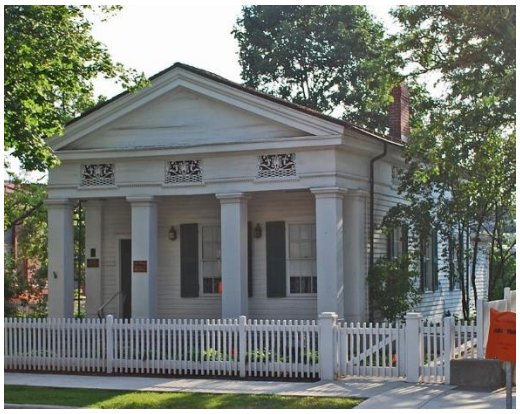
Historical Society of Michigan
Michigan Heritage Home Research Guidelines

Your house has a story to tell. You can reveal that story, and the Historical Society of Michigan's research guidelines will help you. The detective work involves following a trail of clues to progressively narrow down the timeframe in which someone *might* have built your house until you identify the original owner and actual date of construction. The following sources will help you unlock the secrets in your walls so that your home can be a Michigan Heritage Home.



1. Identify the Architectural Style

Identifying a house's architectural style is the first step in determining its history. Architectural designs go in and out of fashion just like clothing styles. A house in the Greek Revival style, for example, was almost certainly built between 1830 and 1860; a house in the Italianate style was probably built between 1850 and 1885. Knowing the style of your house will immediately narrow down the timespan in which it could have been built.

How can you determine your house's architectural style? Many books can help, but the definitive one is *A Field Guide to American Houses*, by Virginia and Lee McAlester (Random House, 1984). You can also inquire of the Michigan Historic Preservation Office or the Michigan Historic Preservation Network.

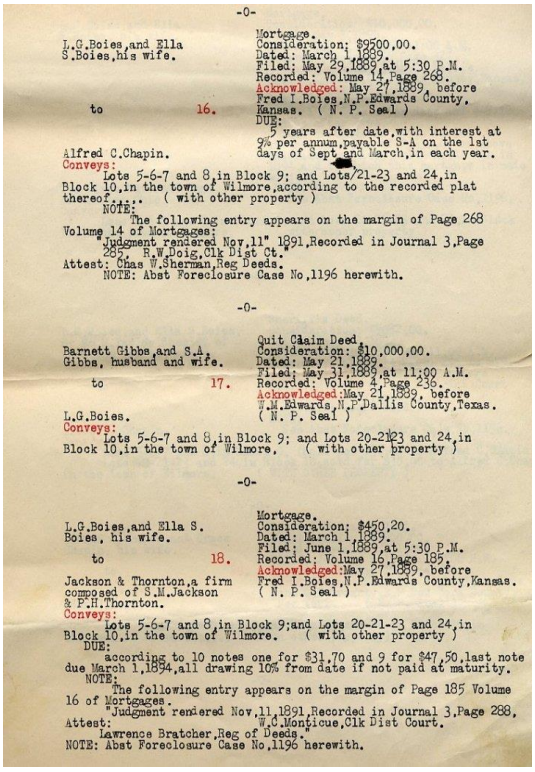
2. Physical Examination/Material Culture

Don't forget to examine your house itself. What hints does it provide about its history? Are additions apparent? Look in basements and attics for nails used in construction: cut nails (square in cross-section) were used in the 19th century, but wire nails (the ones we use today, circular in cross-section) appeared about 1900. Hardware, such as window sash pulleys, will sometimes have patent dates on them. Knob-and-tube electrical wiring usually pre-dates 1930. An experienced building contractor can help you look for physical evidence.

3. Chain of Title Research

Now that you have determined your house's architectural style and looked for hints in the house itself, research the chain of title on the property. Establishing the successive transfers of title from one owner to the next will provide clues for other avenues of research (particularly biographical). Michigan no longer requires an abstract of title for house sales, but you or the

previous owner may have one anyway. If so, great! If not, you can trace the chain of ownership at your county Register of Deeds office. You can hire a researcher to do it for you, or you can do it yourself.



