



How to Research Your Home

Information provided by the Des Moines Historical Society of Des Moines, Iowa

3/2014

Here are a few suggestions to help you research your home. If you haven't already, please see "How to Read Your Home's Abstract of Title," a downloadable PDF available from www.desmoineshistoricalsociety.org. Your abstract is the first and best source of information regarding your home.

1. CALL OR VISIT THE POLK COUNTY RECORDER'S OFFICE.

Ph. (515) 286-3160; (515) 286-3175 (Imaging Department).
111 Court Avenue, Ste. 250, Des Moines, IA 50309-2251.
www.polkcountyiowa.gov/recorder/

The Polk County Recorder's Office holds vital records for the county, like real estate transactions and military records as well as:

- Birth records: 1880-1920; July 1, 1941 – present
- Death records: July 1, 1941 – present
- Marriage records: 1880 – present

Real estate documents from Jan. 1, 1998 – present are available on their web site free of charge. For records not online, there are three options for obtaining copies of documents:

- In-office copies: \$.50 / page
- Mailed copies: \$1 for the first page; \$.50 each add'l page. An invoice is sent out with your copy.
- Faxed copies: \$2 for the first page; \$1 each add'l page. A faxed request for copies with your name, company name, phone number, fax number and book/page info, must be sent to 515-286-3004 before any copies are faxed out.

Ask for the "registry of deeds" for your property and they should be able to give you a simple list of transactions.

2. CHECK WITH THE CITY FOR THE ORIGINAL BUILDING PERMIT.

Building permits usually contain treasure troves of information including the house's original dimensions, construction dates, and cost as well as the names of the architect, contractors, and/or original owners. These are housed in the City of Des Moines Permit & Development Center. See the downloadable PDF, "City of Des Moines Archive Permit Search Request" for fees and application.

3. DO A VISUAL INSPECTION.



You can learn a lot just by looking and see how your house was built and what type of building materials were used.

Examine the walls and moldings.

Look for original materials, such as the bricks of the fireplace. Housing design has changed dramatically over the years, and you may be able to find some clues as to when your home was built, what substantial changes it has endured, and how well off the original inhabitants were.

- Check under the water tank lid on the toilet for a date stamp. This could tell you either when a bathroom was added; or when it was renovated.
- Check doorways. Some may have notches for previous doors; or marks on the floor where a swinging door may have worn a distinct path on the floor. Since central heating and cooling are "modern" inventions, many older homes will have traces of doors at each entry to a room which was a means to regulate the interior temperature during

extreme hot and cold periods.

- Look for any signs of remodeling. Are the walls original textured plaster or smooth drywall? Kitchens and bathrooms are the most likely candidates for remodeling – try to guess by the styles when it was completed.
- And speaking of improvements, you might try looking for your home on the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. These are available online through the Des Moines Public Library: <http://dmpl.org/our-collection/research/all/S?>. You need to have a DMPL library card to access them, however. You can see whether your home had a garage, whether it was part of a larger plat of land (subdivided later), or even if there was an outhouse.

4. TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBORS.

Longtime neighbors may be the best source of knowledge about who lived in your home before you did. And it's a great way to break the ice if you've just moved in! Invite them over for refreshments and ask them if they know – even in generalities – if there were major renovations, if they know anything of the people who lived there (jobs, children, etc.), or anything they can remember. Plus, it's a possibility – in the case of a next door neighbor – that there is a photograph of your home, probably in the background of one that was taken by your neighbor.



If you get to be good friends with your neighbors, you might be able to casually ask if you can inspect their home to get clues about your own. Generally, homes near each other were built about the same time; if you find enough similarities between your neighbor's home and your own, you likely have the same builder.

You might also consider holding an “abstract party,” with

your neighbors and invite them over to share each of your homes' abstracts of title. This could give you lots of information about the original owner of the land, how it was platted and developed, and other trends in urban design that will become apparent as you share information. HINT: Cookies are always a hit at these parties!

5. TALK TO PREVIOUS OWNERS.

Take a look at your abstract for the names of previous owners or their heirs. Sometimes, abstracts will provide addresses for the heirs, if the owner died and a family member stepped in to settle the estate. There are also many online ways to find previous owners just by using Google, phone directories, people finder services or even on Facebook and other social media.

Speaking with those who came before you may allow you to get a better idea of the original house and what work has been done to modify it from when it was first built.

6. LOOK AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD AS A WHOLE.

There may be a great deal more information available about your neighborhood than about your house, and this information may provide tremendous insights into your home's history. For very old houses, for example, neighborhood information may be all you can find about the early history of your home.

7. GET THE PICTURE.

Compile all of your information to create a chronological picture of your house. Show how and when it was built, when various parts were added or demolished, and what natural events may have made changes to the house. Start a spreadsheet of notes to help keep things straight. This is an easy way to add and subtract information as it becomes available to you.

8. USE A METAL DETECTOR IN YOUR YARD.

Often, metal detectors are a great way to uncover old coins and other artifacts that may add their own unique story to your home. Better yet, if you can establish that your home had a privy, it might be worth finding someone who can dig it for you. Old bottles and various other items can be found in the remnants of an old outhouse. If you do decide to try this, please consult a professional first, as digging can be both dangerous and a waste of time if done improperly. Try contacting the Iowa Antique Bottleers:

<http://www.antiquebottles.com/iowa/> for more information or Tom Southard of Des Moines, tjsdsm@aol.com, is a "bottleer" and an experienced privy-digger.

9. ROAD TRIP.

Did you know the U.S. National Archives & Records Administration (NARA) has a facility in Kansas City? See all that they have at www.archives.gov. Most importantly, this is where you would find the "[Records of the Bureau of Land Management](#)" and the "Records of Iowa Land Offices." Specifically, NARA's holdings include:



- Records of the (Fort) Des Moines land office (1852-1910), including registers of certificates issued to cash purchasers, 1853-1909;
- Abstracts of military warrants, 1853-80; and
- Registers of entries, receipts, and final certificates for homesteads, 1863-1908, and timber culture, 1874-1902.

The Timber Culture Act was a follow-up act to the Homestead Act. Passed by Congress in 1873, the act allowed homesteaders to get another 160 acres (0.65 km²) of land if they planted trees on one-fourth of the land, because the land was "almost one entire plain of grass, which is and ever must be useless to cultivating man." (qtd. in "Daily Life on the 19th Century American Frontier" by Mary Ellen Jones).

9. LAST BUT NOT LEAST.

Hire someone to research your property for you. For a fee, the Des Moines Historical Society will work with you to find the answers you're looking for (look under "Research Resources" at www.desmoineshistoricalsociety.org). There are also other, private consultants who are excellent at what they do and know where to find the information. Here's who we recommend:

Kelli Lydon

Vice President, Des Moines Rehabbers Club
www.ournewoldhouse.com
kelli.a.lydon@gmail.com; (515) 451-7559

James Jacobsen

Owner, History Pays!
hp@raccoon.com; (515) 274-3625