This guide provides an overview of the on-line Registry Office sources that document property ownership in the City of Philadelphia between 1865 and 1955. The records are held and made available by the City of Philadelphia Department of Records.

In 1865 on the recommendation of the Mayor and Philadelphia City Councils, the Pennsylvania State Legislature passed a law establishing the Registry Office under the Bureau of Surveys for the purpose of creating maps showing the precise location and dimensions of properties and a record of all owners of real estate in the City of Philadelphia. All current property owners were required to bring their deeds to the Registry Office to have the land plotted and registered and all purchasers after 1865 were required to abstract their deeds and have them reviewed by the Registry Office prior to being recorded by the Recorder of Deeds. The law also applied to people who inherited land or were awarded property by a court order, such as an estate partition. Beginning in 1867 the Recorder of Deeds was not allowed to record deeds until they were first registered.

The main purpose of the Registry Office was to produce accurate lists and plans of current property owners which served as the basis upon which real estates taxes would be assessed. Prior to 1865 there was no way to determine who the current owner of a particular property was without doing extensive searches in the deed records which are indexed only by the name of the buyer and seller (grantee or grantor) not by location. Tax assessors had to rely on older assessment lists and information supplied by the owners to determine who should be taxed. The new system allowed the assessors to have an independent source of information which was based directly upon the very records that established an owner’s legal property rights. Today the Registry Office records serve as a location index to virtually all property ownership changes in the City of Philadelphia since 1865.

Records Available On-line

There are two sets of records of the Registry Office that are currently available on-line: the Historic Registry Maps and the Registry Ledgers. Using these sources, it is possible to trace the ownership any given property in the City of Philadelphia from 1865 to 1955.

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1 “An Act to promote the more certain and equal assessment of taxes, in Philadelphia,” 14 March 1865, P.L. 320. This legislation was drafted by a special commission headed by Eli Kirk Price which had been authorized by a City Ordinance of 26 November 1864 to look into the problems of taxation in Philadelphia.

2 29 March 1867, P.L. 600.

3 The special commission formed to study the problem found instances in which liens were entered and properties sold for back taxes because the name of a former owner was being assessed to a property he or she no longer owned. The new legislation had special provisions protecting property owners from municipal tax cases if they registered their property. For the report of the commission see Journal of Common Council of the City of Philadelphia for the Year 1865 (Philadelphia: 1865), 1: 280–300.
Historic Registry Maps  
https://ework.phila.gov/parcelexplorerauth/  

The key to using the Registry Office records is the map and parcel number of the property being searched. The entire city of Philadelphia has been mapped and assigned registry map numbers. These maps can be easily searched using the subscription based system called ParcelExplorer.

The Historical Registry Maps divide the city into sections that are generally two to three city blocks square in order to produce maps at a scale which can clearly show all the distinct property lines. They are designated with a number-letter-number sequence, eg. 2-S-20 or 2S20, in which the letter is either an “N” or an “S” – indicating that the area covered is either north or south of Market Street.

The Historical Registry Maps document the evolution of property lines from the late nineteenth century to the present. The parcel numbers were assigned in chronological order as the transfers in ownership were submitted to the Registry Office for recording. The lower the number, the older the specific property is. The higher the number, the more recent the property creation or subdivision is. When older parcels were consolidated or reconfigured into new plots, the old plot numbers were left on the maps and sometimes crossed out (see Figure 2). The resulting maps display multiple layers of property lines that cover more than a century of changes on the urban landscape.

The only notable exception is for some areas of Fairmount Park, particularly East and West Park, which were acquired by the City while the registry maps were being created in the 1860s, 70s and 80s. Because these park properties would not be taxed, the Registry Office probably saw no need to map the original properties lines. The Fairmount Park Archives as well as the City Archives have plans for many of the original property lines for these missing areas.
Carefully examining the parcel numbers on the maps from the highest to the lowest can provide clues to how and when blocks were divided or consolidated.

A variety of insights into the development and subdivisions of different sections of the city can be observed from these maps. The map for a part of the East Falls shown in Figure 4 provides an example of how the Registry Office was required to create new maps when the original small-scale plan for this area had to be broken done into several new large-scale maps in order to show new lot subdivision distinctly.
The maps also record old property lines that were obliterated when the grid pattern of center city was extended over the entire city. The scale of the Registry Maps often allows one to reconstruct quite accurately these lost property lines relative to modern landmarks. In Figure 5, one sees a number of diagonal lines that do not match the grid. In this particular case the angled line passing through the block between Passyunk Avenue and Juniper Street is the remnant of the original division line of the early Swedish settlers’ tracts known as Passyunk and Moyamensing and of the later townships of the same names.

