House History Resources

Follow-Up Appointments

We offer appointments Tuesday - Friday from 10am – 4pm.

To access any Historical Society resources in person, please contact library@DCHistory.org to schedule a research appointment. You can browse through those collections using the online catalog: http://dchistory.pastperfectonline.com/.

Please contact staff with as much lead-time as possible to ensure that they are able to accommodate your appointment request.

Building Permits

HistoryQuest

HistoryQuest is the online component of the building permits database for extant buildings only. This GIS map provides historical data on approximately 127,000 buildings in Washington, DC. The map offers several operational layers of information for the user including historic data on individual buildings, links to documentation on properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places, information on historic residential subdivisions, and the identification and boundaries of the L’Enfant Plan, and the city’s Squares, and Wards. The featured layer in the map—the Historical Data on DC Buildings—provides information from a variety of sources on original dates of construction, architects, owners and builders of the city’s historic buildings.

Access Database

If the property you wish to research was constructed between 1877 and 1949, it should have a recorded building permit (initial permit to build). Architect, builder, year the permit was filed, amount paid, ownership, etc. can all be gleaned from this document. You’ll need to provide your address to a librarian on duty to receive a printout of this data. This database includes buildings that have been razed.

Repair, Renovation, Raze, Modification, etc. Permits – Available at Washingtoniana Division of DC Public Library & National Archives

Available via microfilm at Washingtoniana Division of the DC Public Library (dclibrary.org/wash) and National Archives (Series - District of Columbia Building Permits, 1877–1949, identifier: M1116).

Maps & Real Estate Atlases

Real Estate Atlases are structure-level maps which identify street address, square and lot numbers, and subdivision name (if applicable). Depending on the location of the property, any or all of these elements may have varied over time.

Reviewing real estate atlases chronologically can help determine approximate date of building construction and trace neighborhood development.
Holdings at HSW include Boschke maps (1857, 1861), Faehitz and Pratt atlas (1873-1874), Hopkins atlas (1878), Hopkins Real Estate atlas (1887-1896), Baist Real Estate Atlases (1903-1968), and Sanborn Insurance maps (1888-Present).

**Online Access**
DC Public Library has digitized plat maps/real estate atlases from 1874 to 1896. See the *Maps: Real Estate Plat Books* collection at [digdc.dclibrary.org](http://digdc.dclibrary.org). In addition, the *Maps: City & Regional* collection on Dig DC may show early maps of your neighborhood. The Library of Congress online map collection also includes early Baist and Sanborn atlases:

**Baist Atlases**

**Sanborn Atlases**

**Directories**

**City Directories (1822 – 1973)**

From 1914-1973, directories include a separate street address index. Patrons may search for their homes by address to discover its historic occupant. Volumes also contained a business directory, organized by business category.

Data was collected via door-to-door canvas in December of the previous year. If your home was built and occupied within a calendar year, the residents may not appear in the directory at that address until the following year.
Property Tax Assessment Directories

The Historical Society holds select 20th century tax assessment directories, primarily 1917-1940 and 1981-1999 available by appointment. An inventory can be provided in advance.

Property Tax Assessment Directories – Available at the Washingtoniana Division of the DC Public Library

These directories are available from 1874 – 2009 on microfilm. Information provided here will include property owner, assessed value of lot and “improvement” (the value of the house), and square footage. Property’s square and lot number will be needed to search.

Online Access

Online database HeritageQuest (available with DCPL card) has some city directories. However, this database is setup for searching for individual people rather than browsing the entire digitized directory.

Photographs in the Historical Society’s Collection

John P. Wymer Photograph Collection

In 1948-50, hobbyist photographer John Wymer divided the city into sections and photographed representative residential blocks. He also photographed any other buildings of interest in the area, such as churches, schools, parks, commercial centers, etc. This collection is a comprehensive glimpse into D.C. in the mid-twentieth century.

William Edmund Barrett Washington Photographic Collection

As part of the Kiplinger Washington Collection, the Historical Society received the William Edmund Barrett Photographic Collection. This collection of nearly 4,000 photographs documents D.C. buildings in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly endangered buildings or those which were slated to be razed.

