Tracing Your Home's History

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

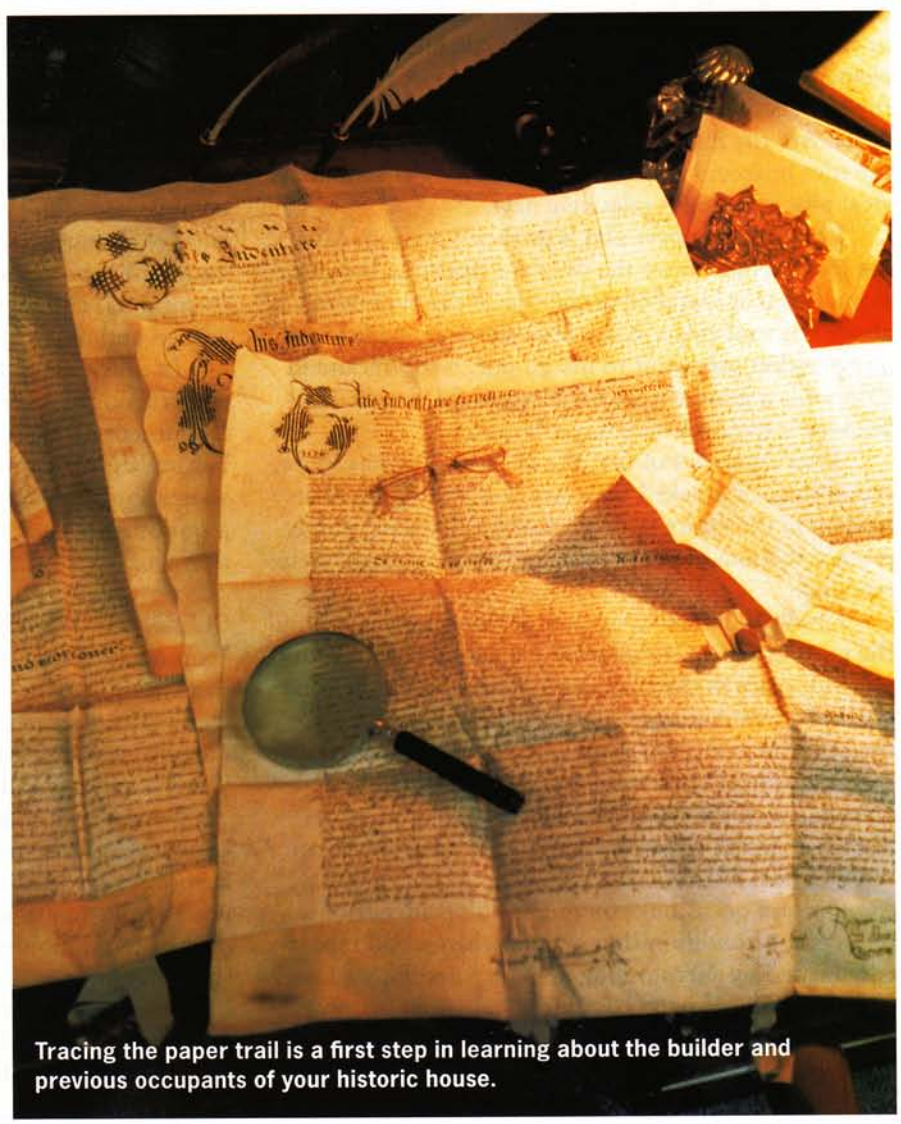
You might find yourself deep in a musty vault in the basement of the county courthouse, squinting at ledgers as old as the hills. Or sitting for hours in the back corner of a cluttered newsroom, eyes glued to the glow of the microfilm machine. Even pawing through the dark dirt in the pit of a long-gone outhouse. Until you dig into the history of your house, you cannot predict where your research will lead or what you'll find. But few activities can make history come more alive than discovering who built your home, whose footsteps wore down the edges of the stairs, whose lives began and ended in the rooms you share.

"The houses you research reveal people expressing their personalities: planting the lilacs and apple trees in the dooryard, building a swinging cat door in the wall next to the front door, burying their young son near the barn after he died from a fall from a tree," said Sally Light of Austerlitz, New York, the grande dame of house genealogy whose book *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home* is now, according to its author, "in its umpteenth" printing.

