Researching the History of Your House (or Other Favorite Building)

OFFICE of ARCHAEOLOGY and HISTORIC PRESERVATION

1200 Broadway
Denver CO, 80203

A Preservation Program of HISTORY COLORADO
Are you the proud owner of a historic property? You may want to consider listing it on the National or State Register or obtaining a local historic designation. Not only does this recognize the significance of your property, it also establishes eligibility for various grant and tax credit programs. Whatever way you go, one of the necessary first steps will be to research the history of your building or property to establish its significance.

Don't be discouraged by the prospect of tackling a research project. The challenge comes in knowing where to look; the reward is in rediscovering the past. A good place to start is the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP) at the History Colorado Center, located at 1200 Broadway in Denver. As the administrators of the Colorado Inventory of Cultural Resources, they have information on some 120,000 sites throughout Colorado and your property may be included. History Colorado's Stephen H. Hart Library & Research Center and the Western History/ Genealogy Department of the Denver Public Library (right across the street) also contain a wealth of research material. You may want to look at the indexes to newspapers and periodicals for relevant articles, explore city, household, and business directories and look at geographical and biographical files. These may provide information about past owners, business operations and dates of construction and alterations. Don't forget to check the photograph collections for possible historic views of your property. If you don't live in the Denver area and you are unable to visit the Stephen H. Hart Library & Research Center or Denver Public Library, look for the same materials at your local public or college library, or contact a local historical society. Most importantly, tell the library staff what you're working on and ask for their advice. Research is a team activity.

Sanborn Insurance Maps are an invaluable resource for urban properties. These meticulously compiled maps were prepared starting in the late 1800s to aid fire insurance companies. The maps reveal details about building shape and size, construction materials, and use. They can also help you establish an estimated construction date and to track the changing development patterns in your neighborhood. While not every Colorado town was recorded, a surprisingly large number were and these maps may be found in various local libraries as well as the Stephen H. Hart Library & Research Center, the Denver Public Library, and the Norlin Library on the Boulder campus of the University of Colorado. Most of these maps are also available for viewing online.

The county tax assessor's office can provide you with legal descriptions, names of former owners, basic floor plan, and dates for recent alterations. They also have estimated construction dates, but these are often inaccurate so try to verify with a second source. The assessor or clerk's office will have property records that
allow you to do a title search for past owners. This is a slow process but persistence can produce a chain of ownership. Those with less patience and a willingness to pay for their information may want to contact a local real estate company or abstractor. These organizations may have or be able to produce a chain of title for you.

Additional sources to check are the local building or planning office (building permits), water departments (water tap records), church and cemetery records, and estate records. One of the best and most often overlooked resources may be your neighbor. Long-time residents can often tell you interesting facts about your property and its past owners available from no other source. This information can usually be had for the price of a cup of coffee and an hour of your time.

The Stephen H. Hart Library & Research Center and the Denver Public Library have building history search guides keyed to their collections. Information about the Denver Public Library guide is included in the last few pages of this publication. Another resourceful guide to consider is the National Register bulletin, *Researching a Historic Property*.

Don’t forget that your house itself can be a treasure trove of information. Differences in materials, patterns, and styles are all tell tale evidence of physical change over time. A systematic architectural investigation may yield information not obtainable in any form of documentation. To assist in this investigation, see the National Park Service preservation brief, *Understanding Old Buildings*.

Whether you’re pursuing a nomination or just curious about your property's past, research can be both fun and addictive. Good luck in your search!
CHECKLIST

SEARCH STRATEGY FOR DENVER BUILDINGS

DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY
WESTERN HISTORY/GENEALOGY
DEPARTMENT
10 W. 14th Avenue
Denver, CO 80203 (720-865-1821)
http://history.denverlibrary.org

Library Catalog
___Denver neighborhoods
___Architects. Denver
___Architecture. Denver
___Architecture. Domestic. Denver
___Architecture. Directories
___Architecture. Victorian. Denver
___Denver. Social register
___Historic Buildings. Colorado. Denver

General Index and Rocky Mountain News Index
___Name of former and present owner
___Denver. Residences (by name, address)
___Denver. Streets
___Denver. Buildings (by name)
___Denver. Buildings. Records
___Denver. Business

