



HOW TO RESEARCH THE HISTORY OF A BUILDING

Primary historical research of an old building typically includes written, visual and oral sources that can provide valuable site-specific information. Written sources of historic information usually include letters, legal transactions, account books, insurance policies, institutional papers, and diaries. Visual resources consist of drawings, maps, plats, paintings, and photographs. Oral histories are people's remembrances of the past, which often provide information unavailable from any other source. Secondary resources, including research or histories already compiled and written about a subject are also important for providing a broad contextual setting for a project. (However, oral histories and secondary resources can be inaccurate and should be clearly identified as a recollection or theory unless confirmed by other primary sources.)

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Historic research should begin prior to physical investigations. This allows time for important written, visual, and oral information to be located, transcribed, organized, studied and checked against physical evidence. For example, the historical research of a building through deed records may determine the sequence of owners. This, in turn, aids the investigation of the building by establishing a chronology and identifying the changes each occupant made to the building. Correspondence may indicate that an occupant painted the building in a certain year; the courthouse files will contain the occupant's name; and paint analysis of the building will yield the actual color. Two-dimensional documentary research and three-dimensional physical investigation go hand-in-hand in analyzing historic structures. Together they will provide insight into the building's architectural evolution over time.

For more information, request the following free publications from the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office: "How to Research the History of a House," "Deed and Title Searches for the Architectural Historian," and "Preservation Brief #35: Understanding Old Buildings: The Process of Architectural Investigation" which served as the primary source for the information presented above.

For further information on The National and New Jersey Registers of Historic Places contact Bob Craig at the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office - 609.984.0541 / bcraig@dep.state.nj.us