"Researching the history of your house is part treasure hunt and part jigsaw puzzle," added writer and house researcher Betsy J. Green of Chicago. "You probably won't find the answers to all of your questions, but you'll probably find some fascinating pieces of information you hadn't even thought about."

You might begin your quest for any of a number of reasons. Some people are content simply knowing when their house was built and who has owned it from then until now. Others prefer a broader historical or architectural context and will conduct more in-depth research. Still others seek historical designations for their house—such as state historical landmark status or a listing on the National Register—which requires extensive documentation to satisfy the complex application process.

Whatever the case, each house's research is unique. For some, scant details exist—even the chain of title has missing links that can span generations—and no amount of diligent searching can fill in the blanks. For others local, county, or state historical societies or historians might



Tracing the paper trail is a first step in learning about the builder and previous occupants of your historic house.

Courtesy of Gary and Margaret Laube

Hand-hewn beams, the earliest way to manufacture timbers, and whitewash, used to brighten a room, indicate this house was built in the late 17th or early 18th Century.

already have done much of the legwork to compile in-depth accounts of events and persons pertinent to the structure's history.

Similarly, every house researcher is different, although most share several traits. "A house historian is of necessity a special kind of social historian, whose discoveries about the lives of our forefathers include the significant and poignant, as well as the trivial or amusing explanations behind the changes in houses," noted Light. "In addition to being observant and outgoing, it helps to have a curiosity that drives you to find out about local history or architecture and enough information to suggest other avenues when you hit a snag."

Persistence, she added, is a key attribute. "A persistence which, if you find you do not know the answer, will drive you to hunt until you do find it—or until you find out that no one else seems to know the answer either."

STANDING ON HISTORY

A vital part of many house histories—especially if you're seeking certification as a historical landmark—is a detailed analysis of the building's architecture and construction. Your home's physical structure as well as its site and environs can help explain why this particular house was built on this particular land or in a particular manner.

Much can be gleaned from close examination of the foundation, walls, windows, eaves, gables, and roof. For example, the foundation can target the general era when your home was built. Rubble foundations made from dry-laid natural, usually local, stone preceded mortared ones. In some houses an off-center chimney is a clue that the house was at some point extended along its long axis. Architectural styles and materials can help you distinguish which came first and when it was constructed. A steeply pitched gable hanging just over the heads of the windows on a one-and-a-half-story house can indicate the house was built before 1770.

Physical location can also be revealing. The earliest settlers built their houses close to water sources, usually streams or springs to supply the cistern. Similarly the first settlers grabbed an area's most fertile land, so the presence of a stone wall often indicates second-wave residency.

"In the 18th and 19th Centuries stony property usually was avoided until the better soils were depleted or the population became so dense that these lands had to be utilized," Light noted.

Outbuildings or their remnants—housing a blacksmith shop, for example—can provide insights into inhabitants' occupations, although experts caution against relying on this evidence for accurately dating your house. Outbuildings went up at different times and had serial uses through the years.

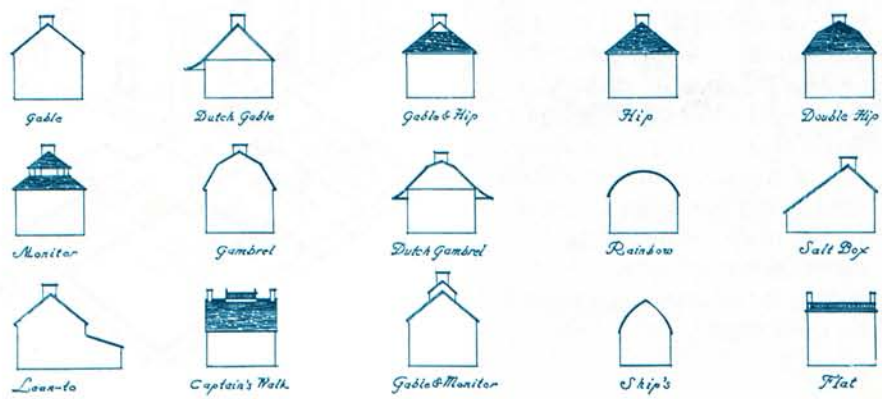
Many early homes and virtually all farms had dumping sites for debris, a designated plot of land fairly close to the house or in the pit of the outhouse. The shards, bottles, and other household items you find there can be as revealing as any archaeological dig. Light cited one instance where homeowners found 150 whiskey bottles under a porch, perhaps explaining why the home's owner in the 1880s had a local reputation as a happy recluse. Some homeowners have even stumbled across family burial plots. (If your research does turn up a body, the experts urge you to call in the police or coroner.)

