

Guide: Researching Your Chicago Home

Illinois Abstract Service Publication

Historical research for your Chicago home or building can be broken into two equal parts. This is, **person and structure**. A historical report of a building is not complete without an understanding of its previous occupants. Likewise, a simple genealogy search does not truly appreciate and answer all of the questions your audience might have.

The established framework of historical property research in Chicago has been reliant on the Art Institute of Chicago guide, “[Researching a Chicago Building](#)” and the 2003 version of, “[Your House Has a History](#)”. Since then, more online sources have become available.

***** Illinois Abstract Service can conduct historical research into your home and building for a fee. Email orderproperty@gmail.com for a research consultation. *****

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Searching the Structure

Seeking information about the house in a history search is the easiest way to begin this quest because it will provide clues about the former occupants, and any changes they made to the structure.

Chicago Art Institute Library

Open during the week days Wednesday, Thursday and Fridays. The [Chicago Art Institute Library](#) specialty is research on the particular style of your house or condo as well as information and documentation on the architect behind the building. It's best to browse the library catalogue and confirm that they have materials on your architect before scheduling a visit.

At this stage, you should figure out the architectural style of your house or condo. Consulting historical book resources and online tools, which some can be found towards the end of this guide.

Chicago Building Databases

Three quick online databases can be accessed, being: Chicago Building Permits, Chicago Contractor Database, American Contractor Database.

[Chicago Building Permits](#), which contains permit information between 1872-1954, and also will automatically search these following indexes: The Chicago Building Permit Street Index, The Chicago Building Permit Ledgers, City of Chicago Fire Reports and Building Construction Data.

[American Contractor Database](#), Allows for searching under architect, original owner search and street name search.

[Chicago Historic Resources Survey](#), The Chicago Historic Resources Survey (CHRS), completed in 1995, was a decade-long research effort by the City of Chicago to analyze the historic and architectural importance of all buildings constructed in the city prior to 1940. During 12 years of field work and follow-up research that started in 1983, CHRS surveyors identified 17,371 properties which were considered to have some historic or architectural importance.

Cook County Recorder

Using the last recorded deed, trace the ownership back to the Plat of Subdivision, or even go behind that to the land patent, when the USGS surveyed the land. The specific house ownership would only be from the Plat of Subdivision.

Online the searching from [Cook County Recorder](#) can go back through 1986, and obtaining the [Cook County Assessor](#) Tax PIN can be found on the [Assessor's](#) page online. While at the [County Recorder](#), you can examine the actual Plat Map which will indicate: the size of the subdivision, the original street names around the property, as well as, original alleys and where the lots sit. You can use the [Cook County GIS](#) viewer online to view where your parcel sits.

While examining your chain for the deeds keep in mind other possible important recorded documents. These important documents might be probate notices, tax deeds, divorces, liens.

Searching the Person

Once your historical deed search is complete, you can then research the grantors/grantees that were found with visiting the [Cook County Recorder](#).

A specific website with a great amount of online resources for genealogy is [Chicago Genealogy](#). Chicago Genealogy is worth checking out as a way to start research into the occupants, it will provide a rough roadmap before you use the Chicago Public Library tools which can be overwhelming in scope.

Chicago Public Library

The [Chicago Public Library](#) has massive amount of free databases that can be accessed remotely with a library card which will complete our research into the people who lived in your house. You can visit a regional or branch library as well to use the free resources and even use the Ancestry account at a computer terminal. These free databases, accessed with a library card, include:

- Chicago Tribune Historical Archive (1849-1996)
- Chicago Defender Historical Archive (1910-1975)

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- Chicago Examiner (1908-1918)
- Illinois Fire Insurance Maps (this includes color fire insurance maps, plat books)
- Illinois Sanborn Maps (1894-1897, 1905-1951)
- Heritage Quest (genealogy, census records, news paper records, other government records. *Slightly* more cumbersome to use compared to Ancestry.)

Online Genealogist

Online genealogists are available on contracting websites like [Fiverr](#) at competitive rates. A pro research tip, is to have one of these contract genealogists research the property you have in mind to use as a method of cross comparing against your own records and to use the information as an outline that can be expanded on.

Historical Societies and Museums

Another great option is to visit your local historical society or at a minimum the Chicago Historical Museum to understand the cultural context of the area and to see if these groups might have specific information on your building, architect, or former occupant. These institutions have local archives and photographs providing a treasure trove of information to the researcher. See and view our list of Chicago historical societies and museums below.

Helpful Research and Reference Materials

Book

Benjamin, Susan S., and Stuart Earl Cohen. *Great Houses of Chicago, 1871-1921*. Acanthus, 2012.