Colorado Collection
___Revised Denver Inventory
___State-wide Inventory of Historic Sites
___Denver Landmarks Commission, 1973-2010

Directories
___Denver City Directory, 1873-present
___Denver Householder's Directory, 1924-present
___Denver Business Directory
(broken holdings 1890-1928)
___Colorado State Business Directory
(broken holdings 1875-1950)

Atlases
___Sanborn - 1887
___Robinson - 1887
___Sanborn - 1890
___Baist - 1905
___Sanborn - 1929 (corrected to 1955)
___Redi - 1973-74
___Realty fiche - 1978-on

Manuscripts
___Denver building permits
(broken holdings 1889-1955)

Card catalog
___Architects
___Denver. Residences
___Denver. Real estate block books
___Denver. Buildings

Photographs
___Denver. Residences
___Denver. Streets
___Denver. Buildings (by name)

Newspapers
___Neighborhood newspapers

Building Permits
___Denver 1889-1955

Building Plans
___Architectural Drawings

OTHER DPL DEPARTMENTS

Documents Division
___Boiler permits 1915-1955

Genealogy
___Federal census 1860-1880
___Colorado census 1885
___Ancestry Library Edition 1860 -1940

To find information on properties outside Denver, replace the name "Denver" in the above sources with the name of your community.
Site Files Database
   ____Inventory form on property
   ____Architectural Drawings
   ____National or State Register nomination forms, also available at
   http://www.historycolorado.org/oahp/listed-properties

Report Library
   ____Survey reports and contexts

Reference Library
   ____Colorado style books

Building Permits
   ____Denver 1889-1905 only (pre 1889 do not exist due to fire)

Library Catalog (available online - HC website)
   ____Denver neighborhoods
   ____Architects. Denver
   ____Architecture. Denver
   ____Architecture. Domestic. Denver
   ____Architecture. Directories
   ____Architecture. Victorian. Denver
   ____Denver. Social register
   ____Historic Buildings. Colorado. Denver

Reference and Vertical Files
   ____Name of former and present owner
      (biographical vertical file index available on website)
   ____Denver. Neighborhoods
   ____Denver. Residences (by name, address)
   ____Denver. Streets
   ____Denver. Buildings (by name)
   ____Denver. Buildings. Records
   ____Denver. Business

Directories
   ____Telephone Directories, 1880-present
   ____Denver City Directory, 1866-1986
   ____Denver Householder's Directory
      (1926-1956; after 1958, the Householder Directory was not published as a separate directory - a listing by address was part of the Denver City Directory)
   ____Colorado State Business Directory, 1875-1956

Atlases
   ____Sanborn - 1887-1962 (available on microfilm; list of holdings on HC website)
   ____Robinson - 1887
   ____Baist - 1905

Census Records
   ____Colorado Federal 1860-1940
   ____State 1885
   ____U.S. Federal Census 1860-1940 through Ancestry Library Edition (available at the library)

Manuscripts
   ____Architects
   ____Denver. Residences
   ____Denver. Buildings
   ____MSS Index

Maps
   ____City maps, street maps

Photographs (collection indexes on HC website)
   ____Denver. Residences
   ____Denver. Streets
   ____Denver. Buildings (by name)

Newspapers
   ____Town & Neighborhood newspapers

Other Resources
   ____CWA cards and Pioneer Interviews
   ____Colorado Magazine, 1923-present

To find information on properties outside Denver, replace the name “Denver” in the above sources with the name of your community.
ONLINE RESOURCES

Digital newspapers:
http://coloradohistoricnewspapers.org
Searchable database of early Colorado newspapers online.

