

Kansas Historical Society

House History Checklist

Anytime you begin the house history journey, it's a good idea to have a map to guide your efforts. We hope the following will help you unlock the secrets in your walls.

Local History and Migration Patterns

Understanding the history of your house is not just about particular dates and people, its also about historical trends and patterns. Which ethnic group settled in your area? When did they arrive? Where did they come from? What local resources were available for construction? What were the prevailing architectural trends of the time? Answering these and many other questions will provide important context before you begin compiling the particular history of your ho use. These resources will provide some important background:

- *A Field Guide to American Houses*. Virginia and Lee McAlester (Random House, 1984)
- *Guide to Kansas Architecture*. David Sachs and George Ehrlich (University Press of Kansas, 1996)
- *History of the State of Kansas*. A.T. Andreas (Andreas, 1883)
- *Homes in the Heartland: Balloon Frame Farmhouses of the Upper Midwest, 1850-1920* (University Press of Kansas, 1992)
- *Peopling The Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas*. James R. Shortridge (University Press of Kansas, 1995)

And any number of other local histories that discuss settlement, economic development, ethnicity and migratory patterns.

Chain of Title Research

Now that you have a working knowledge of general historical patterns, it's time to get to the specifics. The best way to start is by completing a chain of title on the property. Establishing the successive transfers of title will provide clues for other avenues of research (particularly biographical).

1. You'll need 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. You can also call the County Appraiser for this information.
2. Now you'll need to have a look at deed indexes. These can be found in the Register of Deeds office at the



courthouse. (These may also be available on microfilm from KSHS or local institutions). Deeds are indexed in two ways in Kansas. The Direct & Inverted Indexes catalogue transfer of title by the names of the parties involved. The Numerical Index traces transactions on a particular piece of property. The advantages of the Numerical Index for the house historian are obvious. However, these kinds of indexes are not available in all counties.

If your county has only Direct & Inverted indexes, you'll have to begin with your name and work your way back through each transaction. If Numerical Indexes are available you'll need the proper legal description.

3. Having checked the indexes you can now access the deeds themselves. These will generally list the grantee, grantor, legal description, date and amount paid.

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

Tax Assessment Rolls

Since taxes are assessed annually, we can use these records to trace valuation increases and/or decreases over short periods of time. A jump in valuation from one year to the next might indicate new construction or an addition. House historians might also find personal property tax rolls helpful as they inventory certain kinds of personal possessions. These records are usually organized by township and/or city and therein by legal description. Check with either the county clerk or county treasurer for access to these records.

Building Permits

These document any new buildings or additions. Permits often list type of structure, when constructed, construction details, address and owner. These are sometimes arranged by address, but more often are filed chronologically by filing date which can make them difficult to use. Most often these can be found with city or county planning and/or zoning offices.

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. In Kansas mechanics' liens are maintained by the clerk of the district court.

Fire Insurance Maps and Rate Booklets

Fire insurance maps created by the Sanborn Company have proven quite valuable to building historians. Sanborn maps for Kansas begin in 1883 and continued through 1967. Unfortunately for house historians, Sanborn maps most often cover only the industrial (and fire prone) areas in towns. Houses in the vicinity of industrial areas are shown as are their construction type (frame, stone, etc). Additionally, these maps were created intermittently and are not available for every town for every year.

The KSHS also holds Fire Insurance Rate Booklets, 1890-1944, that were compiled by the Kansas Inspection Bureau. These booklets do not contain maps, but do list address, name of owner, fire risk. Entries are arranged by town and therein by address.

Records of Architects and Real Estate Appraisers

Records that are in the hands of private business should not be overlooked. Blueprints created by architects can be useful, though rare. Be sure to check with state and local historical societies as well as university schools of architecture and architects organization 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.

Plats and Maps

When researching a house in the city limits, it may be helpful to check for original plats filed upon incorporation, these may include representations of houses. Also, be aware that occasionally a town will be re-platted which will change the block and lot designation for houses. The Register of Deeds will have plats for cities. Also check with city and county engineers and planners for various maps and photographs (including aerial) which may include your house.

Photographs

Photos can be great sources of information on both the interior and exterior of Kansas State Historical Society, 2000. your house. Check with the previous owners, folks in the neighborhood and with both state and local libraries and historical societies. The County Appraiser also may have photos of residences.

County Histories and Atlases

County Atlases often include photos or drawings of certain houses in the county. Most often these are the dwellings of the wealthy, but every now and again a smaller house will make an appearance. Atlases often contain plats of cities as well. Sometimes state level atlases exist as with Everts Atlas of Kansas, 1887. County Histories also include photos or drawings and sometimes discuss the construction of particular buildings or houses.

Newspapers

If you can narrow construction and/or addition dates to a window of time, newspapers can be consulted. Newspapers can be a mixed bag. You may find nothing or a detailed description over several issues of the construction of a residence.

City Directories

City directories, mostly available for larger cities, can prove invaluable to house researchers. Directories were usually taken 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. A particular benefit of city directories is the ability they provide the researcher to pinpoint construction date. (i.e. the first date in which the address appears).

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.

Physical Examination/Material Culture

It can be easy to get lost in the paper trail, but don't forget to take a close look at your house. What hints does it provide about its history. Are additions apparent? Have you located artifacts in or around the house (bottles, nails, etc). How is the house constructed? Does it blend or stand out in relation to other houses in the area?

Oral Histories

Neighbors, previous owners and others can be a goldmine of information for the house historian. Inquire about previous owners, additions to the house, any fire, flood or tornado damage. You might find some just plain fun stories as well. Any event, it's a good idea to record these stories either with a tape recorder or on paper.

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 who 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 a good amount of work to extract any information.

Site Files

Some local historical societies files on historic homes. These files may include photos, news clippings, building inventories, etc. If your house is on the state or national register, you should check with the Historic Preservation office at KSHS for access to the nomination and supporting documents.

Most house historians continue their research beyond the bricks and mortar into the lives of the folks who lived there. Their aim is to reconstruct as nearly as possible life in the house and how it changed over time. The following resources will help you piece together the stories of you houses' people. Many records listed above are also valuable for biographical research and will be listed again in this section.

County Histories and Atlases

These often contain biographical sketches of mostly well-to-do citizens but may also include family histories of long time residents. These often include photos as well.

City Directories

Directories often list the occupation of individuals which can lead to other research. (i.e. the person was a sawmill owner . . . are there extant business records or photos of that establishment).

Vital Statistics

Records of births, marriages and deaths for the years 1885-1911 can often be found with city and county clerks. Other avenues for this information would be cemetery and church records.

Census Records

Available statewide for the years 1855-1860 and every five years thereafter through 1925 (with the exception of 1890). Census records list members of the household, ages, family relationship, occupation and various other information depending on the year. Also, some counties took an annual census through the 1970's. State and federal census information can be found at KSHS. Researchers should contact the County Clerk for local census records.

Newspapers

Birth, death and marriage announcements were often printed. Additionally stories on local events can provide a glimpse into community life and in turn into the life in your house.