

Open the door...

Tracing the history of your historic Nashville home

•Metropolitan Historical Commission •(615) 862-7970 •Sunnyside in Sevier Park •3000 Granny White Pike •Nashville, TN 37204 •

The stories behind Nashville's historic houses offer a fascinating glimpse into our city's past. Understanding the history of your building also helps in making decisions about future additions or changes.

These questions can help you get started:

- When was the house built?
- Who built the house?
- How did the interior and exterior originally appear?
- Who were the previous owners/residents?
- What did it cost to build?
- How does the house fit the neighborhood?

The first step in historic preservation is almost always documentation: that is, tracing the history of the building or other historic resource. Whether your goal is to pursue a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, to place a historical marker, or simply to satisfy your curiosity, these tips will provide you assistance as you begin researching your historic building.

Begin with the building

Examine the building 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. Pinpoint changes in construction materials, building styles, or floor plan that might indicate additions or remodeling.

Establish an approximate date of your house by comparing its architectural style and building materials with popular trends in domestic architecture. Compare your house with others in the area; similar style and size may point to a common builder.

Read the landscape around the house to discover important features such as foundations of outbuildings, sunken gardens, or original property lines marked by trees or fences.

Explore existing resources

Step back from the individual property and research the history of the neighborhood or area around it. Area histories provide insight how an individual property fits into the broader historical picture. Examine neighborhood, city, and county histories that describe how the area fits within the history of the larger city and often provides research clues for your specific property.

Find out from the Metro Historical Commission or the Tennessee Historical Commission if your property has been included in a neighborhood survey or a National Register nomination.

Talk with older residents about the neighborhood's history; explore written or recorded oral histories. Talk to others who have lived in or near your home and ask them questions. Ask to see and make copies of old photographs, family papers, etc. that will assist you in determining the history of your building.

Delve into the documents

Many types of documents can help you trace the history of a building -- from deeds and tax records to printed maps and published city directories. Visit the Register of Deeds, the Nashville Room at the Public Library, your local library branch, the Metro Archives, or other agencies and repositories for the following documents:

Deeds: Trace the evolution of property ownership at the Register of Deeds office. Deeds will reveal who conveyed the property to each previous owner and the price paid. Look up the deed by the address, owner name, map and parcel number, or book and page number. Dramatic increases in land value often indicate that a piece of property was improved, helping pinpoint a date of construction. In Nashville, the Register of Deeds office is located in the Gaylord Entertainment Center at the corner of Broadway and 6th Avenue South.

Censuses and Wills: Available for almost every year ending in "0" since 1790, censuses provide information about individual households, and beginning in 1850, information about individuals living within a household, including birthplace, occupation, education, and amount of property owned. Wills yield information about business dealings and family members, and may provide information about the transfer of property. Check the Metro Archives and the Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA) for census records and wills for Davidson County.

City Directories list the names, addresses, and occupations of adult residents of the city. Directories are usually organized both alphabetically by last name as well as by street address, so properties can be traced by address, not just property owner. Also, advertisements for local businesses, real estate developers, and builders are often included. Nashville's city directories can be found at the Metro Archives, in the Nashville Room, or at TSLA.

Sanborn Maps: The Sanborn Fire Insurance Company published detailed maps of buildings in cities and larger towns from the 1870s to the 1950s. 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 plumbing and electrical details. Start with the most recent map 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 those maps. Sanborn Maps are available at the Metro Archives, the Nashville Room, and at TSLA.

Newspapers and Photographs: Newspapers generally provide little information about specific homes, unless you can identify a very small time period to research. Newspapers can provide useful information such as the obituary of a former owner, the construction and opening of public buildings, or major events such as floods, fires, or tornados that have changed the built environment. Nashville also has a large collection of photographs and negatives taken throughout the 20th century that depicts local streets, buildings, people and events. The Nashville Room, the Metro Archives, and TSLA all have a variety of Nashville-related photographs and newspapers.

Neighborhood Surveys and National Register Nominations document many local buildings built before 1950. Surveys may provide photographs and brief descriptions of the structures as they existed at the time of the survey. Other homes may already be listed in the National Register of Historic Places individually or as a part of a historic district. Nominations usually provide a great deal of information, including date of construction, architect/builder, and a building history. The Tennessee Historical Commission and the MHC both keep copies of Davidson County's survey and National Register nominations.

There are also several books available to assist you in understanding, describing, and recording the architecture and history of your building. The following are available in the Nashville Public Library:

John Blumenson. *Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms*. American Association for State and Local History, 1981.

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

Barbara Howe, et. al. *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History*. American Association of State and Local History, 1987.

Sally Light. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*. Golden Hill Press, 1989.

Virginia and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Homes*. Knopf, 1988.

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

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

National Register Bulletin 39, *Researching A Historic Building* by Eleanor O'Donnell, is available on-line at www.cr.nps.gov/nr/bulletins/nrb39 or by contacting the Tennessee Historical Commission.

The following local offices are available to help you locate these and other resources which will assist you in documenting the history of your historic building:

Metropolitan Historical Commission (MHC)
Sunnyside in Sevier Park
3000 Granny White Pike
Nashville, Tennessee 37204
615/862-7970

Metropolitan Archives
3801 Green Hills Village Drive
Nashville, Tennessee 37204
615/862-5880

The Nashville Room at the Nashville Public Library
615 Church Street
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
615/862-5800

Tennessee Historical Commission (THC)
2941 Lebanon Road
Nashville, Tennessee 37214
615/532-1550

Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA)
403 Seventh Avenue North
Nashville, Tennessee 37243
615/741-2764

Please call and check hours of operation and make an appointment before planning a research trip to any of these agencies.

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