City Archives (www.providenceri.com/archives) are here to assist you in researching your home's history. We have begun uploading historical photos from our collections organized into galleries by subject. You don't need an appointment so stop by any weekday and let your voyage of discovery begin!



The archives staff wish to acknowledge the generous assistance of Carole Pace and Katherine Cavanaugh in the preparation of this guide.