

Your House Has a History

Presented by

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Changes in the American Home:
Residential Architecture 1900-1945

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PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Before attempting to do research at the library, county offices, or other sites covered in the following pages, you should spend some time analyzing your house to uncover the clues it can yield. Even if you have lived in your house for many years, you will be surprised how many details you may have never noticed.

Step One:

Make a quick series of sketches of the house. These should include elevations of each side of the house, elevations of the walls in each room, and simple floorplans of each level including the basement and attic. This will help you to keep information easily organized and useful for future reference.

Step Two:

Walk around the outside of the house and make note of any indications of possible changes. Look for:

- Ghosts in the paint where trim, porches, etc. may have been removed.
- Patching in the siding material where a window or door may have been removed or replaced with one of different size.
- Unusual joints or seams in the soffit or fascia. This would normally be seen near the back if an addition has been built. If there appears to be an unusual break in the eave, look at the other side of the house to see if there is a corresponding break.
- A clear break in the foundation or a change in materials. Are there sections of the house which have no foundation underneath? This is often a clue that the space was originally a porch, which was later enclosed.
- The consistency of door and window trim. Note which ones are different and try to establish a pattern.
- Unusual rooflines that might indicate an addition. Also look for any chimneys which may have been closed off. You might also see a subtle change in the level of the roofing material, which might indicate an area that was patched over when an earlier chimney or cupola was removed.

Use your common sense to see if everything looks and feels “right.” Are there oddly positioned windows, entryways, misaligned bays, or other details that might be the result of additions or changes through the years?

This is also a good opportunity to take chips of paint from the trim, clapboards, and porch details, which can be used to establish a paint chronology for your house. Place the chips in bags and label from where they were removed.

Step Three:

The basement or crawlspace of your house can be one of the best places for clues about the chronology of your house, especially if it has not been remodeled into living space.

- Follow the foundation wall around the perimeter of the basement. Are there any indications that it was added on to? Are there changes in materials?
- Are there sections where the foundation wall extends into the interior space of the basement? Frequently when additions were made, the foundation was extended, but

the old foundation walls were left in place, often with just a doorway knocked through.

- Is the entire basement floor at the same level or are there areas where you step up or down?
- Look at the joists and rafters. Is the construction consistent throughout the basement? Are there any sections where the joists start running the opposite direction? Are there any small sections that have been patched in, indicating where a chimney or staircase might have been removed?
- Are all the support posts the same?
- Are all the windows the same size and design?

Step Four:

The attic can also be an excellent place for clues, especially if it is still used as an attic. Since this was normally only a storage space, there was no attempt made to cover over the evidence of additions and changes.

- Look at the roof rafters. Is the material and method of construction consistent throughout?
- Is the attic floor the same throughout the space?
- Are there remnants of prior chimneys?
- Are there sections of the original roof still in place within the attic, which were enclosed when additions were made?

Step Five:

The final step of the investigation is to closely examine each room of the house and record as accurately as possible any evidence of change.

- Follow the baseboard and cove moulding around the room to see if it is consistent. Also look for areas where a piece may have been patched in where a door or wall was removed.
- Are there patent dates on floor grates, hardware, etc.? Although this date will not normally be the date your house was built, it can show that your house was NOT built before a certain date, if these details are determined to be original.
- Look closely at the walls and ceilings for any evidence of patching, where a wall, window, door, fireplace, built in bookcase, transom or light fixture may have been removed. Also examine the ceiling for evidence of cove mouldings and ceiling medallions.
- Examine the flooring for evidence of patching from prior walls, heating grates, etc.
- Study archways and doorways for evidence of pocket doors, French doors, grilles, columns and the reorientation of doors (i.e. doors that now open into a room at one time opened into the adjoining space).

Make note of the style of moulding, doors, windows and hardware in each room as well as the type of wood used, if known. Although it was common to change the type of wood between the first and second floors and sometimes even between main first floor rooms, frequent or unexplained changes may indicate additions. Also make note of any unusual features of the room – is there an oddly placed window, a strange flow into a room, a tandem space, etc.