"All of these things—the original and changing technologies connected with the house, the social eras in which it existed, the people who occupied it—will leave the clues to help you understand it from its beginnings to the present," Light said.

THE PAPER CHASE

Compiling a house genealogy often involves the drudgery of mulling through stacks of dusty old ledgers to locate the chain of deeds, mortgages, and wills that document property ownership along with

The configuration and pitch of a roof can help pinpoint when a house was built.



THE ULTIMATE DEED CHAIN

A deed chain—stringing together deeds chronologically to determine a house's owners from the present back to the earliest—is a key part of compiling your home's history. Historian Sally Light, in her book *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*, shared this tale:

A New Orleans lawyer sought a Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loan for a client. FHA advised him the loan could be granted only if he proved title to the property offered as collateral. Since the title dated back to 1803, the lawyer spent three months verifying it.

FHA responded: "We compliment you on the able manner in which you prepared the application. However, you did not clear the title before 1802. Before final approval can be given, we must have the clearance on the title prior to that year."

The annoyed lawyer replied: "I note you wish titles further back than I presented them. I was unaware that any educated person was ignorant of the fact that Louisiana was purchased from France in 1803. That title was acquired by France by right of conquest from Spain. Spain possessed the land by right of discovery in 1492 by a sailor named Columbus, who was privileged to seek a new route to India by the then-reigning monarch, Isabella. The good queen, being a pious woman and careful about titles—almost as careful, I might say, as the FHA—secured the blessing of Pope Innocent VIII before she sold her jewels to sponsor the voyage. The Pope, as you know, is the emissary of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and God is commonly accepted as having made the world. I believe it is safe to presume that He also made that part of the world called Louisiana. I certainly hope this information will enable you to grant my client's loan."

maps, surveys, and tax records.

"There are three reasons house historians document the house's history in this way," Light said of the paper chase. "First, architectural clues usually are not specific enough to establish precise dating. Second, you need to establish who the previous owners were in order to research the house. Third, if you want to achieve a landmark or historic register designation, historic commissions will accept only documented houses."

Of all these historical documents, the most essential is the deed, the record by which the title to real property is conveyed. It tells who owned the property (the grantor) and when, describes the property (its location and size), who bought the property (the grantee), and sometimes the mortgage amounts, although more recent mortgages are recorded separately. Wills might not as precisely describe the property but sometimes include an inventory of the house's contents.

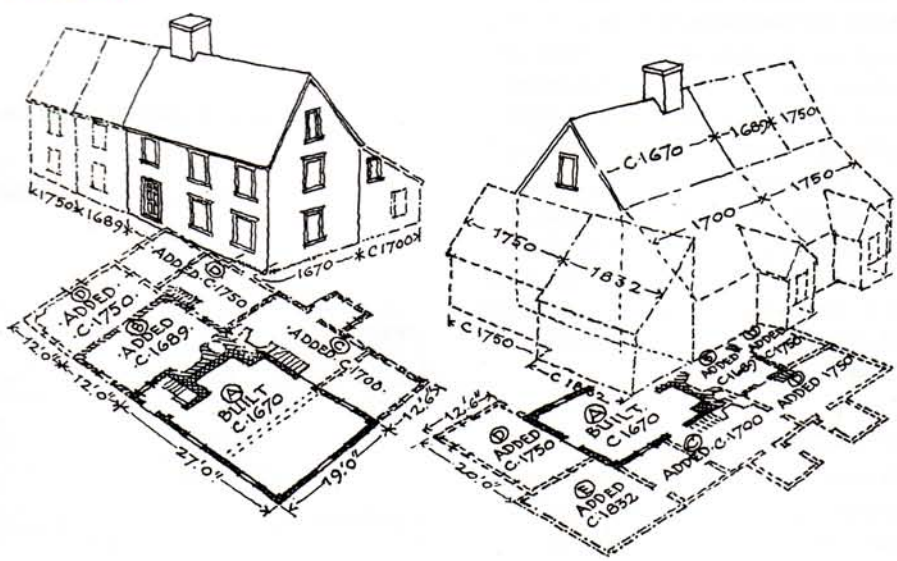
The challenge is to keep going further back through the books at the recorder's office or town hall, systematically compiling the record of who sold the property to whom, "chaining" the title back to the first owner or builder. You start with the most recent deed listing a grantor, then pore back to where the same person is grantee—then repeat the process as far back as the property records allow. Typically these earlier transfer records are referenced by page and volume on the later ones, making the backward search relatively easy—at least as far back as this indexing continues.