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L.G.Boies,and Ella S.Boies,his wife.

to 16.

Alfred C.Chapin.

Mortgage.
Consideration; $9500.00.
Dated: March 1,1889.
Filed: May 29,1889,at 5:30 P.M.
Recorded: Volume 14,Page 268.
Acknowledged: May 27,1889, before Fred I.Boies,N.P.Edwards County, Kansas. (N. P. Seal)
DUE:
5 years after date,with interest at 9% per annum,payable S-A on the 1st days of Sept and March,in each year.

Conveys:
Lots 5-6-7 and 8,in Block 9; and Lots 21-23 and 24,in Block 10,in the town of Wilmore,according to the recorded plat thereof.... (with other property)

NOTE:
The following entry appears on the margin of Page 268 Volume 14 of Mortgages:
"Judgment rendered Nov,11" 1891,Recorded in Journal 3,Page 285. R.W.Doig,Clk Dist Ct."
Attest: Chas W.Sherman,Reg Deeds.
NOTE: Abst Foreclosure Case No,1196 herewith.

-0-

Barnett Gibbs,and S.A. Gibbs, husband and wife.

to 17.

L.G.Boies.

Quit Claim Deed.
Consideration: $10,000.00.
Dated: May 21,1889.
Filed: May 31,1889,at 11:00 A.M.
Recorded: Volume 4,Page 236.
Acknowledged:May 21,1889, before W.M.Edwards,N.P.Dallis County,Texas. (N. P. Seal)

Conveys:
Lots 5-6-7 and 8,in Block 9; and Lots 20-21-23 and 24,in Block 10,in the town of Wilmore. (with other property)

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L.G.Boies,and Ella S. Boies, his wife.

to 18.

Jackson & Thornton,a firm composed of S.M.Jackson & P.H.Thornton.

Mortgage.
Consideration; $450.20.
Dated: March 1,1889.
Filed; June 1,1889,at 5:30 P.M.
Recorded: Volume 16,Page 185.
Acknowledged:May 27,1889, before Fred I.Boies,N.P.Edwards County,Kansas. (N. P. Seal)

Conveys:
Lots 5-6-7 and 8,in Block 9;and Lots 20-21-23 and 24,in Block 10,in the town of Wilmore. (with other property)

DUE:
according to 10 notes one for $31.70 and 9 for $47.50,last note due March 1,1894,all drawing 10% from date if not paid at maturity.

NOTE:
The following entry appears on the margin of Page 185 Volume 16 of Mortgages.
"Judgment rendered Nov,11,1891,Recorded in Journal 3,Page 288, W.C.Monticue,Clk Dist Court."
Attest: Lawrence Bratcher,Reg of Deeds.
NOTE: Abst Foreclosure Case No,1196 herewith.

Important note: property ownership pertains only to the land, not a house or other building standing on it. The legal description will be the same with or without a building.

1. Start with the legal description of the property (either a Section, Township and Range for a rural property or a lot and block number in a city). This description will be on your deed or your property tax bill. Your county Register of Deeds office can also provide the information.

Examples:

Rural: “SW1/4 NW1/4 S13, T1SR20E” refers to the southwest quarter of the northwest quarter of section 13 of Township 1 South, Range 20 East (a 40-acre parcel).

Village or city: “Lot 183, Block 3, Murphy’s 2nd Add” specifies a lot in Murphy’s 2nd Addition to the city or village. Most villages and cities started with a relatively small number of streets and lots in the “original plat,” and then grew larger. The growth came about through “additions” as developers laid out streets and lots around the original part of town.