Step Six:

Now that you probably know your house better than anyone who has ever lived there, sit down with all your information and see what it can tell you. Try to form some patterns and see if you can support your theories (you will have made some by this point). For example, if the foundation indicates that the back two rooms of the house were added later, does information from within those rooms as well as the attic and the roof also support this theory? Depending upon how soon the addition was made and how well it was done, this may be easy or difficult to tell. If the addition was made soon after the house was constructed, they may have used identical mouldings and hardware. This could also be the case if the addition was done by a master carpenter who took care to make the addition as seamless as possible.

This step can take some time but is the most critical in documenting the physical evidence in the house. You will find yourself walking around the house looking at it in a whole new light (and occasionally poking and prodding to satisfy your curiosity). Let the house talk to you. You'll be surprised how much it has to say.

Step Seven:

Once you have a fairly good idea of how the house may have looked originally in terms of size and design, take some time to walk around the neighborhood to look for any other houses that may be similar. Joliet, like most cities, developed as a series of neighborhoods, each area having a peak period during which many of the houses were built. There were a certain number of builders, contractors, and architects who would have been hired over and over again. Very few houses in the neighborhood would have been designed specifically for a client and are therefore, unique. You may very well find a home similar to yours, but keep in mind that house may have also undergone changes through the years. Keep your eye out for mirror-image houses, that is, the same plan and design but in reverse. This was common if the house was placed on the opposite side of the street, since the major rooms of the house will normally be given southern exposure to take advantage of the light.

Also look for homes of similar vintage and the details they have. You may see window trim, porch details, dormers, roof brackets, etc. that are similar to those on your house, even though the overall form and shape of the house is different.

Take photos of similar properties and document the address. If you find a property that really appears identical to yours, you may want to research that house as well to get a broader picture of the two houses to see what you can learn.

Step Eight:

An important source of information is prior owners and neighbors. Ask for information from the people you bought the house from, regarding changes they made, photographs, and if they know anything about the people they bought from. Likewise, neighbors may remember changes made to the house and may keep in contact with former owners. They may also know if children who grew up in the house still live in the area. Sometimes it is as simple as looking in a current city directory to see if descendants of the early families still live in town.

WILL COUNTY RECORDER OF DEEDS OFFICE

58 E. Clinton (lower level)

The Recorder of Deeds office contains the records of every property transaction that has occurred in Will County since the 1830s. Records since 1970 can be accessed using the computer terminals, records before 1970 will have to be accessed using the numerous large volumes located throughout the room. The earliest transactions are recorded in volumes that are now available on microfiche. Copies are available for a fee.

What you will need to begin your research

To begin your search, you should bring your PIN and legal description with you. The PIN, or property index number, can be found on your real estate tax bill and identifies your specific parcel of land. The legal description can be found on your deed or plat of survey.

Transaction information defined

The information included on each transaction, whether located in the computer or the printed volumes will include grantor, grantee, document type, document number, and date of filing.

For most type of transactions, the grantor is the seller of the property; the grantee is the purchaser. However with transactions such as mortgages, the grantor is the owner and the grantee will be the bank/mortgage company. There are several types of transactions. Among the more common are the following:

WD – Warranty Deed: This is the most common type of document to sell property.

QC – Quit Claim Deed: This type of document can convey property, but in most circumstances the grantor is giving up any interest they may have in a piece of property. For example, if a person dies and leaves their property to their eldest child, the other children may file quit claim deeds to show they have no interest in the property.

MTG – Mortgage

TD – Trust Deed: Equivalent to a mortgage.

DT – Deed in Trust: The owner places a piece of property in trust with a bank or other similar institution. These are frequently found with rental and commercial properties.

Lien: A lien is the legal way for someone to record a claim against a property owner. For example, if you hire someone to build a garage for you, and you never pay him or her, the contractor will place a lien against your property for the amount owed to them. Also called mechanic's liens.

R – Release: Filed when a mortgage or trust deed is paid off.

Systems utilized

Counties will use one of two systems to record land transactions. The first is known as the Tract Book system, and basically sets up a page for every piece of property. As transactions occur, they are recorded chronologically on the page. This makes it very easy to gather all the pertinent information on a piece of property. This system is used in Cook County.

The second system is known as the Grantor-Grantee system. This system requires considerable more time to research, as transactions are recorded alphabetically by the last name of the grantor and grantee. This is the system used in Will County.