Emil A. Press Slide Collection

This is a collection of about 4,000 color images taken between 1959-1979. The images are mainly of Washington, D.C. south of Florida Avenue, but some outlying areas are included. Emil Press often photographed buildings that were slated for, or in the process of demolition.

Other Resources to Explore

Research Families in the Census

Searching for the individuals associated with a property such as owners and occupants in the Census can yield a great deal of detail about the family such as other family members, race, place of birth and occupation. Start with the Heritage Quest database (available with DCPL card), through which the following census years may be searched by name: 1790-1820; 1860-1880; 1900-1940. All census years between 1790 and 1940 may be browsed (except the 1890 census that burned).

There is no way to search a specific address in the census, but searching by general location is possible for the
following years: 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, using enumeration district maps.

**Conduct Newspaper Research**

Additional information about a property and the people associated with it can be found by doing newspaper research. A great place to start is the public library's collection of full-text local newspapers ([bit.ly/2HtJVPT](bit.ly/2HtJVPT)), including *The Washington Post* (1877 to present) and *The Evening Star* (1852-1981). TIP: Search names and addresses in quotation marks to narrow results. You will need a library card number to access these databases.

Library of Congress has many other digitized local newspapers searchable online through their Chronicling America - Historic American Newspapers project: [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/).

**Conduct Historic Architect or Builder Research**

The Historical Society holds in its collections the James M. Goode Architects in Washington, D.C., collection, 1870-1987. (MS 0384). The collection contains materials on almost 200 noted architects and architectural firms compiled by Goode in 1987 as part of his research on Washington cultural, social, and architectural. The content includes news clippings, notes, brochures, photographs, and copies of plans. To access this collection, please speak to the Historical Society Library staff to view a finding aid.

The Building Permits Database was compiled from the reels of microfilmed permits located at the National Archives and Records Administration and the Washingtoniana Division of the DC Public Library. The earliest archived permit dates from February 17, 1877, although permits were issued by the City beginning in early 1872. All permits issued through September 1949 were microfilmed.

This database also includes information on original owner, architect, and builder of these properties. From this database, a librarian can create a report which details other properties that may have been designed, built, or owned by someone who was connected to your property. With this method, researchers can learn about other “sister” properties across the District that share a common architect, etc. with their own property.

**Neighborhood History**

To conduct neighborhood histories, there are many, many different types of materials and sources to consider. Each neighborhood will be unique in the information available; however, there are some sources that provide basic overviews:

*Cultural Tourism Heritage Trail Brochures*

Cultural Tourism DC's Neighborhood Heritage Trails are the official walking trails of Washington, D.C. and they cover the diverse social history of over 20 neighborhoods. The brochures are available to download as a pdf, as a mobile app, or as an audio recording. Search the trail brochures here: [culturaltourismdc.org/portal/dc-neighborhood-heritage-trails](culturaltourismdc.org/portal/dc-neighborhood-heritage-trails).
Office of Historic Preservation Ward Heritage Guides

The Historic Preservation Office (HPO) has been working with local communities to prepare a series of heritage guides for the District’s eight wards. Each illustrated guide describes the ward’s historical development, shows recognized historic properties, and identifies other sites that may be significant to local culture or valued by neighborhood residents. Potential strategies for increasing appreciation and protection of community heritage are also discussed. Wards 1, 4, 5, 7, and 8 are available here: planning.dc.gov/node/1184536.

Historical Society Neighborhood Vertical Files

Vertical files are collections of newspaper clippings plus other ephemera arranged by subject. The Historical Society has vertical files for D.C. neighborhoods. Speak to the librarians to access an index to these vertical files. These vertical files can be requested from the librarians.

Photographic Collections

The Historical Society has over 100,000 cataloged historic photographs, most of which are of D.C. neighborhoods. These images may be useful for your research to help visualize what the neighborhood was like during different periods of time. Some of these photograph collections are neighborhood-specific, like the Kathleen Sinclair Wood photograph collection, which is several thousand images of primarily Cleveland Park, and the Susan Myers Capitol Hill Residences Collection, which is thousands of photographs of Capitol Hill in the 1970s and 1980s.

