

# Researching Your Home's History

## Overview of the Research Process

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- **Read the House** – Look for clues in the house and surrounding context
- **Trace Ownership** – Build a time line of who owned the house
- **Uncover Resident History** – Research the people who lived in the house
- **Referenced Tangents** – Dig up sources referenced in your prior research
- **Newspapers and Magazines** – Look in periodicals around significant dates to the house

## General Research Notes

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Some things to keep in mind as you work through the research process:

- Document EVERYTHING you do. Get copies when you can and take good notes.
- Keep track of CITATIONS (source, date, and page number) when you make a note.
- DON'T BELIEVE everything you read or see. There are often spelling errors, incorrect dates, and even false information. Part of your job is to sift through and find inconsistencies.
- You may not find what you are looking for right away (or at all). Historic research is a process.

## Reading the House

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Information can be gleaned from the building itself, the surrounding context, and the physical records of the building's change over time.

### Examine the Context

Look at the house in relation to the other buildings on the block. Are all the homes the same architectural style? How does your home relate to adjacent homes in size and setback? Are the lots equal or different sizes?



Answers to questions like these can help point your research in the right direction.

### Determine the architectural style

The home's architectural style can help date the original construction. Resources include

- [A Field Guide to American Houses](#) by Virginia McAlester and Lee McAlester (1984)
- “Architectural Styles of America” (web page) at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~twp/architecture>
- [Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide for Styles and Terms, 1600-1945](#) by John Blumenson (1981)

### Architectural Clues

The house itself is an excellent historical record. Your initial work should include a detailed examination of the house for physical clues.

- **Additions/demo** – Are there any obvious additions or portions removed?
- **Trim** – Different trim profiles may indicate renovations
- **Windows and doors** – Look for openings that have been closed up or created
- **Foundation** – Examining the foundation may indicate additions to the house

## Polk County Assessor Web Site

The Assessor's web site is not particularly accurate but can be a good start. You can find a current floor plan, an estimate of the year built, recent ownership, and recent building permits.

- <http://www.assess.co.polk.ia.us/>

## Sanborn Maps

Sanborn fire insurance maps are a record of buildings between 1884-1950. Sanborn maps show the historic building footprint, accessory structures, lot lines, construction type, exterior cladding, streets, and alleys. Sanborn maps are available online through the DM Public Library or State Library of Iowa.

- <http://www.pldminfo.org/search/databases.html>

## Tracing Ownership

The next step in the process is developing a time line of ownership from the first plat to current day. There are a couple resources that can help in this process: the property Abstract (if you can get it) and the County Auditor/Assessor.

Use a spreadsheet to keep track of names, dates, and notes for each transaction.

## Abstract

Your home's "abstract" is a legal document that traces the ownership history of a parcel of land. It typically references and sometimes includes copies of legal actions that affect property ownership such as: original platting, subdivisions, owners' names and "aliases", bankruptcies, divorces and custody actions, easements, and foreclosures.

## Polk County Recorder and Auditor Offices

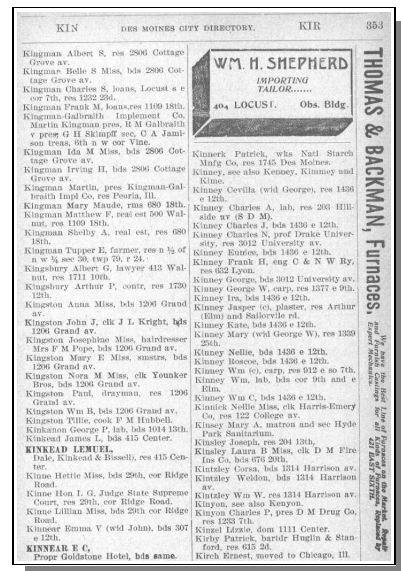
These offices maintains county property records including: deeds and contracts, mortgages, liens, assignments, releases, plats and surveys, easements.