Example

To begin your research, go to one of the computer terminals and enter your PIN, or address. All transactions that have been recorded since 1970 will come up on the screen. For each transaction notate the grantor, grantee, document type and number, and date of recording.

Let us say that the earliest transaction found on the computer is a warranty deed recorded in 1975 between John and Mary Jones (the grantors) and William and Susan Smith (the grantees). To continue your search, you will now need to switch over to the grantor and grantee volumes. The next transaction you will want to find is when the Jones bought the property, that is, you want to find the transaction where the Jones were the grantees.

You will see that the grantor and grantee volumes are arranged alphabetically within certain date ranges. (There are also volumes for other types of transactions such as mortgages.) Find the grantee volume for the letter "J" that includes the period including 1975 and before. For many names, you will simply need to scan the entire letter to look for transactions where the person is listed. For common names such as Jones, these will frequently be separated to ease in the search. Hopefully, you will uncover a transaction for your piece of property (this is where having your legal description comes in handy) with the Jones listed as the grantee. If you don't, you may need to go to the previous set of grantee volumes for the preceding date range. This can be a somewhat hit and miss search, because you have no idea how long the Jones may have owned the property. It could have been just a few years, or several decades.

Helpful hints

You will continue this process until you have searched back all the way to the first transactions involving your property. Several important things should be kept in mind.

This type of system has a flaw in the fact that if a single transaction was not recorded properly (i.e. the name was spelled wrong or the wrong description was given for the property), it can make it nearly impossible to continue searching backward.

There are situations where the grantor (seller) may have never been a grantee (purchaser). Let us say for example, that the Jones inherited the property when Mrs. Jones widowed mother died. The Jones will never have been listed as a grantee, and the chain of research could be broken. This could also occur if a piece of property was owned by someone who married and whose name changed as a result.

To make your research at the recorder of deeds as successful as possible, it is advisable to do a thorough search of the city directories at the public library first (see page 7). This will give you a definite list of occupants of the home back to the time it was built (and hopefully it was always owner occupied). Then if you lose the track going backwards,

you can try and locate a name based on the approximate dates you have determined that person owned the property.

Also keep in mind that the transactions listed here are for the property itself, not for the house. Therefore you may well find transactions older than the building itself. The recording of a mortgage or trust deed may indicate the construction of a building on the property, but further research will be needed to verify this.

Documents

Up to this point you have only been looking at the basic information which describes the transaction, but you have not viewed the full document itself. Once you have your list of document numbers, take these to the counter and ask to view the documents. Some are on microfilm, and some are bound in volumes. The clerk will either provide the microfilm or direct you to the appropriate volume.

The document can provide a great deal of information. It is frequently a long legal document and you won't need to record all the information, but certain items should be notated. For example it will tell you where the grantor and grantee reside, and it will give their full names (the ledgers tend to abbreviate and may list married couples as John Jones and wife). It will detail exactly what property was involved in the transaction, which can be useful because it is possible that adjacent parcels may have originally been part of the property. It will list any restrictions on the property (setbacks, uses, etc.).

The document may also show the amount of money transferred in the transaction. In many cases however, since these records are public, the parties involved would list "\$1.00 plus other good and valuable considerations" to conceal the sales price of the property. To get an estimate however, look for the tax seal somewhere in the margins of the document. For many, many years transfer taxes have been assessed at the rate of \$1.00 per \$1000.00 of value. Therefore a sale for \$30,000 would have a tax transfer stamp for \$30.00.

The value of the transaction is important because this is one of the best ways to determine when a building was constructed. Let us say for example that your property was sold in 1901 for \$2,500 and again in 1903 for \$3,000. Then in 1904 it was sold for \$9,000. This is a good indication that the house was built during that time and thus accounts for the increase in value. Tying this information together with the listings from the city directories will hopefully confirm this fact.

Conclusion

The recorder of deeds office contains valuable documented information not available elsewhere. However, given the awkwardness of the system, it is best to do your research here after other avenues have been explored and pursued. You will appreciate having reliable information on hand before starting your research here.

