How to Research a House
A guide prepared for the program How to Research Your Ancestral Homes
presented January 29, 2014 at the Boston Public Library

Where did my relatives live? Who lived where and when?

Boston City Directories (1789-1929) (Microtext Department, 2d floor)
- From 1789 to 1929 the directory can only be searched by name, and not by address.
- Available on microfilm in the Microtext Department.
- The Directory from 1930 through 1981 can be searched by street address. It will show the name of the family living at an address.
- Includes a list of streets showing where a street begins and ends and the number of the ward in which the street is located.
- Listings starting in 1957 show if the householder or business has a telephone, if the house is owned by the person listed or by some member of the family. Listings may show multiple occupancies, such as apartment complexes, duplexes or three-family homes.
- Some years of the Directory have been digitized on the Internet Archive.
- Tufts University has digitized some directories for Boston: 1845, 1855, 1865, 1870, 1872, 1875, 1885, 1905, 1925
- Ancestry.com and Ancestry Library Edition databases include some Massachusetts directories, including many from Boston between 1843 and 1981.
- The Microtext Department has directories from many other cities listed here.
Telephone Directories (Microtext Department, 2d floor)

Telephone Directories provide less information than city directories, but have the advantage of covering more than one town at a time.

Boston List of Residents
- AKA List of Residents, Election List, Police List
- Years 1861 through 1921 (with gaps) available on film in Microtext Department
- Years 1922 through 2011 available in the Social Sciences Department
- 1909-1910, 1922 through 1960 have been digitized

Boston Tax Lists (make requests at the Delivery Desk, second floor)

- The tax lists covered both individuals and corporations.
- Click here for catalog listing
- Covers 1826-1895
- The bottom value for inclusion in the lists grew over the years. In 1826 owner needed $5,000 in personal or real property to be listed. By 1865 the amount grew to $25,000.

United States Census (Microtext Department, second floor) microformat and online

- From 1850 to 1880 the census shows if a person owned real property.
- After 1900 it also shows if the occupant owned or rented the property where they lived.
- These clues should lead researchers to the Registry of Deeds or equivalent agency for deeds, mortgages, and property tax records.
Most census indexes are by personal name.
There are methods to work backwards to find a specific address.
To find a property, you can also use the city directories to find the occupant of the property.
Use an index or database, such as “Ancestry Library edition” or “Heritage Quest” to find that occupant.

Maps and Atlases

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps and Bromley Atlases (Microtext Department, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, microformat and paper)

- These are very detailed maps created for underwriting purposes (coverage 1867-1940s)
- They show the footprint and construction materials for each house on a street.
- Generally, they do not show the name of the owner.
- Some Bromley atlases are online at [www.mapjunction.com/bra](http://www.mapjunction.com/bra)
- Boston Public Library’s [Norman B. Leventhal Map Center](http://maps.bpl.org) is an excellent resource for maps and atlases, particularly Boston – not online yet – contact them: maps@bpl.org 617-859-2387.
  - The State Library of Massachusetts [Real Estate Atlas Digitization Project](http://www.mapjunction.com/bra)
  - [David Rumsey Map Collection](http://www.davidrumsey.com)
  - MIT Library (MIT Dome – 1883, 1902 digitized)
  - [Harvard Map Collection](http://www.maplibrary.harvard.edu) at Harvard University
  - [The Bostonian Society](http://www.bostonian.org)
  - Boston Redevelopment Authority’s [MapJunction](http://www.mapjunction.com)
  - [Historic Mapworks](http://www.historicmapworks.com)
Newspapers (Microtext Department, second floor)

- The real estate section of the newspaper can be a source of information on your home.
- The drawback is the lack of full text searching for most years and most papers.
- Some papers can be searched from home with a Boston Public Library card and PIN. Others can only be searched from within a Boston Public Library building. Still others are only available on microfilm at the Central Library in Copley Square.
- The *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers* online database is available remotely with a library card, and includes, among many others,
  - Boston Daily Courier, 1826-1870
  - Boston Daily Atlas, 1832-1857
  - Boston Daily Advertiser, 1855-1899

Deeds (online and at county courthouses)

- The Mormons have recently put the Massachusetts land records online at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org). Records are browsable, but not searchable.
- Originals are at the County Courthouse, Registry of Deeds.
- Many 1800s land records are available online at the [Suffolk County Registry of Deeds](http://www.suffolkregistrystation.com).
- Boston, Chelsea, Revere and Winthrop
  - Land Transaction Surveys, 1860-present.
  - Legal Documents of Land Ownership, 1634-present.
  - Boston building contracts, 1820-1860s
  - Suffolk County Registry of Deeds 24 New Chardon Street, Boston Tel. 617-788-6221

