

# DOCUMENTATION OF HISTORIC STRUCTURES

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When a building is being researched for a Historic Structure Report, the researcher is trying to obtain information about the building's age, construction and subsequent additions and alterations. The researcher is also interested in finding out about any significant events or people connected with the structure. Therefore, in documenting a historic structure, information about the history of the building's construction and the events happening in its past are both important.

Not surprisingly many researchers interpret the term "documentation" to mean written records pertaining to an object of study. Fortunately, documentation has a much broader connotation when applied to the research of a historic structure.

Buildings can be very elusive when it comes to finding out who constructed them and when. Unless the researcher is lucky enough to come upon a structure with a tablet bearing the date and builder's name, there is, usually, a great deal of sleuthing to be done. Even if the building is dated, it is often important to learn about subsequent additions or alterations not recorded on the date tablet. Rarely will any one bit of information provide all the answers the researcher is looking for. Thus numerous sources have to be consulted. These sources, when collected form the available deocumentation about the structure. If confined only to written records about buildings, the researcher would frequently be frustrated in attempts to establish a building's history. Sadly, records for our more common buildings often simply do not exist, so the diligent researcher must turn elsewhere for answers. Most important of the nonwritten sources is one that is frequently overlooked by researchers with a purely historical background. That is the building itself. A thorough examination of the physical structure will generally turn up answers to even the toughest questions if the historian is persistent enough to find them. Therefore, the researcher of a historic structure should include among sources for documentation not only written records but also construction evidence and in addition oral history, photographs and anything else that will provide a key to the past.

The following paragraphs discuss some of the most generally useful resources for Historic Structure Reports. Those covered are not an inclusive group. Local repositories may have additional records and information beyond those mentioned here. It is wise to check with court house staff, libraries and historical societies to find out what material each has available before beginning the project. In some cases many of the sources discussed no longer or never did exist. In such situations, the actual physical structure and the information it tells the researcher may be the only documentation available.

If the researcher knows how to interpret a structure, it can provide much information either to corroborate written and oral records or to tell its own history in their absence. The physical evaluation should follow a logical pattern used for all structures studied by the researcher. Such a pattern could begin outside and work upward to the roof, then move to the interior from basement to attic. Whatever the pattern established, following it regularly helps to prevent confusion and inadvertent skipping of important details.

In evaluating the structure, the researcher should look for datable elements such as moldings, hardware, nails, construction techniques and fixtures. The observer also should check for alterations to the structure and evidence to show when and why changes were made. Next, the researcher should observe finishes on the inside or outside of the building such as successive layers of paint or wallpaper, roofing material and floor treatment. Taken together, all of these elements help to tell a structure's history.

Comparative study of a building with other structures in the vicinity is helpful. In looking at a group of buildings in the area that are approximately the same age, similar construction techniques and decorative

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trimwork may be identified. Often more information can be assembled about a group of buildings with like details than can be gathered from just one structure viewed without knowledge of local building practice. Perhaps another similar nearby building is dated, giving clues to the age of the structure being studied. The researcher should be aware that local carpenters and craftsmen may have carried stylistic elements far beyond the *terminus post quem* defined for that particular style. Therefore, placing a building's date according to its style can be misleading, particularly if the researcher is dealing with a vernacular structure.

After the structure itself has been examined the researcher is ready to tackle written sources. First, there are the basic legal records: deeds, wills, and taxes. All three can be invaluable, but, as well, all three often mention no buildings specifically. Deeds are most important as a record of who owned the property and when. A list of deeds giving the property's ownership through time is called a "chain of title." Deeds are the most important step in researching records associated with old buildings because wills, taxes, biographies, letters and other records are useless if the owners of the property are unknown. Deeds also sometimes mention the occupations of the buyer and seller. This information could be helpful in understanding past uses of a building.

Wills, of course, are pertinent only when an owner of a structure being researched died while it was in his ownership. Usually deeds for a property will make reference to a will if there is one. Wills may not mention a building specifically; in fact, some wills are so general as to be of no use at all to a researcher of buildings. Occasionally, however, a structure will be described in detail which is a good indicator of the appearance of the building at the time the will was made. More often, certain personal belongings were bequeathed which give clues about lives of the inhabitants and about room arrangement and usage. Wills are part of a larger group of documents known as probate records. Inventories of the deceased's personal property and occasionally his real estate are also probate documents. Inventories can suggest room arrangement and use, and inventories of real estate, while rare, are excellent documentation because they describe buildings.