JOLIET PUBLIC LIBRARY

Local History/Genealogy Section (2nd floor)
(see page 14 for address and phone number)

This department in the public library contains a wonderful collection of books and other materials that will aid the house researcher and genealogist alike. The following list is by no means meant to be complete. Rather, it will introduce researchers to the types of materials contained in the collection and provide a starting point for research. The librarians in this section are very knowledgeable and eager to help if you have questions. Photocopies can be made at a nearby copier for a nominal fee.

Polk City Directories

This is probably the most important single item to aid in the research of a property. Since the directories date back to 1875, virtually every house in Joliet can be traced back to its earliest occupancy using these directories. Starting in 1895, in addition to the traditional alphabetical listings, the directories started listing residents by address as well. By looking up your address in each directory, you can establish a chain of occupancy for your house through the years.

IMPORTANT NOTE: In 1938, Joliet renumbered properties throughout the city. The directory for 1938 listed both the old and new address, providing an easy reference for converting your current address to its pre-1938 designation. (See Sample A).

Maps and Atlases

Maps and atlases can provide valuable information on a building, including verifying if a building was standing at a particular point in time. Most of these books are quite large and are stored together on an oversized shelf. Some of the more important volumes are listed below.

Aer-O-Plat Atlas of Will County. Published by the Sidwell Company, this volume includes detailed aerial photos and section maps updated to 1969.

Atlas of Will County, Illinois. 1873, 1893, 1909-1910.

Detailed maps show the county by township, giving exact boundaries of farms with owners indicated, as well as statistical information and brief historical information. (See Sample B). Also includes engravings of Joliet and rural homes. Additional plat books and land atlases are available as well.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. 1891 and 1924, two volumes for each year, separating east and west Joliet. A key map at the beginning will guide the researcher to the correct page. These maps are an important source of information on buildings. Each map covers approximately four square blocks and shows the outline of every building in that area. They are color-coded to indicate building material, and will indicate the number of stories. Outbuildings are also shown. Larger building may also have the use and/or occupant listed, i.e. churches, schools, factories, etc. (See Sample C).

Newspapers

Many different newspapers have covered Will County and Joliet, with the oldest dating back to 1846. The library maintains an extensive collection of newspapers on microfilm, a complete listing of which is available atop the microfilm cabinet. The library also maintains death indexes which will guide you to obituary listings. These can be found in either the card catalog or in printout form. They are available for selected years in the early 1900s, and are complete from 1978 to the present.

Census Records

Census records can be especially useful in uncovering information on the families that have occupied your house. The census is conducted once every ten years and is available on microfilm for the following years: 1840, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920. The 1890 census records for virtually the entire country were destroyed in a fire, and records after 1920 are not yet open to the public. The information contained in the census varied from decade to decade, so will not be consistent, but always includes such basic information as names, ages and place of birth. Additional information may include occupation and net worth. The 1850 and 1860 census records have also been printed out by township (See Sample D). Since these records can be somewhat confusing to use, it is usually advisable to ask assistance from the librarian before beginning.

Information on Joliet and Will County

There is a wealth of information on the history and development of Joliet and Will County in the collection. Learning more about the community in which your house was built will give you valuable insight into why it was built when it was, why it is a small, medium or large house, and who the residents of the neighborhood were at the time. If your home was built by a prominent Joliet citizen, you may also find valuable information on that person as well. Many of these types of resources will include images of selected residences, as well as lists of prominent citizens, officers of local organizations, etc. The sampling below includes some of the “standard” resources for Joliet and Will County history and is arranged alphabetically.

Artworks of Joliet. Published 1916.

Excellent photographic record of Joliet, showing many residences and other types of buildings.

Cass Street Sketches (Joliet, Illinois). By “The Old Man,” 1897.

Includes selected biographies and other relevant information.

The Economic Development of Joliet, Illinois 1830-1870. Ph.D. thesis by Fayette Baldwin Shaw, 1934.

Includes a reprint of the 1859 map of Joliet showing all buildings standing at the time, copied from the original at the Library of Congress.

The First Catholic Church in Joliet. Rev. Norman G. Waling, 1960.
This volume includes important parish records from the churches earliest years, 1838-1851.

