

How to Research Your House

A Step-by-Step Guide

Is your house historic? How do you know?

- First, check to see whether your house has already been documented! Check with your city, local historical society, or preservation organization.
- Determine the style of your home. Note how your house was built and what type of building materials were used. Examine the doors, windows, roof, walls, moldings and other architectural details. Look for original materials. A good reference for determining architectural styles is Virginia & Lee McAlester's *A Field Guide to American Houses*.
- Do a title search at the Collin County Record's Office or hire a mortgage company or architectural historian to do this search for you. When you know the original owner, check for Notice of Completion to determine builder and/or architect. Research all the transactions involving your property, noting the date, names of buyers and sellers, and the dollar amounts and types of transactions (warranty deed, quit claim deed, mortgage, etc.). Indications of a construction date are the first relatively large mortgage or dramatic increase in the selling price or taxation of the property. Note: you will need the legal description of the property to do this research, not simply the address. This can be obtained from Collin Central appraisal District (CCAD.org). A list of owners and Notice of Completion should be included in your report.
- Check City of McKinney Phone Directories at the Helen Hall McKinney Public Library to learn about the people associated with your house: the owners and/or occupants (make note of their professions), and the architect, and the builder. A chronological list starting with earliest owners/occupants associated with your house and their professions, if possible, should be included in your report.
- When you know the names of owners, occupants, architect, builder, check biographical files and computerized index for further information; which could include the Dallas Morning News obituaries, news stories, scanned McKinney newspapers through the Texas Portal at UNT, genealogical records at the Haggard Library in Plano. Don't forget the census records at the Haggard Library. Make sure you have looked up the Sanborn address.
- Check the historical photograph collection at the North Texas History Center or the Haggard Library in Plano. All historic photographs should be included in your report with credit given to the appropriate source they were found.
- If your house was designed by a prominent local architect, check the architectural drawing files possibly located at the university they graduated from. Also obtain biographical information about the architect from the Dallas AIA.

- Check the Sanborn Fire Maps for your community/city. These contain much information about individual structures, and show your house with additions, etc., over time including materials they were built with. By comparing the maps from different years, you can establish an approximate date of construction and can determine when and what types of changes have been made to the building and surrounding property. Dating back to the late 1800s the Sanborn Fire Maps are available on microfilm in the Newspaper Room at the Helen Hall Library or on line through the TexShare Databases. Include fire map copies in your report.
- Conduct oral interviews of previous owners and architect/builder, if possible, to obtain further information about your house. Track down former residents or their children. Verbal accounts from the family and others associated with the property are also often useful. They may be able to help you date changes or tell you stories about their home. Written histories, journals, letters, photographs, etc., are sometimes available from family members. Neighbors can also be helpful if they have lived in the neighborhood for a long time. Ask neighbors or relatives if they have any family pictures that might show the building in the background.
- Obtain a copy of the Residential Building Record for your home from the Collin Central Appraisal District's Main Office. There is a fee and this record shows a configuration of your house with changes over time, as well as assessor notations. You may want to include this in your historic report. Local tax records may reveal the dates of additions and improvements to property by a change in the valuation, The file for a property usually provides an estimated date of construction. These can quite often be incorrect.
- Other public records to look for are mortgages, wills, and tax records. Mortgage records can contain detailed descriptions of buildings. Will and probate records may list one or more of the previous owners.