The value of tax assessment records varies from place to place according to the type of records kept. Often tax records are little help to the building researcher. They may show nothing more than relative value of the total of a person's taxable holdings. Occasionally, however, tax records can be very specific as with the U.S. Direct Tax of 1798 taken only in Maryland, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. This tax was assessed on the number of windows in each person's house. However, other information was recorded in these assessment records, such as building materials, dimensions, height as well as size and construction of outbuildings. It should be noted that these records are not always accurate. Occasionally discrepancies have been found between assessment records and buildings documented by other means. It is best if all records can be substantiated by other sources. Unfortunately, such verification is not always possible.

Land, probate and assessment records are primary sources because they are contemporary with the period being studied. Other primary sources may be consulted as well. Among these are records of court proceedings. If the property was ever involved in litigation, transcripts of testimony may offer descriptions of a building's historic appearance. Sometimes these proceedings are cross referenced among land records and thus appear in deeds. Generally it is not productive for the researcher to conduct a search among court records unless there is a good indication that the property was the subject of a court proceeding.

Land, probate and assessment records usually can be found in county court houses unless the jurisdiction has another type of record keeping facility. Occasionally the oldest records have been turned over to another repository such as the historical society or state archives.

Old newspaper files are also a potentially valuable primary source. Perhaps a deed will mention that a property was purchased at public sale; or maybe court records will indicate that a disagreement was solved through the public sale of real estate. In such an instance, newspaper files are almost sure to be helpful. Properties offered at public sale are usually advertised in the local papers. The advertisements often offer a complete description of the structure at the time of sale. A comparison of the printed description with the current appearance of the building can be invaluable in determining what changes were made and when. Court records occasionally will specify that the public sale of the property was to be advertised at specified times in a certain newspaper. If the researcher has this information, the search through a newspaper morgue can be made much easier.

In addition to public sale bills, newspapers may contain other valuable information. For example, a news story about a fire could explain certain repairs in a building and the presence of charred materials still in place. An advertisement telling of a merger of two commerical enterprises could be related to renovations to a building dating from about the same time.

Local and state historical societies sometimes have useful information for the researchers of buildings. These societies may hold collections of primary documentation like old maps and photographs. Comparing old and current maps can reveal much about travel patterns. Some early maps record buildings, making distinctions among churches, schools, dwellings, mills, furnaces and other structures.

Old photographs are just about the best documentation available. Unfortunately, they are extremely rare prior to the Civil War. Old pictures taken during the late 19th and early 20th centuries of family gatherings, local events and streetscape views for postal cards are excellent tools for the researcher. Old photographs frequently show people posed in front of the family home or business, thus providing a record of the building, as well as the people associated with it.

Historical societies often have collections of travelers' accounts, ledgers, diaries, journals and letters which, if pertinent to the property in question, may be of help. This material is generally filed under the name of the author, so it is important to know the names of the people associated with the building being researched. Once in a while, a phenomenal find like a bill of materials, builder's contract or architect's plans will turn up for a building. This sort of documentation makes preparation of a Historic Structure Report much easier, but much of the time such records simply do not exist.

During the late 19th century bird's eye view maps of many towns across the United States were printed, showing buildings in detail. Atlases are another source of 19th century maps, frequently with specific buildings delineated.

In the 18th and early 19th century, some insurance companies issued policies with descriptions of the buildings they covered. Also, some jurisdictions required licenses with building descriptions for certain businesses such as taverns. These documents may be kept in an historical society library or a state archives collection.

Many libraries have local history divisions which contain much of the same sort of information found at historical societies. It is important to check both libraries and historical societies in the course of researching. They do not necessarily have duplicate records. Personnel at historical societies and at libraries also may have knowledge of local private collections of records which could be helpful.

If the property being examined happens to have been near the site of a military conflict, a potential source of information is government claims records housed among the National Archives in Washington, D.C. If property was damaged by U.S. Troops, the owner was entitled to make a claim for damages. Filed with the documents are detailed descriptions of the property being claimed and of damages which occurred. In addition to the military claims records, the National Archives may have photographs of sites where military action took place. These pictures could include buildings important to the researcher.