Photographs:
http://h-co.org/collections
http://www.historycolorado.org/researchers/photography-collections
Digital images of photos from the collections of the DPL, Stephen H. Hart Library.

http://digital.denverlibrary.org
Digital images of photos from the collections of DPL & History Colorado

http://cdm15981.contentdm.oclc.org/
Pikes Peak Library District digital collection

Colorado Sanborn Insurance Maps:
http://libcuudl.colorado.edu/sanborn/index.asp
http://www.denverlibrary.org/database/s
Available online through CU libraries or DPL

Other Maps:
http://ucdlibraries.colorado.edu/map/index.htm
University of Colorado, Boulder

Other Resources:

Creating Your Community website
(Please note this website was taken down in 2015, but all of the information was moved to DPL’s photo collection and other collection accessible at the following website links)
https://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/search/collection/p15330coll26
https://history.denverlibrary.org/

National Park Service:

National Register Bulletin
Researching a Historic Property

Preservation Briefs
Understanding Old Buildings
http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/35-architectural-investigation.htm
STATE ARCHIVES
1313 Sherman Street, Room 1B-20
Denver, CO 80203 (303-866-2358)
https://www.colorado.gov/archives

____ Land records
____ Local government incorporation filings
____ Local government minutes and ordinances
____ Business incorporation filings
____ Fire insurance maps
____ County boundary maps
____ School district boundary filings (with amendments)
____ Architectural drawings of some courthouses and town halls
____ Architectural drawings of the Colorado State Capitol building
____ Architectural drawings of State owned buildings
____ Deeds to state owned property
____ Photos of public buildings and officials
____ Territorial legislative records
____ Court records
____ Water rights records
____ Prison records
____ Marriage/Divorce records
____ Birth/Death records
____ School records
____ Military records

CLERK AND RECORDER OFFICE
Wellington E. Webb
Municipal Office Building Department 101
201 W. Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80202 (720-865-5400)

____ Property deeds

DENVER LANDMARK PRESERVATION COMMISSION
Wellington E. Webb
Municipal Office Building
201 W. Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80202 (720-865-2942)
http://www.denvergov.org/preservation

____ Denver Landmarks and districts

SUPREME COURT LIBRARY
The Ralph L. Carr Colorado Judicial Center
2 E 14th Avenue
Denver, CO 80203 (720-625-5110)
http://cscl.colibraries.org

____ Court Records

DENVER WATER DEPARTMENT
1600 W. 12th Avenue
Denver, CO 80204 (303-628-6000)

____ Tap records
____ Service record district books

DENVER TAX ASSESSOR'S OFFICE
Wellington E. Webb
Municipal Office Building
Department 406
201 W. Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80202 (720-913-4162)
https://denvergov.org/property

____ Appraiser cards
____ Schedule numbers
____ Master property records

OTHER AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

TITLE COMPANIES
____ Abstract of titles

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Colorado State Office
2850 Youngfield St.
Lakewood, CO 80215 (303-239-3600)
http://www.glorecords.blm.gov/

____ Homestead records
____ Survey plats and field notes
____ Land status records

PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT
DESIGN ENGINEERING DIVISION
Wellington E. Webb
Municipal Office Building, Dept. 608
201 W. Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80202 (720-865-8630)

____ Legal plat maps
DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY  
WESTERN HISTORY/GENEALOGY DEPARTMENT  

DENVER BUILDING HISTORY SEARCH GUIDE

For an introduction to the building history search process and tips on locating photographs of buildings, see the Department’s Building History Tutorial at https://history.denverlibrary.org/denver-building-history-tutorial.

To begin your search, you will need to know the approximate date of construction, legal description, and street name at time of construction for your property.

APPROXIMATE DATE OF CONSTRUCTION

The following Denver real estate or fire insurance atlases will help to establish a range of dates for construction (e.g. it appears in the 1905 atlas but not in the 1903):

Drawers in the Map Area:
1887 - Robinson, E. Atlas of the City of Denver, Colorado...
1905 - Baist Co. Baist’s Real Estate Atlas of ... Denver.

Building History Research Area:
1903/04 - Sanborn (4 volumes with paste-over updates to early 1925).
1929/30 - Sanborn (11 volumes in 8 with paste-over updates to early 1961).
1974 - Sanborn (3 volumes - incomplete).

The Sanborn maps are also available on microfilm and through the DPL homepage, with and without updates. Once you have located the appropriate sheets for your property, make a copy from the microfilm or website for reference as you continue your search. Be sure to ask if you need help in using the indexes to each of these tools.

