



South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, South Carolina Department of Archives and History

[scdah.sc.gov](https://scdah.sc.gov)

## Researching a Mid-Century/Modern Property

Mid-century construction is now more than fifty years of age and eligible to be considered for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. While South Carolina may not have been the center for big name designers of the time, the state had several prominent firms designing buildings in the mid-century and a wealth of vernacular buildings. Mid-century buildings include houses, schools, banks, churches, government buildings, motels and more.

Until recently, little scholarly attention has been paid to the mid-century and post-World War II building era in the South and in South Carolina. New research into the history of mid-century buildings is helping us understand the historic significance buildings and developments from this era. A building's significance relates to the historic events and trends of the era such as military growth in the face of the Cold War; desegregation of public facilities and white flight to the suburbs; the development of the interstate highway system; and the growth in tourism. New housing developments and other large-scale community projects may be significant for their context in the urban renewal policies of the late 1950s and early 1960s. By understanding the context in which a building was constructed, we can define the significance and identify the key features that reflect its history.

This list of potential sources is not comprehensive and may vary based on the location or type of the building. Remember to check some of the main staples of South Carolina history, such as the local history rooms in county libraries, the *South Carolina Encyclopedia*, and Walter Edgar's *South Carolina: A History* when doing research. Visit SCDAH webpages at <https://scdah.sc.gov/historic-preservation> for Historic Properties Research links and <https://scdah.sc.gov/research-and-genealogy/online-research> for Online Collection links.

### Places to Start

[Historical Bibliography of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urbanism in the United States Since World War II](#) by Richard Longstreth is one of the most comprehensive bibliographies of writing and works on mid-century buildings and materials. See also "Preserving Resources from the Recent Past" by Jeanne Lambin.

*University collections:* South Carolina's main universities, such as the University of South Carolina, Clemson University, South Carolina State University, and College of Charleston all have extensive libraries and collections that deal with the architecture of the state. University collections may house historic maps, such as Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, topographic maps, and other highway maps.

*Local library and local history rooms:* Housed in county libraries and/or in local historical societies, local collections can provide historic context, photographs, maps, or other information about a municipality or a county. City directories may have building names, advertisements, and indices that trace the history of a building or neighborhood.

## Specific Resources:

**Aerial photographs:** These photographs can show the development of a town or area and may show new residential, commercial, or industrial development. Dating as far back as 1938, aerial photographs can be found at [HistoricAerials.com](http://HistoricAerials.com).

**AIA publications:** The *Review of Architecture* and *Architecture South Carolina*, published by the South Carolina American Institute of Architects, focus on local buildings. Researchers can find historic photographs, building plans, and architect histories.

**Architect collections:** Firms, family members, or other repositories may hold papers of architects/architectural firms that practiced in mid-century South Carolina. Documents can include building plans, specifications, photographs, correspondence, and newspaper clippings.

**Catalogues:** Useful for researching building materials, fixtures, or standardized building plans for sale.

**Chamber of Commerce:** Chambers of Commerce began to develop marketing campaigns to bring businesses and residents to their towns. These publications highlighted new buildings, new developments, new shopping centers, and other changes in the towns. Chambers of Commerce may also have tourism brochures and historic maps in their archives.

**Department of Defense:** The military presence in South Carolina expanded during World War II and in the Cold War era. Each military base in South Carolina maintains its own archives and has a cultural resource manager. Information may include the acquisition of land to expand the base, architectural and site plans for new housing projects, photographs, and other planning documents. The University of South Carolina Public History department produced a 4-volume report, *Cold War in SC, 1945-1991* that discusses the history of military sites and expansion during this time period.

**SC Department of Transportation:** The interstate highway system was funded and built in the mid-twentieth century. Department of Transportation records may include photographs taken for acquired

right of way for new interstates and roads, planning documents, maps and information on interchanges and other highway plans. The South Carolina State Archives holds a number of [records from the Department of Transportation](#) from this era.