History of the house itself

Building permit searches

- Boston Inspectional Services Department Building Permit Search Database:
  - Building Permits, post-1872
  - Database includes bin numbers for 1902 – 1966 blueprints filed at Boston Public Library
  - Later building plans may be scanned onto database
  - Boston Inspectional Services
  - 1010 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston ISD Permit Search Database
www.cityofboston.gov/isd/permitsearch/default.aspx
includes scans of Building Permits for post-1872 buildings, original construction, additions, renovations

Building plans (Arts Department, third floor)

- Boston Building Inspector’s Reports, 1879-1902, sometimes referred to as the Partial Plan Collection, for new construction only, with partial plans, 1879-1901, with gaps
- Boston City Plan Collection – rolled blueprints 1902-1966
  Procedure for requesting blueprints (1902-1966) from the BPL’s Arts Department
  - Request a form by email blueprints@bpl.org or call 617-859-2277 (Arts Department)
  - You must first search for a permit in the ISD Database
  - In the permit database, the permit will be followed by the jacket or cover.
  - On the jacket, look for a bin number – letter followed by one, two or three numbers.
  - Arts Department needs a bin number to initiate a search
  - There is a card index to alterations that may lead to plans.
  - Sometimes there is a plot plan in the roll of blueprints.

- Boston Building Plans
- 1902-ca. 1966 with gaps, arranged by bin number
- Plans after 1971 may have been digitized and can be found on ISD Permit
  http://www.cityofboston.gov/isd/building/docroom/default.aspx
  - Originals were returned to one who submitted them.
  - ISD may have copies of plans on microfilm as well.

Demolished Buildings:
- Building permit files of demolished buildings
- (Takedowns) circa 1919-1987
- Photographs of demolished buildings, circa 1950-1990
- City of Boston Archives
Boston Information File and Boston Picture File (Arts Department, third floor)
- Boston Buildings and Architects cross-indexed by architect, building type/name, owner name / address
- citations to articles and illustrations in publications and to primary material

Boston Landmarks Commission reports (Arts Department, third floor)
Many commission reports are available on the Boston Preservation Alliance website and in both the Arts Department and Social Sciences Department.

Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals (Arts Department, third floor, no remote access to database)

Helpful journal articles (Arts Department, third floor)
- “How to Date An Old House,” Brooklyn, NY, The Old-House Journal Corporation, 1985

Local Resources
- Boston Preservation Alliance
- Bostonian Society - Research Guides
- Historic New England
- Jamaica Plain Historical Society – Resources “How to Research the History of Your House and Lot”
- Other Neighborhood Historical Societies, including those at Boston Public Library branches
  - MACRIS – Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System
  - Massachusetts Historical Commission
  - Massachusetts Historical Society
Guides to House Styles (Arts Department, third floor)


- Books on triple-deckers

- Boston Preservation Alliance [Architectural Style Guide](#)

Pattern books and books on house plans

- [Architecture, Domestic – Designs and Plans](#)
- [Prefabricated Houses — United States — Designs and Plans — Catalogs](#)

Major Repositories of architectural drawings and plans in the Boston Area

- [Boston Public Library Arts Department](#)
  - Maginnis and Walsh collection
  - William G. Preston collection
  - Peabody and Stearns collection
- [Boston Athenaeum](#)
  - George Minot Dexter
  - Nathanael J. Bradlee
- Harvard, [Houghton Library](#)
  - Henry Hobson Richardson
- [Historic New England](#) – collections include Arthur D. Little and Herbert W. C. Browne; and Jacob Luippold (middle-class building styles)
- [MIT Museum](#)
  - TAC (The Architects’ Collaborative)
  - MIT Campus Buildings

Photo research

- List of addresses and years your family members lived there
- Use atlases, maps for variant street names, cross streets, notable nearby landmarks, owner names(Bromley) / also building type – i.e. row of three-story buildings with front porches (Sanborn)
Use deeds and reverse directories to locate other owner names and names of neighbors
Look for photographs of the specific address, street, neighborhood, landmarks, variant owners in:
  - newspapers
  - libraries – photograph collections and books
  - local historical societies

Sources for photographs

- Boston Public Library:
  - Print Department
  - Robert Severy Photograph Collection (Arts Department)
  - BPL Flickr photostream
  - Neighborhood branch libraries
- Bostonian Society
- Historic New England
- Boston Athenaeum
- Massachusetts Historical Society
- neighborhood historical societies
- Google Images, includes real estate sites such as Zillow
- Wikimedia Commons

Boston Public Library contact information:

Arts Department arts@bpl.org 617.859.2275
Microtext Department microtextref@bpl.org 617.859.2018
Print Department printref@bpl.org 617.859.2280 (usually by appointment only)
Social Sciences/Government Information socsciref@bpl.org 617.859.2261

We wish you the best in your research. Remember, contact any department listed above, and they can help you get started or help if you’re stuck!