

House History Hunting

Part of the allure of owning an old house is imagining, and researching its history. Exploring the home's changes through the years can be both daunting and rewarding. While some resources focus on the property itself, others will be organized by the name of the people who once lived within the house.

Assuming ownership of the house, the **abstract** is the best place to start. It will list, in order, all the previous owners of the property with the dates of ownership. If ownership was ever in question, as in a divorce or an estate probate, it is documented there. Any mortgages, liens, deeds, or foreclosures will be noted, as well as any other information that is held by the county records office. Although there are gaps prior to the 1950's, the abstract will usually be on file with the county, in case the homeowner has misplaced it. However, the records are not generally available to the public.

Once the names of deed holders are known, there are a myriad of resources available. **The Anoka County Historical Society, (ACHS), located at 2135 Third Ave. North in Anoka**, houses resources and references pertaining to Anoka County's 21 communities. Helpful staff and volunteers are available to help those patrons who may be unfamiliar with the library. They will direct researchers to one or several of the following.

City directories may be useful, especially regarding the communities of Blaine, Coon Rapids and Anoka between roughly 1958 and 1988. Unlike other sources, they can be searched by address.

Plat maps of rural areas are one of the earliest resources for history hunting, and their accuracy and detail are impressive. The land owner is listed on each parcel of 40 acres and nearby infrastructure like power lines, telephone lines, railroad access, roads, churches and schools, are helpful in placing the current address on the old maps. ACHS has maps of each of Anoka County's 21 communities, the earliest from 1849, and the most complete from 1888, and 1914. By comparing your lot on maps from successive years you can track some changes, as property is sold or acquired. Unfortunately, plat maps are pretty useless if the property is in the city.

For information on homes in the City of Anoka, you can't beat the **Sanborn Fire Insurance** Company maps. Every five years from 1885 to 1925 the company sent a representative to walk through town and document all the changes since the last scan. They are somewhat difficult to use because they are scans on the computer, but they are a wealth of data. When the outhouse was dismantled and removed, for example, is probably when your house first got its plumbing. The addition of a second entrance may mean that part of the house was rented out. A fence may mean livestock needed to be contained or it could mean a quarrel with the neighbors. Any major additions would be noted and an approximate date could be derived.

Some local **government records** are public information; others are not. County tax records, for example may indicate when a house was built or improved. They are available at ACHS but are not indexed. Building permits are issued by each city and contain similar information. ACHS has the oldest ones but each city is different in terms of record storage and availability. The Anoka County Office of Geographic Information has all sorts of maps and data on neighborhoods in each community. There is usually a

charge for any government records, but some genealogy files are on microfilm and are searchable for free.

Once you have names of people associated with your house, you can begin to amass data about them. For information prior to 1940, the **US Census** is a great source. Organized by name, it will identify the head of household and will list name and age of anyone else living in the house (children, hired help, renters, relatives), the relationship to the head of household, and place of birth. It lists the occupation of the head of household, and sometimes of the other family members if they happened to offer the information to the census taker. Knowing these details illustrates the activities that would have been happening in the house during each era. The downside to census data is that it is gathered only every ten years, and is not made public until the information is 70 years old.

The resident's names can also be used to search old **phone books** and city directories. You may be amazed to find ACHS has a phone book from 1889, although most homes did not yet have telephone service until the 19teen's. Business owners advertised in phone books and newspapers, and the ads are often worth a chuckle, even if they are not terribly informative.

If the family had children, they may be pictured in the local **high school yearbooks**. ACHS has a fairly complete collection of old yearbooks from county high schools, some as old as the early 1900's.

Death records will yield a date of death, and then you can look for an **obituary**. Obituaries run the gamut from one-liners to short biographies. You might get lucky. Again, ACHS's files are extensive. And while searching the **newspapers**, you will get a feel for the character of the neighborhood—the political turmoil, the social scene, the crime rate, and any new development, amidst the advertisements for local merchants.

A comprehensive index of **Anoka County Burials** has been compiled from cemetery records. The index includes small private and family cemeteries, but does not include burials at Fort Snelling Veteran's cemetery. While this information may not lead to discoveries about the house, it can give you a better idea of the lives lived within it.

Births, deaths, and marriages are indexed at ACHS, and they are sometimes helpful in determining the date of certain changes to a house. If the house is particularly historic, there may even be a picture in the **photograph collection**.

Don't overlook the **human resources**. Ask questions of neighbors, county and city employees, churches and schools. "Old timers" are a great library of local history. In fact, it's been said that when an old person dies, it's like a library burning down in terms of the information that is lost forever. You may get more info, gossip, nostalgia, and stories than you bargained for. And you might make a friend in the process.

Happy hunting.