

Finding Hidden Gems

Researching the History of Your Historic Property

Each historic property, no matter how insignificant, has a story to tell. History is not always about the biggest homes or the wealthiest people, it is about family, a community, a nation. A little hard work and research can help you *unearth the hidden gem in your community!*

Getting Started

The first step in *historical research* 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 Register of Historic Places, to place a historical marker at a 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*. Some basic roof types can be seen below. All of these features may be clues to the *date of construction*.



Gable



Hip



Offset Gable



Truncated Hip



A-Frame



Pyramidal



Flat



Gambrel

The Occupant

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 the building* - from deeds and tax records in the County Recorder's Office to printed maps in the County Public Works Agency Survey and Mapping Division, and published city directories in libraries and archives. Begin with those outlined below.

County Recorder's Office

County Recorder's Office can provide you with a chain of title to establish the history of ownership of the property. You will need the name of the current owner and the current address to begin your search. Don't be afraid to ask for help. 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 County Recorder's Office, 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. County Assessor's Records are also valuable when determining the estimated age of a building. 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.

Plans and Permits

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, measurements and even placement of windows and doors.

Maps

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, 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 Museum of Ventura County, located at 100 East Main Street, Ventura CA 93001.

City and County Directories

City and County directories list the names, addresses, and occupations of adult residents of a political subdivision in which that person, business, etc. was located 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 change over time, 123 Main Street may not be at the same location as it was 75 years ago. Microfiche city directories can often be found in county libraries and historical societies.

Published Histories

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.

United States Census

The 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 number of employees and types of products manufactured by a business.

Newspapers

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 death date 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 Oxnard Public Library also has a large newspaper collection. Research of the Oxnard Press Courier newspaper (and its earlier names) is available on the following online historical newspaper site:

<https://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/Home/usa>

State Office and University

The South Central Coastal Information Center (SCCIC) at California State University Fullerton is one of twelve regional information centers that comprise the California Historical Resources Information System (CHRIS). CHRIS works under the direction of the State Parks Office of Historic Preservation and the State Historic Resources Commission to supply information on historic resources (e.g. location, age, size, age, etc.) and surveys within Ventura, Los Angeles, and Orange Counties per CHRIS standards. Information about historical resources is maintained in various forms such as 7.5 USGS Quadrangle Maps, historical resource records and reports, and computerized data. The SCCIC website is:

<https://anthro.fullerton.edu/sccic>

A fee is charged for maintaining the information and any assistance provided.

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