Greater Joliet, Illinois. Published by the Commercial Club of Joliet in January 1913.
Includes photos of many buildings, many commercial but some residential. (See Sample E).

HABS Survey. HABS is an abbreviation for the Historic American Buildings Survey, a nationwide effort by the National Park Service to document important historic architecture throughout the country. Much of this work was completed in the 1930s as a government funded project during the Depression. The library has a booklet summarizing the buildings in Will County which were selected and documented.

A Historical Narrative of the Early Midwest and of the First White Settler of Joliet, Illinois. Charles Reed, for the Will County Historical Society, 1970.

History of Will County. George Woodruff, 1878.
An extensive history of the county, one of the best starting points for researching county history. Contains a directory of all owners of real estate in the county as well as biographies and portraits of prominent citizens. The Will County Bicentennial Committee republished this volume in May 1973 and included a useful name index.

History of Will County. August Maue, 1928, in two volumes.
An extensive history of the county, long considered a “must” for any researcher. It includes many biographies of prominent county residents.

Joliet: A Pictorial History. One of several books on local history by Robert Sterling.

Joliet of Today, “The Pittsburgh of the West.” Published 1906.
Contains many biographies of Joliet residents.

Joliet Illustrated: Historical, Descriptive and Biographical. Published by *The Daily Republican*, 1897.
This interesting volumes contains numerous biographies of Joliet residents, many with photos. It also includes photos of selected area buildings.

Joliet and Joliet. William Grinton, 1904.

A Look at Joliet and Will County, Illinois. Jean Sout, 1966.

Past and Present of Will County, Illinois. W. W. Stevens, 1907.
Another of the “standard” histories of the county, this contains a good number of biographies of local residents. The portion on Joliet Township was reprinted in 1989 by the Will County Historical Society and is available.

A Pictorial History of Will County. Robert Sterling, in two volumes. Using his own extensive collection of photographs as well as those of the Joliet Historical Society, these are among the most extensive published resources of historic photos of the county.

Resource Directory. Canal Town Downtowns: The Legacy Continues. Published by the Canal Corridor Association, 1996. Good information on the role Joliet played in the development and operation of the I&M Canal.

Souvenir of the Settlement and Progress of Will County, Illinois, 1884. Includes history and directory of Will County, a listing of prior and old settlers, the tax rolls for 1842 and 1884 and a business directory.

Time and Place in Joliet: Essays on the Geographical Evolution of the City. Edited by Michael Comzen, from Studies on the I&M Canal Corridor, No. 2, 1988.

Atlas of Will County, Illinois, 1873. Detailed maps show the county by township, giving exact boundaries of farms with owners indicated, as well as statistical information and brief historical information. (See Sample F). Also includes engravings of Joliet and rural homes.

This is Will County, Illinois. John Drury, 1955. Historical narrative, maps and hundreds of aerial photographs showing farms throughout the county, many of which have since been absorbed by subdivisions to Joliet and other communities.

Will County Directory. 1859 and 1873. Provides good listings of residents, business, municipal officials, etc.

Other Genealogical Resources

You will find many types of genealogical materials in this section of the library. If your house was owned by a prominent person in Joliet, you will obviously have an easier time finding material. For many homeowners, these resources will not yield much, if any, information. But, they are important tools to check once you have uncovered the names of the original and other early owners. The following list is representative of the types of materials on hand and is arranged alphabetically.

1850 Illinois Mortality Schedule, Volume III (includes Will County). Listings include name, age, color, marital status, place of birth, month of death, profession, and cause of death.

Civil War Roster, Will County, Volume I. Published by the Will County Historical Society, Summer 1981. Listing of all Will County residents who served in the Civil War.

Fifteen Years Ago or the Patriotism of Will County by George Woodruff, 1876.
Civil War regimental histories and a listing of all Will County residents who served.

Genealogical and Biographical Record of Will County, Illinois. Published 1900.
Includes a name index.

Grundy-Will-LaSalle-Kendall Counties: 1840-1879. Deaths, Marriages, and Births extracted from area newspapers. Edited by Becki Leucht, 1998.
Listing is arranged by date with a name index.

Honor Roll, Will County, State of Illinois. Published by the Illinois Veterans Commission.
This is an extensive listing of veterans of all wars buried prior to 1 July 1955. It is arranged by cemetery first, then alphabetically.