## Resident History

Not all homes were owner-occupied. Often, rooms were leased to boarders or the entire home was rented. The next step in the process is to determine who lived in the house and when.

## City Directories

The historic Des Moines City Directories list resident, occupation, tenancy by address and alphabetically. First look up the address to see who lived at the property. Then look up each resident in the alphabetical index to find more information about the person. Look for other people with the same last name to sleuth out possible connections. Start out with the earliest year for your house and move forward in 5-year increments, backtracking if you note a change in residency.



City directories are available at:

- Downtown Library (second floor, south wing)
- Online at <http://distantcousin.com/Directories/IA/DesMoines/1897> (1897 only)
- Drake University's Cowles Library (make an appointment with the librarian)

### **U.S. Census**

Individual records from the decennial census by address are available for years prior to 1930. The census information available changes each year and may include race, education, family relationships, and occupation. The 1910 census records were lost in a fire. The remaining years are available at:

- Microfilm at the State Historical Society

### **Connecting the Dots**

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Once you have names, dates, and occupations, you can begin to piece together the story more completely. During your research so far, you may have uncovered hints and suggestions of other sources to explore. Now is the time to track down tangents and follow those leads.

Some of the more common sources for additional information include:

- **City histories** – There have been several books published about the history of Des Moines. These books may mention notable people and provide more information about their lives.
- **Business records** – Use your knowledge of the residents' occupations to sleuth out business advertisements and news articles.
- **Who's Who Directories** – These reference books can provide additional information about notable residents.
- **State Historical Library of Iowa** – This repository of historical information may have clippings, articles, books, and research covering residents and the house itself.
- **Church bulletins** – If you can find references to the religious institutions that the residents attended, you may be able to track down information about them in church publications.
- **Google/web** – Use the internet to find “needle in a haystack” information. Search for residents' names and you may find birth/death announcements, genealogical information, business and occupation connections, historical information, and even old photos! However, be careful that web sources you locate reference the same person you are looking for.
- **Academic catalogs and yearbooks** – Universities are good record keepers. If a resident was associated with an academic institution, search for old yearbooks, academic catalogs, and historic university publications.
- **Trade catalogs** – Use the residents' occupations to sleuth out additional information.

### **Newspapers and Magazines**

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Use key names and dates you have uncovered through your research to target a search for magazine and newspaper clippings. Society pages often have news about notable residents. Newly constructed homes were often featured in home/style publications and newspapers. Historic newspaper and periodical archives can be found at the State Historical Society Library.

## **Additional Online Resources**

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### ***newspaperarchive.com***

Fee-based online newspaper archive with 36 Des Moines papers

### ***www.familysearch.org***

Free 1880 census via name, plus lists of library holdings and genealogical resources. It links to fee-based [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com), with digitized census and city directory records.

### ***www.distantcousin.com/directories/ia/#desmoines/1897/***

Free searchable scanned 1897 DM city directory

### ***www.cyndislist.com***

Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites of the Internet: a digital "card catalog" to the vast resources on the Web. Search by state or topic.

### ***library.drake.edu/about/collections***

Digitized Quax yearbooks (1916+), digital photos and histories, Special Collections lists of files and more. The Cowles Library (28th and University.) is open to the public.

### ***www.iowahistory.org/libraries/index.html***

Search for city and county histories; city directories; plat maps; cemetery surveys; trade and academic catalogs; biographies and memoirs; newspaper collections, records of schools, churches, clubs, businesses; federal and state census records for Iowa.

### ***www.pldminfo.org/search/#onlineresources.html***

Browse digital IA Sanborn maps and limited online DM newspaper indexes. Plus search for DM high school yearbooks and Men and Women of Iowa Biographies – newspaper clippings about prominent figures from 1909+

### ***www.genealogybank.com***

Historical newspapers (none in DM, but others in IA) – citations free, but scanned articles require fee-based subscription