**Registry Ledgers**

The Registry Ledgers document property transfers beginning in 1865 and ending in 1955. The ledgers were created from the property transfer forms every new owner of real estate was required to fill out prior to having his or her deed recorded or after receiving the property as the result of the probate of a will or a court order. The ledgers served the purpose of providing a quick method to determine the name of the current owner of a parcel. Images of the pages can be viewed for free on the PhilaDox website.

The 1865 enabling act required the Registry Office to prepare books which “show the situation and dimensions of each property therein with the city numbers thereof, and who are the owners, with such succession of blank columns as will permit the names of future owners to be entered

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5 These original property transfer forms still survive and are available at the City Archives. They sometimes contain more detailed information and notes than can be found in the ledgers. These sheets were microfilmed and inserted into microfilm jackets that were maintained by the Records Department into the 1990s before the introduction of the PhilaDox system.
therein, with the dates of transfer …”

The books that were created now form the set of Registry Ledgers available on-line.

The ledgers are organized by Registry Map Number, such as 2S20, with sheets that list 75 lots per page and read from left to right chronologically and continuously, often over several pages, until the last transfer of ownership before 1955 is recorded. There are two types of standard forms found in the books: original entry pages and continuing entry or transfer pages.

**Original Entry Pages**

Lists the date the plot was created and the ownership registered, the name of the owner, the date of the deed, address of the house (rarely filled out on the forms), the street the lot fronted, the frontage of the lot in feet, the name of the person from whom the first registered owner acquired the property. These pages contain two sets of columns marked “Original Entry” on the right and “Transfers” on the left. The “Transfers” columns list the subsequent ownership after the original entry.

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6 Section 2, P.L. 321

7 The ledgers that were microfilmed are almost entirely copies dating from the 1920s and 30s from the original ledgers which were probably in poor condition due to heavy use. These later copies show signs of great wear and tear. Some of them survive in the holdings of the Department of Records at the City’s Record Center.
Though the Registry Office began recording ownership in 1865, it is not uncommon to find entries for property transfers that pre-date 1865 because the ledgers record when the first owner acquired the property. The Original Entry is the only place in which the name of the former owner, also known as the grantor in the deed parlance, is recorded in the ledgers.

**Continuing Entry or Transfers Pages**

Lists the lot number, the name of the new owner and the date of acquisition or deed. Unlike the Original Entry pages, the name of the former owner is not noted but implied by the entries in the columns to the left. All the Transfers Pages and sections read from left to right and are arranged chronologically. There are as many Transfers Pages for each 75 parcel list as are needed to list the changes in property ownership up to 1955.
The Transfers Pages often include information on subdivisions. When the entries for a particular parcel ends and the lot was subdivided, the clerks often noted the parcel numbers of the subdivisions (see line for Parcel 1 in Figure 9). This can be confirmed by referring to the Registry Map as well as looking for the name of the former owner in the Original Entry page listing for the new subdivided parcel numbers. Transfers in ownership which were the result of sheriff sales often have the note “by Shf” or something similar noted by the name of the new owner and those which were the result of devise in a will often have the note “by Will.”

CAVEAT

The images of Registry Ledgers pages that are available on-line were scanned from microfilm. Though the overall quality of the images is good it is dependant on how well the ledgers were filmed and the condition of the original pages. A common problem one encounters is reading parcel number entries at the top and bottom of the pages where the original page was worn or torn or the ink faded. One can work around these problems by looking for later Transfers Pages for the same lot number and tracing the title backwards using the on-line deed records or by looking at the original Transfer Sheets at the City Archives.

If the lot number does not appear in the sheets but does on the Historical Registry Maps, it generally means that the lot was created after 1955. The Registry records of ownership from 1955 to 1976 are available in the microfilm jackets arranged by Map and Parcel number maintained by the Department of Records in City Hall. Records after 1976 are available through the subscription-based component of PhilaDox. Records of property ownership prior to 1865 are found in the deed records on microfilm and in original form at the Philadelphia City Archives and on-line with Philadelphia Historical Land and Vital Records. There is no location index for the pre-1865 deed records. One must know the name of the property owner to trace the title.

For further information on using City records for property and building research see:

Searching Properties

To begin a property search, a person must have an established account and subscription to ParcelExplorer. There are a variety of subscription options available on the web site (see subscription section).

https://ework.phila.gov/parcelexplorerauth/

Locating the Registry Map and Parcel Number
The key to tracing the history of a particular property is to locate the registry plan and plot number.

