

# House Research Guide



A how-to guide for researching your house history

North by Northwest Neighborhood Initiative

Every home has a story to tell. At one time or another, you may have wondered about the history of your home. When was it built? Who lived there before you? Is your home historically significant? These questions usually go unanswered because people aren't quite sure when to start looking. To help get you started, we have written a general 'how-to' guide on researching the hands of ownership, with some helpful tips and informative websites.

## CITY DIRECTORIES

City directories can answer many questions related to your house research. The Bethlehem Area Public Library's Bethlehem Room includes a number of directories dating from 1900/1901 on. The directories have various titles, including Scholes Directory of the Bethlehems, Directory of the Bethlehems, and later the Polk Directory. Volumes of interest to most residents in the North by Northwest area would be those from 1900-1901, 1904, 1906, 1911, and 1917-1918. (Call number 917.48) The 1900-1901 volume has been digitized for Lehigh's Beyond Steel site:

[http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/cdm4/beyond\\_viewer.php?ptr=12906&searchworks=cat24](http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/cdm4/beyond_viewer.php?ptr=12906&searchworks=cat24)

What can you learn from these directories:

- 1) More about the range of years in which your house was built (for example, the address appears for the first time in 1911)
- 2) The occupation, including business ownership, of the people who lived in your home, and the names and occupations of neighbors at various points in time.

House numbering systems have varied over time. The Directories let you track when and what those changes were. For example, a house might be originally numbered 24, then 121, then 421 over successive decades.

## SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAPS



Sanborn fire Insurance maps were originally created for to assess fire insurance liability in cities and towns across the United States. The collection of Sanborn maps for Pennsylvania includes over 550 cities, towns and communities. These large-scale plans include information such as the outline of each building, the size shape and construction materials, heights and function of structures, location of windows and doors. The maps also give street names, house numbers, boundaries and building use, although the extent of information various over time. A variety of maps cover Bethlehem.

The Bethlehem Area Public Library has Sanborn maps on microfilm reproduced from original copies in the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress that include the years: 1885, 1892, 1897, 1904, 1912, modified 1912. There is also an original copy of the 1892 book in the Bethlehem Room.

Lehigh University has a digital version of the same microfilmed maps through the Digital Sanborn service for Pennsylvania that the public can use through a set of terminals located near the main entrance of Fairchild-Martindale Library.

The Library of Congress has created a checklist of these maps, accessible at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/sanborn/>

As maps are digitized they are linked to the checklist. As of June 2010, maps of Bethlehem had not yet been digitized for this checklist.

How will these maps aid your research? Through perusing the Sanborn maps, you can view the development of your neighborhood over time, learn more about the house numbering, see the original outline of your house, and see property boundaries that may have changed over time. Details are also provided about structures in nearby commercial districts.

## MORE ON RESIDENTS

Beyond the city directories, there are some additional resources that will enable you to discover more about the families who lived in your house and in your immediate neighborhood. The Bethlehem Area Public Library owns some biographical compilations, such as Portrait and Biographical Record of Lehigh and Northampton Counties. Chicago: Chapman Publishing, 1894 (online at archive.org and at 920 in the Bethlehem Room).

The BAPL has also been working on an obituary index to the Bethlehem Globe-Times (<http://www.bapl.org/lochist/news/lhnews1.htm>) which is particularly helpful for earlier years. If you know the death date of your subject, you can look for an obituary in the microfilm of the Bethlehem Globe-Times, available at the Bethlehem Area Public Library and at Lehigh University.

Another place to look for information about residents is in the decennial census records for Lehigh and Northampton Counties. These are available on microfilm in the Fairchild-Martindale Library, Lehigh University for census years through 1920. While the information collected varies from Census to Census, typical information contained in the schedules may be: name, relationship to head of household, sex, race, marital status, number of children, year of immigration, occupation, etc.

## Performing Deed Research



When searching for a home's history, the best place to always start is with the current deed. A deed is listed on property/tax records or can be obtained at the county Recorder's Office. A deed shows the progression of ownership as a home is passed from one owner to another. Using the current deed to trace the preceding deed will start your home history. Using the information gathered from deed research, you can trace who lived before and reveal the story your home plays in this community.