"You may have a lucky day and be able to keep chaining the title back to what you believe was the approximate date of construction of the house. More likely, you'll hit a snag and be unable to find a grantor for the last grantee you found," Light said, adding, "there are almost always ways around such snags."

Other legal documents on file with the local government can help fill in the breaks that inevitably pop up in chains of title stretching centuries back. "Because they each provide different information, mortgages, wills, and letters of administration can help fill the gaps remaining after your deed search," Light explained. "They may even provide names that will help you over some snag in title chaining and can flesh out your documentation, further enlivening the house history."

Be prepared for some surprises as you uncoil the title chain. "While researching old houses, you begin to

This drawing of a New England house shows how the structure's profile changed as the house typically would have been expanded through several generations of ownership.



realize—from deeds, mortgages, and other documents—how many men had two or three wives, due to the high death rate from childbirth and related causes. Men also died young, not only from disease, but also from accidents," Light continued.

These tidbits of social history are clues to your house's history. When a marriage meant uniting two households instead of just two individuals, the owners might have added more rooms to the existing house. A new husband might require a new outbuilding or some other structural change to accommodate his profession.

WIDENING THE SEARCH

Armed with basic knowledge of who owned your house and when, you're now in a position to expand your research, the extent limited only by the availability of documents and your zeal.

"When you've finished looking at the deeds to your property, you'll have a list of all the owners' names," Green said. "The more you discover about these people the more you'll learn about your home. Former owners of your house or their descendants can provide wonderful information and stories that you'll never find in the public records."

When faced with a gap in the title chain, Gregory Huber, owner of research company Past Perspectives and author of five books and 60 articles on historical matters, architecture, and building genealogy, often turns to the local county atlas—maps that were compiled for most counties in the Northeast during the 1870s—to find the name associated with the property. "Many times that name is the owner of the homestead in the 1870s and, fairly often, before that time," he said. "This can help extend back the record of ownership of the property."

Expanding your house's history entails consulting documents as diverse as birth, death, and marriage certificates, tax lists, land surveys, and census data. You might be aided (or confounded) by local histories, old newspaper accounts, and genealogical research done by previous owners.

"Obituaries are one of the most useful sources of information about a person," Green said. "They provide the names of family members as well as the occupation and achievements of the deceased." And possibly information about the house.

"Ask at local libraries, historical societies, or museums as well as city and state historic commissions and preservation associations about architectural surveys of your area," Green suggested. "Some states have conducted their own surveys. In Connecticut, for example, more than half of the towns in the state are included in town architecture surveys, and more than 90,000 properties were surveyed for the Connecticut Historic Resource Inventory."

Using the Internet to extend your research can be fruitful, especially web sites of state historical agencies. Several offer guidebooks on compiling house histories for their particular state. A simple look with your favorite search engine will reveal where a more notable person has touched the historic record. Genealogy websites will help you trace ancestors.

This wider search into prior owners, historic neighborhoods, and architectural details is critical when seeking historic landmark status such as a listing on the National Register. Landmark status can appreciate your home's value, potentially qualify it for certain preservation funds, and add prestige. But simply being an old house is far from enough to satisfy the ever-tightening requirements for inclusion on federal or state historic registers. Usually you must prove that the building was associated with a significant historic event or person—a historically noteworthy builder, owner, or tenant—or is distinctive of a particular building type, period, or method of construction.

"In general," Light said, "the structure or property must be a historically significant representation for the locale—not just one more Greek Revival, Eastlake, or Italianate structure."

WORDS OF CAUTION

When it comes to researching the history of your house, one familiar adage outweighs all others: *Don't believe everything you read.*

"Be suspicious of every fragment of information you discover about your house," Green advised. "People make mistakes, both in official records and in the things they tell you about your house. If you find a source that says your house was built in a specific year, don't stop your search there. Try to find other pieces of information that corroborate each fact."