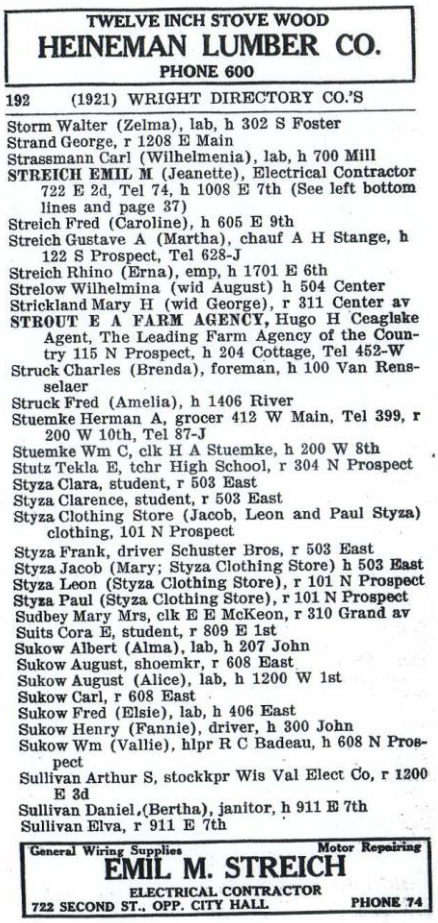
2. Now that you have a property description you’ll need to look at deed indexes, found in the Register of Deeds office at your county courthouse. Property deeds are indexed by the names of the grantor (seller) and grantee (buyer). When you bought your house, you were the grantee; you bought it from the grantor. Start with your own purchase of the property and work backward, going from buyer to seller through the years.

3. The indexes will take you to the deeds themselves. A deed will generally list the grantee, the grantor, legal description of the property, and the date of purchase. It may include the amount paid. It will usually NOT mention any buildings on the property.

4. Property purchases often provide a hint about the construction date of a house because new owners may have bought land with the intention of building on it.

Many Registers of Deeds have computerized at least some of their records and made them available online. Check your county Register of Deeds Office’s website.

Establishing chain of title will narrow your focus somewhat, but you still only know who owned the land and when. You will need to consult other resources to discover more detailed information.



TWELVE INCH STOVE WOOD
HEINEMAN LUMBER CO.
PHONE 600

192 (1921) WRIGHT DIRECTORY CO.'S

Storm Walter (Zelma), lab, h 302 S Foster
Strand George, r 1208 E Main
Strassmann Carl (Wilhelmenia), lab, h 700 Mill
STREICH EMIL M (Jeanette), Electrical Contractor 722 E 2d, Tel 74, h 1008 E 7th (See left bottom lines and page 37)
Streich Fred (Caroline), h 605 E 9th
Streich Gustave A (Martha), chauf A H Stange, h 122 S Prospect, Tel 628-J
Streich Rhino (Erna), emp, h 1701 E 6th
Strelow Wilhelmina (wid August) h 504 Center
Strickland Mary H (wid George), r 311 Center av
STROUT E A FARM AGENCY, Hugo H Ceaglske Agent, The Leading Farm Agency of the Country 115 N Prospect, h 204 Cottage, Tel 452-W
Struck Charles (Brenda), foreman, h 100 Van Rensselaer
Struck Fred (Amelia), h 1406 River
Stuemke Herman A, grocer 412 W Main, Tel 399, r 200 W 10th, Tel 87-J
Stuemke Wm C, clk H A Stuemke, h 200 W 8th
Stutz Tekla E, tchr High School, r 304 N Prospect
Styza Clara, student, r 503 East
Styza Clarence, student, r 503 East
Styza Clothing Store (Jacob, Leon and Paul Styza) clothing, 101 N Prospect
Styza Frank, driver Schuster Bros, r 503 East
Styza Jacob (Mary; Styza Clothing Store) h 503 East
Styza Leon (Styza Clothing Store), r 101 N Prospect
Styza Paul (Styza Clothing Store), r 101 N Prospect
Sudbey Mary Mrs, clk E E McKeon, r 310 Grand av
Suits Cora E, student, r 809 E 1st
Sukow Albert (Alma), lab, h 207 John
Sukow August, shoemkr, r 608 East
Sukow August (Alice), lab, h 1200 W 1st
Sukow Carl, r 608 East
Sukow Fred (Elsie), lab, h 406 East
Sukow Henry (Fannie), driver, h 300 John
Sukow Wm (Vallie), hlpr R C Badeau, h 608 N Prospect
Sullivan Arthur S, stockkpr Wis Val Elect Co, r 1200 E 3d
Sullivan Daniel (Bertha), janitor, h 911 E 7th
Sullivan Elva, r 911 E 7th