Old paintings and prints are another source of documentation. Perhaps scenes depicting people or events will have representations of buildings in the background. There have been several instances where exterior views of houses have been depicted within the building, painted on the parlor mantelpiece. Magazines like *Harper's Weekly* published prints of Civil War action and other newsworthy material. While the researcher must take artist's license into account, these documents can form an important part of a structure's records.

Secondary sources are distinguished from primary sources in that they are separated from the object of study by time. The researcher must take into consideration this separation in evaluating the accuracy of secondary sources. Among these works are local histories, biographies and genealogies. Ordinarily, material obtained from these books is not as helpful as that which comes from primary sources, because often their main purpose was not to record information about buildings. However, a local history volume printed in the late 19th century may have photographs or engravings of buildings as they appeared at that time. Thus, illustrations in these secondary sources can be of great help.

With the basic written sources now covered, the researcher might turn to oral history for documentation. It is wise not to take orally transmitted information as absolute fact unless it is substantiated by other sources, since accuracy can vary with the telling and with time. Recent past owners of the property might have recollections about alterations and repairs that they made; or, they may have found artifacts that would help to explain the history of the building. Descendants of earlier owners may have old photographs, letters or accounts concerning the building. Elderly members of the community can have helpful recollections. They may also have old photographs and documents useful to the researcher.

When the written and oral resources have been exhausted, the researcher may find it helpful to conduct an archeological investigation. The archeological work should not be undertaken until the researcher has familiarity with the site and its history. With knowledge of the property, the researcher can anticipate likely places to find artifacts. Probing the ground with a pointed rod could turn up now buried foundations for outbuildings or porches, or former walkways. Digging of test pits could yield artifacts such as discarded architectural elements from the building as well as clues to the lives of the inhabitants. In some cases, if much archeological information seems to be buried, the digging of cross trenches may be called for.

To summarize, documenting a historic structure involves more than a simple search of written records; and work among those records itself can be quite a challenge. However, to get as complete a picture as possible of a structure's history, it is important to take a broad interpretation of the term "documentation" and augment written records and oral traditions with a study of the building itself. Since it is rare for any one source to provide a complete history, the researcher is forced to glean as much information as possible from as many sources as can be found. Only by being thorough can the researcher develop a substantial base of facts which will assemble themselves into a pattern of development for the structure being studied.

The researcher should follow a logical process for gathering information when examining the building. After an initial observation of the building, the next step is to look at written records. The most logical procedure is to begin with the deeds to establish a chain of title, since it is necessary to know who owned the property under study at a given time. The deeds will also give clues to the existence of other important records. Secondary sources should be checked after the primary records, because they are derivative in nature and not recorded at the time being studied. Finally, some sort of archeological investigation can prove helpful.

Checking the sources outlined in this article should lead to a thorough documentation of a historic structure. Sometimes distinct references will be found which

make the task of researching much easier. Other times, when all of the sources are exhausted, there is still little known information about the building. Nevertheless if the sources have been checked, the researcher at least knows that he or she has made a conscientious effort to find every available piece of information about the building being studied. Generally enough clues are found to make the search rewarding.

Following are a few books that will provide further guidance on researching a historic structure. Most of the references noted below have additional bibliographical lists for more specific reading.

Bullock, Orin M. Jr. *The Restoration Manual*. Norwalk, Conn: Silvermine Publishers Inc., 1966.
A guide to preservation and restoration of structures with detailed sections on historical, archeological, and architectural research.

Hume, Ivor Noel. *Historical Archeology*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.
An extensive guide to archeological work for amateurs.

McKee, Harley J. *Recording Historic Buildings*. Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey, 1970
Based on the standards of documentation and recording of buildings established by the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Travers, Jean. *Guide to Resources Used in Historic Preservation Research*. Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1978.
An annotated topical list of resources useful to individuals in the field of historic preservation.

Waserman, Manfred. *Bibliography on Oral History*. New York: Oral History Assn., 1975.
Many state historic preservation offices have published guides to the research of buildings. These publications are available in each state's preservation office.