LEGAL DESCRIPTION (NAME OF SUBDIVISION, BLOCK, AND LOT NUMBERS)

While addresses and street names may change, these remain the same for a specific property and are needed to access early building permits. These are shown in each of the atlases listed above and can also be found on the Denver Assessor’s Office web site at https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/assessors-office/real-property/alternative-search.html

STREET NAME AND NUMBER CHANGES

The 1887 and 1903/4 Sanborn and the 1905 Baist atlases often show former and current street names and numbers. Since the legal description does not change, the block, and lot numbers can be used to verify the location of the property.

For further information on the history of street name changes, see Denver Streets: Names, Numbers, Locations, Logic by Phil Goodstein in the Building History Research Area.

With the above information, you can search the following tools:
DENVER BUILDING PERMITS

1889-1892 and 1900-1905

1906-1914
Microfilm, indexes in the Building History Research Area (Salmon volumes).

1915-1955
Microfilm, filed by street name and number.
Even if your building was constructed earlier, these may show additions or changes.

1970-present
https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/denver-development-services/help-me-find-/building-permits.html

These may provide the name of an original owner, builder, or architect.

DENVER ASSESSOR LOT INDEXES 1860-1917 (incomplete)

Microfilm, filed by addition name, lot, and block numbers, index in the Building History Research Area.

These may provide a chain of ownership for your property, but do not indicate whether a structure is on the property.

DENVER HOUSEHOLDER’S DIRECTORY

1924-1958 – Shelved in the Building History Research Area

1959-Present – Varying titles, shelved with Directories in the Genealogy area.

Arranged by street address. Lists residents, owners, and business names. After 1924, owners are indicated by special symbol. Many have been digitized and are available to view in the Digital Collections.

DENVER CITY DIRECTORY

1873-1986 -- Arranged by name. (1893 Directory has a separate printed index by address in the Building History Research Area).

(1873-1960 on microfilm) (1960-1986 in Western History Reading Room)

Lists occupation and residence address. Many have been digitized and are available in the Digital Collections and via the Ancestry Library Edition database.
GENERAL INDEX

This large card file located in the Genealogy area indexes the *Rocky Mountain News* starting in 1865 and other local newspapers, many historical journals, and other items in the Department’s collections. Use it to search for names of owners or architects you may have found. There are also extensive listings under Denver - Buildings, Denver - Residences, Denver - Streets, Denver - Neighborhoods, etc. Be sure to ask at the Reference Desk if you have any questions about any of the entries.

CLIPPING FILES

Ask for these at the Reference Desk. Headings are similar to those of the General Index.

PHOTOGRAPHS

The Department has an extensive collection of photographs including many of Denver residences, streets, people, etc. Many photographs of Denver and Colorado buildings are now online at [http://digital.denverlibrary.org](http://digital.denverlibrary.org).

ARCHITECTURAL PLANS

These are available for only a selected number of buildings in the Department’s Manuscripts Collections. Ask at the Reference Desk.

CENSUS

The census records for Denver can give a more in-depth picture of a neighborhood including such things as nationality, occupation, etc. The 1910 census is especially useful since there is an index for Denver by neighborhood at the Reference Desk.

LIBRARY CATALOG [http://denverlibrary.org](http://denverlibrary.org)

The Department’s book, manuscript, and map collections; including books on Denver history, architecture, neighborhoods, etc.; are listed here.

(2/2016)

Martha Weiser House, Boulder County 2012
ACCESSING SANBORN MAPS ONLINE
(Available in the Library or from outside with a Denver Library Card)

1. Go to the Library's web page at [http://denverlibrary.org](http://denverlibrary.org)
2. Under "Research" click on "Databases A-Z."
3. Under "s" click on "Sanborn Maps".
4. Follow the steps to select "State"", "City", and "Date".
5. Click on "Help" for assistance in navigating the site.
6. For Denver maps, it is usually easier to determine the correct page by first using the hard-copy in the Western History/Genealogy Department on the fifth level of the Central Library.
7. For best results when printing, click on "Download Map" and print the higher resolution Adobe PDF version. Use the Adobe "Snapshot" tool to print only a portion of the image.