



PRESERVATION HOTLINE #8

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

scdah.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 site. Whether your goal is to pursue a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, to place a historical marker at the site, or simply to satisfy your curiosity about something important to the history of your community, here are 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. Visit <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.

The Building: Start with the building and examine it carefully, inside and out. Take notes on its appearance, building materials, style, and features such as roof and windows. These may be clues to the date of construction. Refer to [Preservation Brief 17: Architectural Character - Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving their Character](#).

The Occupants: Talk to current and former owners or occupants, 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? How was the building used? Ask to see and make copies of any old photographs, papers, etc. that help document the history of the building.

The Documents: Many types of documents can help you trace the history of a building — deeds and tax records, maps and plats, city directories, census records, local history books, newspaper articles, and collections of letters, photographs, and business records.

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 documents that 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 19th century, but if you are researching a 20th century property, these can be valuable. Most importantly, take good notes so you will know where you got a piece of information, down to the book and page number. The SC Department of Archives and History also has a collection of wills, deeds, property inventories, and similar records for many South Carolina counties.

Maps can be 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, construction

materials, number of outbuildings, and sometimes details about plumbing and electrical systems. Start with the most recent map for your area and work backward; if a building is on one map, but not on the previous one, there is a strong possibility it was built in the years between the publication of the two maps. Highway, city, aerial, and topographic maps may provide useful information such as a name and location.

City directories list the names, addresses, and occupations of adult residents of a city or town, and usually list businesses and addresses also. 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. Note that addresses can change over time, so 123 Main Street may not be at the same location as it was 75 years ago.

Published town or county histories 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.

United States Census, available for every year ending in "0" from 1790 to 1940 (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.

Newspapers can provide helpful information and online newspaper collections often have search capabilities that make it easy to search by name, dates, and/or address. Newspapers can 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.

Architectural plans, like building permits, are usually not available unless you are working with a relatively recent and sophisticated building. But if they do exist, they can show 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 maintains files on historic properties in the state. The South Carolina Statewide Survey of Historic Properties has documented approximately 82,000 historic resources over 50 years old, while there are more than 1,500 listings in the National Register of Historic Places, including nearly 200 historic districts, or collections of historic buildings. Survey and National Register files may contain architectural descriptions of a particular historic property, a statement of its significance, and a photograph or photographs documenting the resource. Many of the records are available in the SC Historic Properties Record, <http://schpr.gov>.

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, travel guides, school board reports, business records, or tax information.

For More Information

["Useful Sources for Researching Historic Properties"](#) online guide from the SC SHPO.

[Researching a Historic Property](#) by Eleanor O'Donnell, 1991, revised 1998. This National Park Service bulletin describes basic sources and techniques for collecting data to nominate a property to the National Register.

Nearby History series from the American Association for State and Local History. Book titles include: *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; and *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.

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.

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 Savage. *A Field Guide to American Houses Revised*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

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 (Revised)*. Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 2003.

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

ARCHIVES
& HISTORY