## Deed Research (Lehigh County)

The following is a step-by-step guide for researching your home's deed history at the Lehigh County Government Center (Recorder of Deeds office)

1. Computers are available for research that lead to the full text of recorded deeds.

- a. A Doc ID # is required to begin research. This is located on your house deed) If you do not know your Doc ID #, head to the Help Desk and someone will assist in ascertain this information.
2. For those with a Doc ID # dated before 1984, use the Russell Index; those with a Doc ID # dated after 1984, use the Landex Index.

Using the Landex Index:

1. In the “Original Instrument” box (at the bottom of the screen), enter the Doc ID # in the “Instrument #” line. This retrieves your deed.
2. Double click on the Deed Line to view the deed.
3. In the full-text of the document, look for the wording “...being the same premises...” to find the previous deed owner and deed Doc ID #
4. Go back to the search screen and enter the new Doc ID # to find the next deed
  - a. Note: The further back you research, you may find that instead of finding a Doc ID #, you will find a Book and page # instead. When searching for the next deed, enter this information in the search boxes labeled “Book” and “Page Number”(above Instrument #” search box)
  - b. If the deed to search for is dated before 1984, switch to the other deed index, the Russell Index.

Using the Russell Index:

1. Click on the “Go to Document” tab.
2. Select Book Type = Deeds
3. In the “Go to Book” search box, enter book # and enter the page # in the “Page #” search box.
4. Click “Go to Document”
5. To continue to the next deed, look for “Being the same premises...” and locate the Deed Book and Page #. Enter this information into the search box at the top of the page.

## Deed Research (Northampton County)

The following is a step-by-step guide for researching your home’s deed history at the Northampton County Courthouse

The Recorder of Deeds Office is located on the lower level of the courthouse and hours are M-F 8:30 – 4:30

\*Obtain Parcel Id (please note: if you do not own a computer, proceed to “Go to Northampton County Courthouse”)

1. Go to [www.ncpub.org](http://www.ncpub.org)
2. Click on Property Records tab
3. Click on Agree on bottom of screen
4. Enter in property address
5. Click search
6. Obtain parcel id

\*Go to Northampton County Courthouse

7. To start research go to computers and type in parcel id on lower left hand side of screen; hit F12 (“Retrieve Next” to bring up page)
  - a. *if you did not obtain parcel Id, you will need to ask someone behind the counter to obtain this for you*
8. Highlight Deed; hit F12
9. Either read document to get book and page of next deed or look on left hand side of screen and it will state book and page number under “reference instrument information” of preceding deed

10. Hit F4 (“Exit” to go back to main screen) and enter in another book and page number to continue search
11. Continue to use computer to obtain a book and page number for preceding deed until computer does not recognize book and page number
12. At this point you will need to use hard copy books to continue research; the Recorder of Deeds office has many deeds on microfilm; however the older your home is the more likely you will need to use the hard cover books to continue research of home
13. If you would like to make copies at any point during research you will need to go to counter; give them your license and obtain a vending card (each copy is .25 cents) to print from either computer or from a book

### SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

Ellsworth, Linda. *The History of House: How to Trace It*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1976. 8 p.

Foster, Gerald L. *American houses : a field guide to the architecture of the home* / Gerald Foster. Publication info: Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

*Houses & Homes: Exploring Their History*. The Nearby History Series. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1987.

Howard, High. *How Old is This House? : A Skeleton Key to Dating and Identifying Three Centuries of American Houses*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984

### WEB SITES

Powell, Kimberly. *Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home or Other Building*

[http://genealogy.about.com/od/basics/a/house\\_history.htm](http://genealogy.about.com/od/basics/a/house_history.htm)

Brief outline articles from ehow.com: [http://www.ehow.com/how\\_2321543\\_research-history-house.html](http://www.ehow.com/how_2321543_research-history-house.html)



<http://www.nbnw-bpa.org/>