General Wiring Supplies — Motor Repairing
EMIL M. STREICH
ELECTRICAL CONTRACTOR
722 SECOND ST., OPP. CITY HALL — PHONE 74

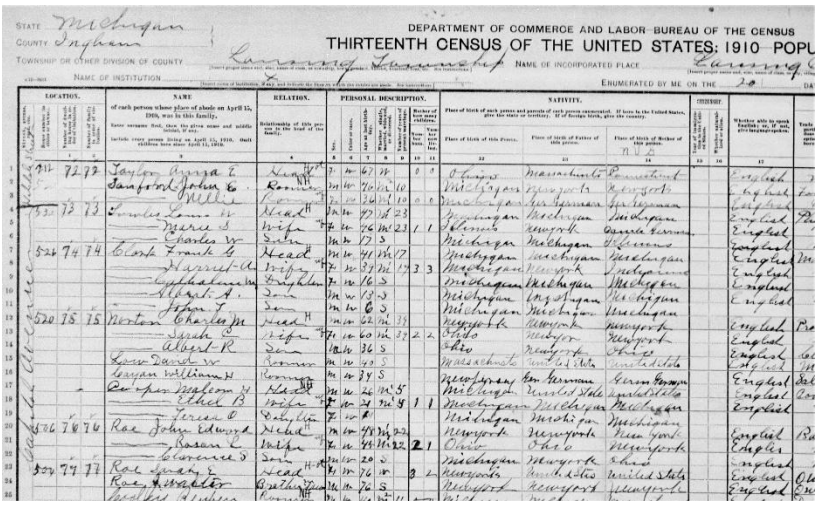
4. City Directories

City directories like those published by R. L. Polke of Detroit may help you establish a chain of title. Directories were usually issued at least bi-annually if not every year and list address and occupation of the head of household. Directories are generally cross-listed with entries indexed by name and address. The first date in which an address appears in a city directory may indicate a house's construction date. Many city directories are digitized and available on genealogy research websites.

City directories have a few drawbacks. Remember that towns and cities sometimes renumbered houses and changed the names of streets, so you may have to confirm that an address has remained unchanged. Some directories have no index; if the directory is digitized you can search electronically for a name or address, but otherwise you can only search manually page by page. House occupants may be renters, not the owners, so you will have to confirm ownership through your Register of Deeds Office.

5. Census Records

The federal census is taken every ten years and has been released through 1940 (the 1890 census was destroyed). Census records list members of the household, ages, family relationship, occupation and other information depending on the year. Later census records (typically from 1910 and later) will often include a street address for the residents. Census records can help identify residents and make other sources (such as property deeds and city directories) easier to search, and the record of someone living at an address shows that a house stood on the site. The censuses (and many other records) have been digitized and are free online to Michigan residents through the Library of Michigan's



STATE Michigan
COUNTY Ingham
TOWNSHIP OR OTHER DIVISION OF COUNTY Lansing Township
NAME OF INCORPORATED PLACE Lansing
NAME OF INSTITUTION
ENUMERATED BY ME ON THE 20
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND LABOR—BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
THIRTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1910—POPU

Michigan Electronic Library at https://records.myheritagelibraryedition.com/research.

6. County Histories and Atlases

Publishing companies produced several atlases for many Michigan counties over a span of years – mostly the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These maps can help narrow the date of construction for a house. Atlases contain plat maps of cities and villages in the county, and the earlier ones (usually pre-1890) show lots and buildings on them. Rural areas will have a plat of the township showing property lines, owners' names, and black squares that indicate houses.