Block, Jean F. *Hyde Park Houses: an Informal History, 1856-1910*. University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Blumenson, John J.-G, et al. *Identifying American Architecture: a Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600-1945*. AltaMira Press, 1995.

Foley, Mary Mix., et al. *The American House*. Harper & Row, 1981.

Foster, Gerald L. *American Houses: a Field Guide to the Architecture of the Home*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

Jones, John H., and Fred A. Britten. *A Half Century of Chicago Building: a Practical Reference Guide: All Building Laws and Ordinances Brought to Date: Historical, Technical and Statistical Review of the Construction and Material Development of America's Inland Metropolis*. Publisher Not Identified, 1910.

Lowe, David. *Lost Chicago*. The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010.

McAlester, Virginia, et al. *A Field Guide to American Houses: the Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

McBrien, Judith Paine., and John F.. DeSalvo. *Pocket Guide to Chicago Architecture*. W.W. Norton & Company., 2014.

Rifkind, Carole. *Field Guide to American Architecture*. Signet.

Sinkevitch, Alice. *AIA Guide to Chicago*. University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Zukowsky, John, and Mark J. Bouman. *Chicago Architecture and Design: 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis* ; Prestel, 1993.

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Zukowsky, John, and Robert Bruegmann. *Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922: Birth of a Metropolis*. Prestel, 2000.

Zukowsky, John. *Building Chicago: the Architectural Masterworks*. Rizzoli, 2016.

Online

“Buildings of Chicago.” *Chicago Architecture Center - CAC*,
www.architecture.org/learn/resources/buildings-of-chicago/?collection=4#buildings.

“Chicago Building Permits Digital Collection 1872-1954: Introduction.” *Subject & Course Guides*, researchguides.uic.edu/CBP/home.

“Chicago Historic Resources Survey.” *Chicago Landmarks - Historic Resources*,
webapps1.chicago.gov/landmarkswb/web/historicsurvey.htm.

“Cook County GIS Viewer.” *Cook County Viewer*, maps.cookcountyil.gov/cookviewer/.

“Cook County Recorder of Deeds.” *Cook County Recorder of Deeds*, cookrecorder.com/.

“Encyclopedia of Chicago.” *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/.

“Fire Insurance Maps.” *The Newberry*, <http://www.newberry.org/fire-insurance-maps>.

“Forgotten Chicago: History, Architecture, and Infrastructure.” *Forgotten Chicago History Architecture and Infrastructure RSS*, forgottenchicago.com/.

“Helpful Websites for Chicago Genealogy Research.” *ChicagoGenealogy*,
<http://www.chicagogenealogy.com/find-chicago-research-websites.html>

“Index to the American Contractor's Chicago Building Permit Column, 1898-1912.” *American Contractor Building Permit Index*, <http://www.chsmedia.org/househistory/1898-1912permits/search.asp>

“People Saving Historic Places.” *Landmarks Illinois*, <http://www.landmarks.org/>.

“Property Search.” *Cook County Assessor's Office, Fritz Kaegi*,
<https://www.cookcountyassessor.com/Search/Property-Search.aspx>

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“Researching a Chicago Building.” *The Art Institute of Chicago*,
<https://www.artic.edu/library/discover-our-collections/research-guides/researching-a-chicago-building>

Historical Societies & Organizations

Afro-American Genealogical & Historical Society of Chicago	http://www.aaghsc.org/
Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture	https://balzekasmuseum.org/
Chicago Genealogy Society	https://www.chicagogenealogy.org/Chicago
Chicago History Museum	https://www.chicagohistory.org/
Chicago Postcard Museum	http://www.chicagopostcardmuseum.org/
Chicago Sports Museum	https://www.chicagosportsmuseum.com/
Chinese-American Museum of Chicago	https://ccamuseum.org/
DANK Haus German American Cultural Center	https://www.dankhaus.com/
DuSable Museum of African American History	https://www.dusablemuseum.org/
Edgewater Historical Society	http://www.edgewaterhistory.org
Haitian American Museum of Chicago	https://www.hamoc.org/
Irish American Heritage Center	https://irish-american.org/
McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum	http://www.bridgehousemuseum.org/
Museum of the American Indian	https://www.mitchellmuseum.org/
National Hellenic Museum	https://www.nationalhellenicmuseum.org/
National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture	https://nmprac.org/
Norwood Park Historical Society	http://www.norwoodparkhistoricalsociety.org
Polish Museum of America	https://www.polishmuseumofamerica.org/
Ravenswood-Lake View Historical Association	http://www.ravenswoodhistorical.com
Ridge Historical Society	http://www.ridgehistoricalsociety.org
Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society	https://rpwrhs.org
Swedish American Museum Chicago	http://swedishamericanmuseum.org/2.0/
Ukrainian National Museum	http://ukrainiannationalmuseum.org