1. Log-on to ParcelExplorer and either type in an exact address or intersection (e.g. 18th & Walnut St. – remembering to include the abbreviation “st”, “ave”, etc.) in the search box or use the zoom tool on the overview map to locate the section of the city you want.

2. Move the map around with the “Drag and Pan” tool (the hand symbol) until you have located the property on the map.
3. To find out what the current Map and Parcel number for the lot is, click on the “i” in a circle icon on the tool bar and then click inside the property. This will fill in the “Indentify Parcel” panel on the left. The map number is found after the “RecMap” label and the parcel number after the “Parcel” label. In this case, the map is 002S20, or 2S20, and the parcel is 0157 or 157.

4. To view the Historical Registry Map, click on the “Map Options” tab in the left panel.
5. Click on the plus sign in the “Historic Maps” section.

6. Click on the down arrow button in the Registry Maps section for get the selection of historic registry maps that cover the area you are searching.
7. Click in the radio button for the map that covers the area you want and then click on the Show on Map button.

Now you are able to see the historical parcel numbers that are contained in the present-day parcel 157.

Finding the history of ownership using the Registry Ledgers
After you have located the parcel numbers that you need, you can use the Registry Ledgers found in the PhilaDox system. The scanned images of the Register Ledgers are indexed by the Map Number only. The user needs to browse through the pages to find the sheets for the particular parcel being searched.

1. There are two ways to go these pages:
   - Directly from ParcelExplorer:
     1) Click on the PhilaDox link in the upper left-hand corner.
     2) Read the access statement and click on the “I Acknowledge” button.
     3) On the iCRIS Login Screen, click on the “Link to Historical Index Info” on the left.
   - Directly from your web browser.
     1) Open a new window tab or another instance of your web browser and type in the following URL:

N.B. It is highly recommended not to close the ParcelExplorer window or browser because you may need to go back to the map to check parcel numbers.
2. The Historical Index page is divided into three rectangular frames. The frame in the upper left contains folders which expand and allow you to drill down the lists of what is available.

![Historical Index Frame](image)

3. To access the Registry Bureau Ledgers, click on the plus sign by the folder titled “Reg. Plans”

![Registry Ledgers](image)

A list of numbers will appear. These numbers correspond to the first number of the Registry Map. All Registry Maps are composed of combination of two numbers and letter – “S” or “N”.
4. Click on the number that corresponds to the first part of the Registry Map number as it appears in ParcelExplorer, ignoring any leading zeros. In this example, 2 for 002S20

Once the number is clicked, another list of folders will appear in the frame in the lower left corner. Scroll down the list until you find the plan number you are searching for and then click on the plus sign by the folder for that number.

N.B. If you do not find the plan number you are looking for, there are two options to locate the images:

1) Look for other numbers which may be close. All map numbers have two numbers separated by an “S” or “N” but some of the folder headings have variations like 48-N-A-11-A. Ignore all other letters except “S” or “N”. These anomalies in the folder headings relate to problems from unclear markings on the original Registry Office Ledger sheets.

2) Look at the images for plans immediately before or after the plan number you want. Sometimes these images were grouped under the adjacent plan because the original pages were not marked with the correct plan number. If you compare the lot numbers and address information in the ledgers you can verify that you have the right pages.
A list of images of the ledger pages will appear. The list has all the ledger pages that exist for that plan. It is often helpful before going through the list to expand the frame to see the entire page image name so you can keep track of where you are on the list as you browse. To expand the frame, place the cursor over the vertical frame boundary that divides the two frames on the left from the single frame on the right. When the cursor symbol changes to a double arrow (↔), hold the left mouse button down and drag the column to the right until the full file name appears.

The Registry Ledger is indexed only to the Registry Map number level. All the individual pages are arranged in parcel number order and then chronologically until all the transfer pages needed for a particular parcel number sequence is completed to 1955. You will need to browse through the images until you locate the Original Entry Page for the lot number you are searching for.

5. To begin searching for the ledger page that has the lot you want, click on the linked page numbers in the lower left panel. Clicking on any link in this panel will open up the page image in Adobe Reader in the viewer pane on the right.
The first page usually contains lots 1 through 75. In order to find parcel 93, which is one of the older parcel numbers for this site, you will need to browse through the images. The Original Entry page for parcel 93 is found on /REGISTRY PLANS/01/000697. Note that the highest parcel number is 114 (all other parcel numbers were assigned after 1955).

6. To zoom in on the specific lot, use the navigation tools found at the top (the plus and minus sign buttons) and the hand icon to move the image around.