**Development plans:** Engineering firms, architectural firms, construction firms, or municipalities may have permits, layouts, plats, or other information related to development of a neighborhood, subdivision, shopping mall, or other largescale developments.

**Engineering plans:** Collaborations between architects and engineers, especially on large-scale buildings, began to proliferate in the mid-twentieth century. Engineering firms and/or construction firms may have information in their archives on buildings, structural materials, and development plans.

**Homeowners associations:** These groups began to proliferate in the 1960s. HOAs for early residential developments may have documents and records for the neighborhood and individual houses.

**Housing Authority:** Urban renewal began in the mid-twentieth century as cities and towns chose to fight blight and poverty by demolishing large swaths of land and building new housing or commercial developments. Housing authority records could include photographs, building plans, site plans, and other records.

**Magazines:** Magazines highlighted new architecture and promoted architectural plans and new materials in the mid-twentieth century. Magazines that include architectural information are *Better Homes and Gardens*, *House Beautiful*, *Popular Mechanics*, and *South Carolina Magazine*. Information available in magazines can include photographs, building plans, and architect histories. Local libraries may have back issues of these magazines for review.

**Newspapers/Advertisements:** Real estate sections, advertisements, and articles highlight new developments, residences for sale, and new commercial and office space. Some newspapers may have architectural reviews.

**Oral histories:** Seek out architects, clients, designers, developers, community leaders, business people, and residents for their memories and stories.

**Picture/Postcard Books:** Many South Carolina communities have picture/postcard books that may have photographs of mid-century places. The South Carolina Sesquicentennial Commission published *South Carolina Architecture, 1670-1970* that is also full of mid-century architecture from across the state.

**Planning Department:** Local planning departments (city, county, and/or Council of Government) may have building permits on file, planning documents (especially related to urban renewal projects or downtown development), subdivision plats, photographs, and development plans. Historic preservation surveys and plans may also be useful and obtained through the planning department. Older preservation plans from the 1970s are on file at the South Carolina State Archives.

**School Districts:** In South Carolina, school districts began consolidation of smaller schools and smaller districts in the 1950s. District records may include consolidation plans, building plans for new schools, photographs, board of education meeting minutes, and yearbooks.

**South Carolina Development Board:** Founded in 1945 as the Department of Research, Planning, and Development, this precursor agency to the Department of Commerce was responsible for bringing industry and economic development to South Carolina. The Development Board promoted the state and its people, towns, cities, and buildings across the nation. The [Development Board records](#) may include information on

new industries, tourism, and other largescale economic development projects and are available at the South Carolina State Archives.

**Tax records/Plats/Deeds:** Many tax records and deeds are now available online. Online tax databases tend to have correct dates for buildings from the mid-twentieth century. Tax records, plats, and deeds can show sales in residential neighborhoods/subdivisions, creation of parks, and the exchange of ownership.

**Thesis Research:** Many graduate students in South Carolina are producing research on the history, buildings, and development patterns in the state during the mid-century. Look for thesis topics from the University of South Carolina Public History program and the College of Charleston/ Clemson University Historic Preservation program to start.

**Television:** Television stations, such as the South Carolina Educational Television or local news channels, usually have archives of film and stories. ETV began in 1957 and houses an extensive archive in their Columbia offices.

**Tourism brochures/travel guides:** As tourism increased with the development of the interstate highway system, brochures highlighted new hotels, motels, restaurants, parks, golf courses, and other entertainment. These brochures may be found in local libraries, at Chambers of Commerce, or in newspaper archives.

**Zoning Department:** Local zoning departments may have building permits, historic maps, or historic aerial photographs.

**Questions?** SC Department of Archives & History / 8301 Parklane Road / Columbia, SC 29223 / 803-896-6179 or 803-896-6182

The activity that is the subject of this fact sheet has been financed, in part, with federal funds from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of Interior. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, or handicap in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC 20240.