Green's book relates lessons she has learned as a house historian. "While researching an 1895 home, I heard a story that two brothers built the house and lived in it all their lives. After I finished my research, I discovered that the brothers had lived in it all their lives, but they had not built the house. Their parents had."

She recalled of another house, "I was researching an 1890s house and the owners had heard that their home had been built by the farmer who also built the home next door. They heard that the farmer had built the house next door first, and then built their home for his sister. Well, it happens that I had also done the history on the house next door and knew that it had not been built by a farmer. And when I researched the history of this house, it was clear that it had been built earlier than the one next door, that a young couple had built this house, and that there was no farmer or sister involved with either house. How that story got started, I have no idea. But it just takes one person who misunderstands something or gets something mixed up to get a story like this passed through the years as though it were gospel."

But perhaps the most profound, or unsetting, advice comes from the Rhode Island Historical Society's booklet *Uncovering the History of Your House*: "Make sure you have the right house! More than once a researcher has mistaken the plat and lot numbers, deed book references, or tax ledger information and proceeded carefully to research the wrong house."

TURNING TO THE PROS

Even if you have a burning desire to know the history of your house, you might lack the ability or inclination for the search. Instead of slogging through stacks of old ledgers, you can turn to a professional already versed in the various elements of house histories, from deed searches and architectural analysis to compiling complex applications for historic landmark status.

"People hire firms like mine because we have experience and know where to look for answers," explained Huber. "Interested owners often consider themselves stewards of their historic properties but can become very much lost in searching for the answers they seek, as there are so many twists and turns in going down the right path to knowing what actually happened centuries ago."

The cost of hiring an expert depends on what you want done, but generally will run from $1,000 to $2,500. "Sometimes people want a so-called reduced version, and that can reduce the cost by two or three hundred dollars," he explained. "But I don't encourage this last type of report as it reduces the amount of information, per ownership, significantly."

Homeowners willing to pay the price can get a variety of documents, such as deed searches, historical narratives, architectural documentation, and state and National Register nominations. Some professionals also offer scientific tools unavailable to the layperson, such as paint analysis and dendrochronology, the precise dating of

the age of a building by comparing the patterns of the tree rings of its wooden beams with known standards.

You can locate professionals through Internet searches, museums, historical societies, state historic preservation agencies, even the Yellow Pages. Title companies, for example, pore through property records and search chains of title. Geographic proximity sometimes determines which house historian you can hire, although some research anywhere in wide sections of the country. As with hiring any professional, be sure to examine the person's credentials and references before making your choice.

Whether you search on your own or with a professional's aid, in the end you'll feel a stronger link to your house and its history. And that's the whole point of house genealogy.

"What people really want is to come closer to the consciousness, the thoughts and aspirations of early Americans in how they lived their lives," Huber said. "In some manner, they want to carry on the spirit that created their homesteads 200 to 300 years ago." ✶

Oregon writer Gregory LeFever is contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

SOURCES

Betsy J. Green
www.betsyjgreen.com

Gregory Huber
Past Perspectives
50 South Church Street
Macungie, PA 18062
610.967.5808
www.past-perspectives.com

Sally Light
PO Box 17
11622 State Route 22
Austerlitz, NY 12017-0017
518.392.4270
slighthh@capital.net

FURTHER READING

Discovering the History of Your House and Your Neighborhood, by Betsy J. Green (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2002)

House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home, by Sally Light (Spencertown, NY: Golden Hill Press, 1989)

Authorities on the subject of compiling house histories cite these two books most frequently. Light's *House Histories* is a highly readable, encyclopedic handbook on the topic.

First printed in 1989 and still used as a standard text in university courses on the topic, *House Histories* covers where to go and what to look for, as well as providing plenty of detail on architectural characteristics, writing up your findings, and even running a building genealogy business of your own.

Green's *Discovering the History of Your House and Your Neighborhood* is more of an overview, filled with anecdotes, photos, and helpful tips based on her years of researching house histories. Perhaps because of her Chicago origins, Green's book is particularly helpful for 19th- and 20th-Century houses and neighborhoods.

Many state historical societies and preservation agencies have guidebooks and pertinent histories available for people interested in researching building genealogy.

PHOTO CREDIT Opening photograph from *Old Title Deeds*, by N. W. Alcock, reproduced by permission of the publisher, Phillimore & Co., Ltd., Shopwyke Manor Barn, Chichester, Sussex PO20 2BG, England (www.phillimore.co.uk).