

DOING YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY

WHO LIVED HERE?

WAS THERE A STREAM NEAR MY HOUSE?

HOW DID THIS AREA GET DEVELOPED?

IS THIS A HISTORIC DISTRICT?

WHAT WAS IT LIKE
BEFORE THE STRIP MALL
OR HIGHWAY WAS BUILT?

DISCOVERING YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD'S PAST

The built environment has changed as much over time as the natural one. Roads now cover what was once running water, wagon trails and railroad tracks. Shopping complexes have been built on land once used for playing fields, small businesses and farms. Native-American villages, mining towns, sand dunes, gardens, or race tracks may have existed where now there are housing developments, industry and parking lots. This brochure will provide ideas and resources to help document your neighborhood's history.

The resources for looking backward to document a particular place are almost unlimited. Documentation may consist of sites surveys, oral histories and records created by government offices, businesses, institutions, individuals, and organizations. Land surveys, census records, water department records, city directories, correspondence, photograph albums, and real estate brochures all provide clues to changing neighborhoods. Researchers may have to consult one or more of these resources to collect all existing information.

Community history can be aided by understanding the development of a place; patterns of land use and ownership, and real estate growth. The best way to begin is with an examination of the neighborhood. Identify different parts of an area – residential, commercial, social and recreational – when these sites were built, which ethnic groups

lived there, the street layout, and what transportation methods were used. Look at individual structures, review their position on the block, their age in relation to their neighbors, and the existence of matching buildings nearby. These are all clues to their history. Consider whether a building was originally the focus of one large property, part of a group or tract, or a later infill structure. Talking with “old timers” who lived and worked in the neighborhood is an excellent way to learn about the recent past. While collecting this on-site information, members of the community will become involved in your local history project, meet other people and discover documentation that will fill in gaps.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The next step is to begin searching for information. The best place to start is your public library. Most public libraries have historical collections containing published and unpublished materials about the community they serve. Next, plan a visit to your local historical society or architectural heritage organization. Other good resources are colleges and universities, government archives, genealogy collections, museums, business archives, diocesan archives, the State Library, and the State Historic Preservation Office. Most of these repositories have collections of historical photographs, maps, books, records, pamphlets, manuscripts, periodicals, architectural plans and drawings, and microfilm.

Additional sources for information and documentation include local chapters of social clubs and fraternal organizations, sports organizations, hospitals, schools, churches, developers, real estate agencies, construction firms, banks, preservation organizations, and businesses

TYPES OF DOCUMENTATION

PUBLISHED SOURCES that may prove helpful include guide books, real estate brochures, and building surveys. Local and county histories are good sources for establishing context as well. Annual city directories can be crucial for tracking a building's uses over time and for providing information on public buildings. Newspapers

can provide information ranging from articles on changes in neighborhoods to daily records of real estate transactions.

VISUAL MATERIALS such as photographs and postcards offer vital documentation of a neighborhood's appearance over the course of time. Nearly all repositories house collections of historic photographs. Images may be filed according to street name, building type, and geographic area. They may also be filed under neighborhood subjects such as transportation or celebrations. Long-time residents, businesses and social organizations also have collections of photographs. Construction photographs for significant buildings often document the surrounding area before, during and after construction. Aerial photographs are particularly useful for understanding overall geographic context.

MAPS provide essential evidence for local history. The Sanborn Map Company's fire insurance maps of various dates (updated annually) show a building's footprint, height, use, structural materials, precise geographic location, street address at given dates, and relative age. Comparing Sanborn maps from different years is an excellent way to trace changes in a given locale. Parcel maps for ascertaining the precise geographic location of property are available at county assessor's offices. County recorders maintain copies of all recorded subdivision maps. Real estate sales maps, block books, tract or plat maps, and other historic maps exist at various repositories or government offices.

PUBLIC RECORDS from all levels of government are a rich source of information on land and buildings use. Municipal agencies are responsible for planning, land use management, public works, building design and maintenance, utilities, taxes, parks and recreation, building permits, and road construction.

City recorders' and assessors' offices are responsible for documenting a property's chain of title and value. The succession of a property's owners provides vital links to its history and uses. It also validates building information. Because property ownership involves large sums of money, liability and taxes, land description remains constant over long periods of time. Records may include tax assessment files, deeds, block books, building permits, maps, titles and other real estate records. Water Department records can, for example, reveal when water was first requested at a site as well as information about structural and use changes. Legal records may also provide

information relating to real property and land use. Federal, state and local census records provide detailed data that records decades of changing residential populations.

State government records useful for local history include those from Department such as State Architecture, Transportation, Water Resources, Public Works, Public Utilities Commission, Agriculture, and Parks and Recreation. The files of the State Office of Historic Preservation (SHPO) contain photographs and detailed historical descriptions of historic buildings and districts. Historical records created by these agencies can be found in the State Archives.

Federal records documenting land use can be found throughout the National Archives regional system. Of particular interest are records related to real property disposal, land management, military installations, public housing, Native American lands, and construction of federal buildings, roads and highways.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS held by historical societies, museums, universities, businesses, institutions, and organizations may also contain useful information. For example, diaries and letters may describe locations in which people lived and worked. Documents and photographs held in the archives of a State Railroad Museum or a local bank may reveal information about changing neighborhoods in the vicinity of transportation corridors or bank buildings. In addition, many cities and towns have preservation organizations that collect information about the built environment as well as specific structures or neighborhoods.

Understanding our community helps us to understand ourselves. Imagination, research, and documentation make it possible to collect, preserve and record the history of the place in which we live, empowering us to improve the present and inform the future.

- WAVERLY B. LOWELL

Books on this subject are available through the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), 1717 Church Street, Nashville, Tennessee, 37203-2991.

Phone 615/320-3203 E-mail: history@aslh.org <http://www.aslh.org/>

The Oral History Association (<http://www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>) offers some helpful publications such as *Using Oral History in Community History Projects* by Laurie Mercier & Madeline Buckendorf (1992). It also links to other resources.

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