

Uncovering your Home's History

Discovering the history of your home can be a fun and fascinating process.

By Stephanie Hoover

Though settled since 1685, Montgomery County was officially created out of Philadelphia County in 1784. The Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line first rumbled through the county in the 1860s, and soon after well-to-do neighborhoods and booming industries lined the rails. Even if your home is not in one of these now historic districts, it has a place in history. And, if it is one hundred or more years old, it likely has a story to tell.

The three primary resources for home history research are county courthouses, local historical societies, and libraries. To begin your research, locate your deed. It probably contains a recital clause, usually found after the property description. This clause provides invaluable information, including the names of the owners who sold the property to the persons who, in turn, sold the land to you. Make note of the book and page numbers for these earlier deeds, as well as all names and dates. Armed with this information, it's time to make your first visit to the Montgomery County Court House where you can locate the deeds you've noted. Then, by using the recital clause from each preceding document, work backwards to the earliest available records and list all property owners. Depending on the age of your home, you may have to visit the Historical Society of Montgomery County where the earliest deed books are housed.

Keep in mind that deeds are for land, not for the structures built on it. This means you might not be able to learn exactly when or who built the house solely through land records. Original building dates can sometimes be determined by comparing the design and construction materials of your home with known historical examples. In other instances, searching estate records of former owners (also found at the county court house) may yield descriptions of the house or even the furnishings in it.

To create biographies of previous owners, search for their names in county histories. Since most of these were written in the late 1800s, look only for those owners who would have held the property before or during the time of publication. You may get very lucky and find an entry detailing an early settler's purchase of

your land, and his construction of the home on it. However, don't neglect other, more subtle clues. If a published history mentions exact dates of significant events such as births and marriages, search applicable issues of historical newspapers to see if notices were published. Obituaries can be found using the dates of death noted in these histories, or on estate papers. Early death notices range in length from one sentence to several columns, depending on the subject.

Take advantage of your library's genealogy and local history materials. Conduct name searches in church records, tax assessments, early atlases, and other pertinent offerings. Contact area public and university libraries to learn if they offer access to subscription databases such as Ancestry and Heritage Quest. These electronic repositories include everything from immigration information to military records.

Countless families may move in, and then move on, but a home can stand for centuries. With a little effort and persistence you can catch an intriguing glimpse at the people who once walked where you now tread. **LS**

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