

## Birds Eye View Maps

A phenomena of the nineteenth century, many communities were represented in "birds-eye views". These very accurate published sketches of a community gained their name from the artist's perspective, which was almost always that of a low flying bird looking down on the community. Bird's-eye views were usually created at the request of a town's business community for promotional purposes. Thus the bird's-eye view creates a usually accurate snapshot of the buildings in a community as of the date of publication. Go to <http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem> and search the database for a birdseye view of your town.\*\*

## County Histories

County histories were a second nineteenth century phenomena. County histories solicited paid subscriptions from "leading citizens." Depending upon the fee paid, a biographical statement, a portrait, and in some cases an image of a residence, were published in the pages of the county history. Usually only the most prominent houses in a community would be found in the pages of a county history. Many of Michigan's county histories are available online at: [www.hti.umich.edu/m/micounty](http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/micounty).\*

## City Directories & Gazetteers

City Directories list residents who live in dwellings within a community. Usually arranged by street address, they offer information regarding names, and sometimes the vocations of those who lived in a house in year's past. As with fire insurance maps they were published mainly for urban areas and revised as market demand dictated, annually in major metropolitan areas but irregularly in smaller, more rural communities.\*

The Michigan Gazetteer is a geographic cross indexing business directory similar to city directories. The coverage is statewide and contains business name, locations, proprietor and advertising.\*

## Other Sources

- ☞ City Planning Offices (drawings & reports) \*\*\*
- ☞ "Built in America" at [www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs-haer/](http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs-haer/)
- ☞ Library of Michigan Rare Book Room (kit home plans)
- ☞ Probate and Civil Court Records \*\*, \*\*\*
- ☞ Local Fire Department Records (incident reports) \*\*\*
- ☞ City Council minutes (discussions of property) \*\*, \*\*\*
- ☞ Local history room of your public library or historical society \*\*\*

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\*Library of Michigan

\*\*Archives of Michigan

\*\*\*Local Offices

# Genealogy of a House

## A Practical Guide to Researching Historic Structures



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\*\*Portions adapted from the "Documenting the History of your House Guide" from the Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University.

## Looking at the House - Architectural Type Sources

Particular kinds of houses were built in particular eras using particular construction techniques. Try identifying the architectural style of your house by consulting guides such as, *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia & Lee Mc Alester (Knopf, 1984) or *Identifying American Architecture* by John J.G. Blumenson (American Association for State and Local History).

## Talking to the Neighbors

People who live in the community may know a good deal about the house in which you live. They may even lead you to a person who once lived in the house prior to your occupying it. Obviously the more you can learn through conversation the easier it will be to determine information about your house. You should, however, approach what you "learn" this way with a gentle skepticism. Memories fade and the absolutely charming story you hear describing a holiday gathering in the 1960s may turn out to be about the family that lived across the street rather than the people who lived in your house.

## Register of Deeds

Most record searches will start with the register of deeds. This county official is charged with keeping track of who owns property. Your goal is to trace the "chain" of ownership, usually starting either with the most recent owner and working backward or with the first owner and working forward. To create a chain of ownership you will need a legal description of the property rather than the street address. A legal description might read, "block 2, lot 16, Bentley's Addition, City of Mount Pleasant." This description can commonly be found on either the papers that were signed when the house purchased or the semi-annual tax bill. \*\*\*

## Building Department

For many "newer" houses a building permit may still exist giving the date of the house's construction and perhaps other details. Most jurisdictions require building permits be obtained whenever a new house is erected or when major renovations are undertaken to an existing structure. In addition to the permit itself, there is sometimes a file of inspector's reports and occasionally the contractor's plans.

You should contact the relevant city or county building department to inquire if previously issued permits are available. There is considerable variation among jurisdictions regarding how far back records can be found. Most jurisdictions will have permits going back twenty to thirty years, while a few may have records dating back forty to fifty years. It is very rare, however, to find building permits prior to 1950. \*\*\*

## Tax Records

For "older" homes, which is certainly any home built before 1945 and often structures erected before 1960, tax records may prove a clue as to when a building was constructed. Found in the Assessor's or Treasurer's office, tax records do not directly indicate when a building was built. However, because a building will increase the property's value, a sudden increase in the tax paid usually indicates that construction has taken place. Tax rolls, however, must be used with caution.\*\*

## Plat Books

Plat books are maps that document property ownership. They were published by commercial firms as a different and more convenient way to display ownership information than the way it was found in the Register of Deeds office. In some instances plat books will also include dots or some other indicator of where structures existed. Urban areas are usually excluded from plat books which concentrate on the rural countryside.\*

A typical plat book is published by county with a map printed for each township. Each township map is further subdivided to indicate who owns property. These plats will soon be online at [www.hti.umich.edu/m/micounty](http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/micounty).

Subdivision plats show the original layout of a city, village, town or neighborhood. A link is available in the Archives of Michigan quicklinks page at [www.michigan.gov/archivesofmi](http://www.michigan.gov/archivesofmi). \*, \*\*\*

## Rural Property Inventory

Rural Property Inventories were a WPA project that sought to get a handle on assessed values of land. The indirect result is a historic snapshot of properties around the state. Information includes all building types (including barns etc), construction date, materials, condition, electrification, plumbing, dimensions, cubic feet and woodlot, forest or crop types present on the property. \*\*

## Fire Insurance Maps

Fire insurance maps are one of the most productive sources of information about older buildings. Sometimes called "Sanborn" maps after the name of the leading company in the field, fire insurance maps first appeared in the 1870s and continued up until the 1950s. They were created for insurance companies who wanted detailed information about buildings in a particular area in order to calculate accurately fire insurance premiums. These maps show actual structural information such as exterior type, shingle type, etc. \*, \*\*