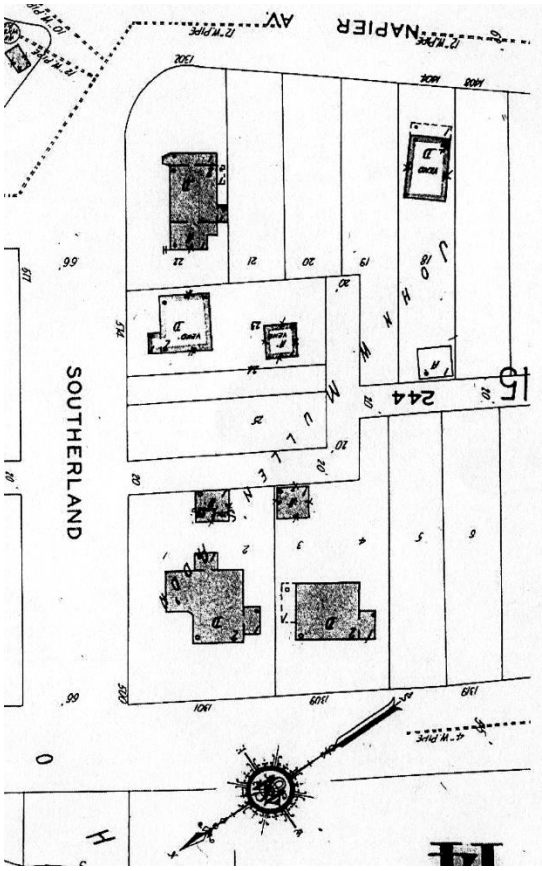
Suppose, for example, that a plat map in an 1873 atlas shows your property vacant but the next atlas, published in 1887, shows a house on the site. That suggests a construction date between 1873 and 1887. Beware, however – houses were sometimes moved!

The University of Michigan Library has digitized Michigan county histories and atlases, made them searchable, and put them online at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micounty/ Your local public library or historical society will probably have original copies, too.

County atlases often include photos or drawings of certain houses in the county. Most often these are the dwellings of the wealthy, but occasionally a smaller house will make an appearance.

County histories contain a wealth of biographical information about people. Those produced in the 19th and early 20th centuries charged a fee to print biographies, so they usually represented the wealthier people. County histories also include photos or drawings and sometimes discuss the construction of particular buildings or houses.

7. Fire Insurance Maps



The Sanborn Fire Insurance Company created maps of great value to building historians. Like plat maps, the Sanborn maps may help you narrow down the date range of construction for your house. Selected pages from digitized maps are available online through the Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps. Your local library will probably have a full set of maps for your town available on microfilm.

Sanborn maps for Michigan began in 1883 and continued through 1970. Sanborn created a new map of a town only every 5-9 years, so maps are not available for every year. Unfortunately for house historians, Sanborn maps mostly covered the industrial and commercial (and therefore fire-prone) areas in towns. Over time, however, the maps extended farther and farther into the residential areas. The maps depict houses in good detail and identify their construction type (frame, brick, stone, etc.).

8. Birds'-Eye Views

"Birds'-Eye Views" of towns and cities were popular art forms in the 1860s-1890s. These lithographs were drawn from an overhead perspective, as though the artist was a bird looking down, and depict streets, buildings, natural features, and the like. Most buildings are not shown in great detail, but the view can help determine if a building stood on a lot and provide a general idea of its appearance. Local libraries, museums, and historical societies will often have copies of them.

9. Property Tax Assessment Rolls

When you have narrowed down the possible construction date of your house to a span of years, examine the property tax assessment rolls. Look for a large increase in assessed value from one year to the next that indicates the addition of a house. This is more difficult with rural property than urban lots because the house is a relatively minor part of the former's value.

Property taxes are assessed annually and are useful in tracing valuation increases and/or decreases over short periods of time. The tax rolls describe the property, not any buildings on it, but a jump in real estate valuation from one year to the next indicates new construction or an addition. Tax rolls are organized by the property owners' last names, hence the need to identify the former owners.

The tax rolls specify various taxes a person owed each year: personal estate, real estate, road taxes, even a tax on dogs! For your house history, you're looking for the real estate tax.

Tax assessment rolls are usually organized by township and/or city and therein by the owners' names and the property legal description. Check with either the county clerk or county treasurer for access to these records.

