



Preservation Hotline #8

South Carolina Department of
Archives & History
8301 Parklane Road
Columbia, SC 29223
**State Historic
Preservation Office**
<http://shpo.sc.gov/>

Tracing the History of Your Historic Building

The first step in historic preservation is almost always documentation; that is, tracing the history of the building or other historic resource of interest. Whether your goal is to pursue a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, to document a historical marker at the site, or simply to satisfy your curiosity about something important to the history of your community, you might need a few tips on where to begin your research and on what types of sources are available. Though these tips focus on buildings rather than other types of historic resources, many of them are applicable to all types.

The Building: Start with the building itself. Examine it carefully, both inside and out. Take precise notes on its current appearance: the building materials, style, and shape, as well as the number and style of windows and chimneys and the appearance and material of the roof. All of these features may be clues to the date of construction.

The Occupants: Another preliminary source of information is the people that have lived, worked, gone to school, or worshipped in or around the building. Talk to the owners or occupants, both current and former, and ask them questions. Who built it? Why? Who was the architect or builder? Have there been any alterations? When and why did they occur? Ask to see and make copies of any old photographs, papers, etc. that will assist you in determining the history of the building.

The Documents: Many types of documents can help you trace the history of a building — from deeds and tax records in the county courthouse to printed maps and published city directories in libraries or archives. Begin with those outlined below.

◆ **County courthouse records** can provide you with a **chain of title** that will establish the history of the ownership of the property. You will need the name of the current owner and the current address to begin your search at the courthouse. Don't be afraid to ask for help; records storage will vary from county to county and will be found in different offices. For very old properties, you may end up in the county or state archives. Other types of documents that you may be able to locate at the courthouse or in county records include wills and probate records; these can also be of assistance if you have a break in the chain of title. Building permits did not exist until the late nineteenth century, but if you are researching a twentieth century property, these can be valuable. Most importantly, take good notes. Knowing where you got a piece of information, down to the book and page number, will come in handy later. The South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia also has a collection of wills, deeds, property inventories, and similar records for many South Carolina counties.

- ◆ **Maps** can be particularly useful when researching historic buildings. From the 1870s to about 1950, the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company periodically issued maps detailing the buildings in cities and towns. These color-coded maps show street names and addresses and provide information about the size of a building, its construction materials, the number of outbuildings, and even details about plumbing and electrical systems. Start with the most recent map for your area and work backward; if your building is on one map, but not on the map previously issued, there is a strong possibility it was built in the years between the publication of those two maps. These maps are available at the South Carolina Library at the University of South Carolina in Columbia or online at www.sc.edu/library/digital/collections/sanborn.html.
- ◆ **City directories** list the names, addresses, and occupations of adult residents of a city or town, and usually list businesses and addresses as well. Directories usually are organized both alphabetically by last name as well as addresses by street, so the history of a property can be traced through its address, not just through its owner. Note that addresses can change over time, so 123 Main Street may not be at the same location as it was 75 years ago. City directories can often be found in county libraries, historical societies, or the South Carolina State Library or the South Carolina Library in Columbia.
- ◆ **Published town or county histories**, though of widely varying quality, often provide valuable information on the development of a city, town, or county. The typical county history will rarely address a particular building unless it was significant to the community as a whole, such as a courthouse, railroad depot, church, or school. Such histories can often be found in county libraries.
- ◆ **The United States Census**, available for every year ending in "0" from 1790 to 1930 (except 1890), provides information about individual households, including the head and size of the household and also (beginning in 1850) information about every individual living in a household, including his or her birthplace, occupation, education, and amount of property owned. Slave schedules for 1850 and 1860 provide information on the numbers of slaves an individual owned. Agricultural and industrial schedules for 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880 list the types of crops, livestock, and products produced on a farm or plantation and the numbers of employees and types of products manufactured by a business. The South Carolina census records are available on microfilm at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

- ◆ **Newspapers** can provide rewarding information if you have the time and patience to review them. They usually are not indexed, however, and you may spend a great deal of time reading the newspaper for little to no information directly related to your search. They are most useful if you can identify a very small period of time to research or a specific date, such as the deathdate of an individual, whose obituary may be a valuable source. They provide information related to the owner or occupant of a building, the construction and opening of public buildings, churches, or businesses, or major events, such as floods, fires, hurricanes, or other local disasters that might have changed the built environment. Newspapers are usually available in county or university libraries, and local archives or historical societies, often on microfilm. The South Caroliniana Library also has a large newspaper collection.
- ◆ **Architectural plans**, like building permits, are probably not available unless you are working with a relatively recent and sophisticated building. But if they do exist, they can be a marvelous resource, showing detailed floor plans, and measurements and placement of windows and doors.
- ◆ **The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia** also maintains files on historic properties in the state, from surveys, or preliminary studies of resources in a particular town, city, or county, to nomination files documenting historic buildings, sites, districts, structures, or objects listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the official Federal list of historic and cultural properties significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture. The South Carolina Statewide Survey of Historic Properties has documented over 60,000 historic resources over 50 years old, while there are more than 1400 listings in the National Register, including more than 170 historic districts, or collections of historic buildings. Survey and National Register files at the SHPO may contain architectural descriptions of a particular historic property, a statement of its significance, and a photograph or photographs documenting the resource at the time it was designated. An index to survey records, National Register records and other sources is available at <http://shpo.sc.gov/research/pages/default.aspx>.
- ◆ **Additional sources** may also be available for the building you are researching. The information you have discovered from the sources listed above will guide more detailed research using family or personal papers, family histories, wills or probate records, historic photographs, church histories, business records, or tax information.

For More Information

Guides to Tracing the History of a Building

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) website includes links to internet resources for researching historic properties at <http://shpo.sc.gov/research/pages/default.aspx>.

Researching a Historic Property by Eleanor O'Donnell is available at www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb39/ or by contacting the State Historic Preservation Office at 803.896.6172. This bulletin is intended to introduce the beginner to basic sources and techniques for collecting data to nominate a property to the National Register of Historic Places.

Altimira Press publishes the *Nearby History* series for the American Association for State and Local History. Books in this series include the following titles:

Local Schools: Exploring Their History by Ronald Butchart

Public Places: Exploring Their History by Gerald Danzer

Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History by Barbara Howe, Dolores Fleming, Emory Kemp, and Ruth Ann Overbeck.

Local Businesses: Exploring Their History by K. Austin Kerr, Amos J. Loveday, and Mansel G. Blackford.

Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You by David Kyvig and Myron Marty

Places of Worship: Exploring Their History by James P. Wind

Architectural History Guides

Blumenson, John J.-G. *Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600-1945*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1981.

Gowans, Alan. *Styles and Types of North American Architecture*. New York: IconEditions, 1993.

Harris, Cyril M., ed. *Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, 1977.

Howard, Hugh. *How Old is This House? A Skeleton Key to Dating and Identifying Three Centuries of American Houses*. New York: Noonday Press, 1989.

Longstreth, Richard. *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*. Washington, DC: Altimira Press, 2000.

Lounsbury, Carl R. *An Illustrated Glossary of Early Southern Architecture and Landscape*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.

Phillips, Steven. *Old House Dictionary: An Illustrated Guide to American Domestic Architecture (1600-1940)*. Washington DC: Preservation Press, 1992.

Poppeliers, John C., et al. *What Style Is It? A Guide to American Architecture*. Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1983.

Rifkind, Carole. *A Field Guide to American Architecture*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1984.

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