Other collections, such as those like Wymer, Press, and Barrett that were outlined above cover many neighborhoods and may be of broader use. Search the online catalog (https://dchistory.pastperfectonline.com/) using the hundred block for the address that you are interested in. For example, to find pictures of 906 G Street NW, search 900 AND G.

And More. . .

The Historical Society may have additional archival material such as books, pamphlets, and ephemera on neighborhoods. The Historical Society also has neighborhoods and civic association records for neighborhoods such as Woodland Normanstone, Kenilworth, Foggy Bottom, and more. Speak to a librarian or search the online catalog to learn more about these resources.

Street Numberings in the District


Modern street addresses do not correspond to the street numberings of buildings in pre-Civil War Washington. The present system of numbering the buildings in Washington City (quadrant system) was developed by E. Dwight Clapp and was instituted by the Aldermen and Common Council of Washington in November of 1869.
Previously, buildings were numbered in Washington City starting at Rock Creek with numbers increasing going east to the Eastern Branch and at Boundary Street (now Florida Avenue) going south to the Potomac.

This meant addresses were only west or east, north or south–quadrants did not exist until the Clapp system. Numbers only started where buildings did; for example, numbers theoretically would have started at North Capitol and Boundary but the first numbered building on North Capitol Street in 1867 was near H Street.

This left no flexibility for addresses above H to Boundary, since the lowest number was already taken. Georgetown’s addresses were arranged in opposite fashion – starting at the Potomac waterfront and rising going north, and starting at Rock Creek and increasing as one moved west.

The 1867 city directory has several pages laying out the address ranges for both Washington City and Georgetown street by street. (digitized version - https://archive.org/details/boydsdirectoryof1867wash page 97 forward).

To convert an address from pre-1869 to current you need to figure out what block it was on based on that 1867 list then look at where that falls in the current numbering system.

**Other Repositories to Explore**

**Washingtoniana Division of the DC Public Library**

The Washingtoniana Division holds historical materials and resources related to D.C. history. Visit dclibrary.org/washingtoniana to learn more.

Specific resources relevant to House Histories include tax assessments records, building permits, neighborhood files, and more.

**DC Archives:**

The District of Columbia Archives holds historical and permanently valuable records of the DC Government such as birth and death records, wills, land records and marriage records. Please email archives@dc.gov to make an appointment.

Specific resources relevant to House Histories include: deed and land records (1879-1973); building permits (1949-1995); building plans (1949-1995); and deeds issued prior 1900.

**National Archives:**

The National Archives building (on Pennsylvania Ave NW between 7th and 9th) holds many resources related to local D.C. history. These range from building permits to the Records of St. Elizabeths Hospital. See this relevant InTowner article which outlines local archival holdings for the District of Columbia: http://bit.ly/2C4fsCm.
Specific resources relevant to House Histories include: Building Permits (1877 – 1949) and DC City Directories (1867-1970).

D.C. Government:

**Recorder of Deeds Online (1921 – Present):**

For public deed and land record information (liens, bonds, easments, etc) from 1921 – present, there is an online portal available here: [https://countyfusion4.kofiletech.us/countyweb/login.do?countyname=WashingtonDC](https://countyfusion4.kofiletech.us/countyweb/login.do?countyname=WashingtonDC)

For public deed and land record information that falls outside of this time period, visit the Department of Tax and Revenue’s Office of Recorder of Deeds (202-727-5374)

**Office of Historic Preservation**

Visit this page to access their lists of historic sites, historic districts, and information on how to apply for a listing in the historic site inventory: [https://planning.dc.gov/page/historic-landmarks-and-historic-districts](https://planning.dc.gov/page/historic-landmarks-and-historic-districts)

**Peabody Room, Georgetown Branch - DC Public Library**

For Georgetown-specific information such vertical files (arranged by street address), photographs, tax assessment records (19th century), neighborhood newspapers (on microfilm, 19th and 20th century), and more: please contact Jerry McCoy, librarian, at Peabody Room (202-727-0233 or jerry.mccoy@dc.gov).