10. Newspapers

When you have determined the likely year of your house's construction, look for articles about it in local newspapers. Your local library will probably have your community's historic newspapers available, either on microfilm or in a digitized version.

Newspapers, especially those in smaller towns and cities, often reported the construction of houses and other buildings. Today, many newspapers have been digitized and you can search for a name and/or an address. Even if the newspaper has not been digitized, you can still search for reports about house construction. You may find nothing or a detailed description over several issues of the construction of a residence. In the early 20th century, some newspapers carried a weekly feature devoted to new building construction in the community.

Don't skip the "society" columns that were common to newspapers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A social function held in someone's home confirms that the house existed.

Here is a typical example from a newspaper in St. Joseph, Michigan:

St. Joseph Herald-Press, August 10, 1925: "Work was started today on the new two-story brick home of John Fay, Jr., which will be built in the Mullen Addition. Construction is under the supervision of Max Stock and Company, contractors."

St. Joseph Herald-Press, June 10, 1926: "Mr. and Mrs. John Fay, Jr., who have been residing at 814 State street have moved to their newly completed home at 514 Sutherland avenue."

Additional Sources

11. Building Permits

These document any new buildings or additions. Permits often include information about the type of structure, when constructed, construction details, address, and owner. The permits are usually arranged by address but may be filed chronologically by filing date, which can make them difficult to use. The permits are usually filed with city or county planning and/or zoning offices. Unfortunately, few municipalities required building permits (or have retained those they have) until relatively recent years.

12. Mechanics' Liens

Liens are sometimes filed to ensure that a contractor is properly compensated for his or her work. Liens will list the contracting parties, provide a detailed description of the work to be performed as well as listing estimated amount due, and address. Like building permits, these seldom exist for very many years in the past.

13. Photographs

Photographs and picture postcards can be great sources of information on both the interior and exterior of your house. Check with the previous owners, local residents, and with both state and local libraries and historical societies. The County Appraiser also may have photos of residences.

14. Estate Records

Estate records document the final settlement of an individual's estate. If the person dies intestate (without a will) the court will order an inventory and appraisal of the decedent's possessions. These records can help researchers reconstruct the contents of a house. Also, any estate actions that involve the sale of property can be helpful. Estate records can be found with the Clerk of the District Court.

15. Oral Histories

Neighbors and previous owners can be a goldmine of information for the house historian. Inquire with them about previous owners, additions to the house, any fire, flood, or tornado damage. You might find some just plain fun stories as well. If possible, record these stories either with an audio recorder or on paper.

16. Manuscript Material (Letters, Diaries)

Although difficult to locate, personal letters and diaries of folks who lived in the house, visited or lived nearby might contain information on the appearance, construction, or furnishings of the house. Repositories that collect and preserve these kinds of records usually will not catalogue each individual entry or topic discussed. So, if you are lucky enough to find the diary of an individual associated with your house it may take extensive work to extract any information.

17. Site Files

Some local historical societies have files on historic homes. These files may include photos, news clippings, building inventories, etc. If your house is on the State or National Register of Historic Places, you should check with the State Historic Preservation Office for access to the nomination and supporting documents.

18. Records of Architects and Real Estate Appraisers

Records owned by private business should not be overlooked. Blueprints created by architects can be useful, though rare to find. Be sure to check with state and local historical societies as well as university schools of architecture and architects' organizations about the existence of these records. Real estate appraisals can also be useful to house historians. These records may include photos, maps, dimensions, building materials used and a description of the condition of the house. These can be hard to locate as most appraisers operate independently and may not maintain their records.

Realtors' Listings

If you purchased the house recently, the realtor will usually include the house construction date in the listing information. That date may be accurate, but it is often only a "best guess." Realtors will frequently list the construction date as "1900." That isn't the construction date – it only means "it's an old house, but I don't know how old."

Learning More About Your House

Most house historians continue their research beyond the bricks and mortar into the lives of the people who lived there. You may wish to research the lives of people who, like you, have called your house their home. Your local genealogical society and historical society can help you learn about the lives of previous residents.