A Necrology of Will County Pioneers: 1886-1921. Edited by D. Andrew Bale for the Will/Grundy Counties Genealogy Society, 1998.
Arranged by date with a name index and includes additional information from the Will County Pioneers Association.

The Reed Family. Published by the Will County Historical Society, August 1979.

Register of Pioneers by the Will County Pioneers Association (organized 1880).
This valuable listing of early Will County residents is arranged chronologically from 1882 to 1901, using the listings of members as originally entered in the membership ledger. Information includes dates and places of birth of members and the date they arrived in Illinois and Will County.

Roll of Honor: Record of Burial Places of Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Army Nurses of All Wars of the United States buried in Illinois. Two volumes, published 1929.
Entries are listed by county, then by cemetery, and then alphabetically.

Surname Index to Our Ancestor Charts, issued by the Will/Grundy Counties Genealogy Society, April 1984.
This useful guide will give researchers a list of all family surnames for which ancestor charts have been compiled in the Society.

OTHER SOURCES

WILL COUNTY BUILDING PERMITS

58 E. Clinton (Fifth floor)

Locating a building permit is the easiest way to date a house. Unfortunately, building permit information does not exist prior to 1940. Permits are on file from that date for buildings, and from 1965 on for other types of improvements. House plans are rarely found prior to 1990.

JOLIET TOWNSHIP OFFICE

This office maintains a card file for every piece of property on which property tax is paid. The card will show a date of construction which may or may not be accurate. Sometimes it was recorded when a building was constructed, at other times it is an estimate based on the observation of the assessor. The card may also give the date for a major improvement such as a garage or large addition. The office also has a collection of old aerial photographs of the Joliet area.

JOLIET HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

JOLIET PLANNING DEPARTMENT

150 W. Jefferson Street

This Commission was established by the Joliet preservation ordinance and consists of twelve members appointed by the Mayor and City Council. Among their duties are to provide information and assistance in the designation of landmarks and to educate the residents about the architectural and historic heritage of the city. Among the resources available in their office:

- 1924 and 1965 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps
- U.S.G.S. Maps (U.S. Geological Survey)
- Aerial views 1980 –
- Selected city directories
- Herald-News route delivery map, circa 1890 (excellent early map)
- Various books and publications on the history of Joliet and Will County
- Nomination forms for the two Joliet National Register districts. The Upper Bluff district contains approximate 350 buildings and the form identifies each specific building. The East Side district contains approximately 200 buildings, but the information focuses on only about twenty select properties.

JOLIET AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

(see page 14 for address and phone number)

The Historical Society maintains an extensive collection of historic photographs of Joliet and the surrounding area. The collection can be viewed by appointment only. They are currently in the process of moving to a new facility in the Jefferson Mall.

JOLIET HERALD-NEWS

The Herald-News has covered the Joliet area for over one hundred years and as such, is a vital source of historical information on the area. The newspaper is available on microfilm at the Joliet Library, but the newspaper office library has a clipping file arranged by subject which may help in locating specific topics.

OTHER RESOURCES

There are many other resources which may contain historical information of relevance to your property. Many of these are best utilized after all other research has been completed and you are armed with fairly concrete information on your property and its owners.

Suggestions for further research include:

- Local churches. Churches maintain vital records such as baptisms, marriages, and deaths, as well as membership records. If your research has tied a particular family to a congregation (say for example through funeral information in an obituary), it may be worth your while to contact that church for information on the family. In addition to the vital records listed above, the membership records may also indicate where the family transferred their membership from and where they later transferred to if they left the Joliet area.
- Local colleges. Joliet Junior College, the University of St. Francis, Governor State and Lewis University at Romeoville all have some local history material in their collections. These may also be useful resources if you have identified residents of your home who attended or taught at these schools. Alumni and staff records may provide interesting material.
- Local cemeteries. Cemeteries can be a great source of information and help to fill in missing facts about births, deaths, and children. The quality and accessibility of these records varies from cemetery to cemetery. The Will/Grundy Counties Genealogy Society has also done some work on records at selected sites. (See page 14 for a listing of local cemeteries with addresses and phone numbers).