

HOW TO RESEARCH A PROVIDENCE BUILDING'S HISTORY

1. Find the approximate age of the building by checking early maps and atlases (listed below) which indicate existing buildings and their locations. If the building does *not* appear on one map but *does* appear on the next later map, the building was likely built sometime between the publication dates of the two maps or atlases. This will give a general time frame to guide further research.

Maps and Atlases to Check (in chronological order)

Walling, Henry F. *Map of the City of Providence, Rhode Island*. 1857.

Beers, D.G. & Co. *Map of the City of Providence*. 1870.

Sanborn, D.A. *Insurance Map of Providence*. 1874. (Not inclusive, mostly Downtown)

Hopkins, G.M. *Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island, by Wards*. 1875.

----- *Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island and Environs*. 1882.

Sanborn, D.A. *Atlas of Providence*. 1889. (Not inclusive, mostly Downtown)

Everts & Richards. *Topographical Atlas of Providence County, Rhode Island*. 1895.

Richards, L.J. *Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island*. 1908.

----- *Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island*. 1917.

Hopkins, G.M. *Plat Book of the City of Providence, Rhode Island*. 1917.

Sanborn Map Company. *Insurance Maps of Providence*. 1921, 1926, 1937. (Variously updated in different copies)

2. Check Deed History

- A. At Tax Assessor's Office (City Hall, second floor), obtain plat and lot number from the assessor's records, then check the plat card for property transactions and owners of the property in question. Record the owners of the property in reverse chronological order, beginning with the current owner. Record the date of transaction and the reference to the deed book and page. References to deed book and page were not commonly recorded on the plat cards before the mid-20th century, but reference in the deed books of recent transactions can be helpful in providing references back to much earlier transactions. Chain of title of owners recorded in the plat cards usually does not extend very far back into the nineteenth century, 1880s or 1890s most often, but occasionally as far back as the late 1850s.
- B. Trace the title through the deed books. Deed books numbered 200 and above are located in the Land Records Office (fifth floor, south side of building); deed books lower in number than 200 are in the City Archives (up the stairs on the east end of the building and in the middle of the east side of the building). It is best to begin with the most recent transfer and to read each transfer. Read each deed to determine what is included in the transfer (land only, land and buildings, sometimes referred to as "improvements") as well as the dimensions of the property being transferred. Keep in mind that the lot may not always have been in its current size or configuration. Generally the earliest recorded transaction that includes land only provides you with a *terminus post quem* for the building in question. Usually, each

transfer makes a reference to the recorded location of the deed from the previous owner to the seller; if that reference is not given, the deed will always provide a reference to the name of the owner of the property from whom the seller purchased it. Use Grantor (seller) and Grantee (buyer) indexes to obtain reference to the deed books. Twentieth-century indexes are in the Land Records Office; pre-twentieth-century indexes, in the Archives.

3. Check Other Primary Documents

Once you have a more precise time frame for the building's construction, you should check other sources for a more precise date. These are located in the City Archives.

- A. Tax Records. Providence tax records extend back to the time of its incorporation as a city, 1832. The early records, however, list only the individual's name, the total value of the property being taxed, and the tax. There is no distinction made for each piece of property owned. Beginning in the 1850s and continuing through the late nineteenth century, the Tax Ledgers refer to each piece of property by plat and lot. The ledgers are in several series, A-F, arranged more or less chronologically. The ledgers are well indexed. For the twentieth century, taxes are recorded in books for each year and arranged alphabetically by owner with specific reference to each parcel owned.
- B. Directories. Providence has directories beginning in 1824, with alphabetical listings by last name. Beginning in 1892, the House Directory records each building and its owner and occupants arranged alphabetically by street and in ascending numerical order. Keep in mind that house numbers change from time to time, and re-numbering was never done at one time on a citywide basis. The directories include a reference to streets and their numbers and give the numbers on either side of every intersection, so you may interpolate the number given in the directory with the street references to make sure that you have the right location.
- C. Intention-to-Build Permits. Between 1873 and the mid-1920s, the City had an optional registration of new construction. These permits record owner, location of construction, type of building to be constructed, estimated cost, builder, and architect. Builders and architects (if one was employed) are not always identified, but the basic information usually provides a very specific date for construction.

Compiled by Wm. Mackenzie Woodward, Senior Architectural Historian, RIHPHC