
Andover Historic Preservation

Researching the History of Your House

Researching your home history is like building a family genealogy. Begin with what you know about your house from the time you purchased it. Make a list of previous owners and write down related stories passed on to you by your realtor, neighbors and former occupants. Use these notes as a beginning reference as you explore primary resource materials. The following resources and locations may help in your search for information about your house. Call before you visit to make sure the location has what you're looking for.

- Assessor's Office at Andover Town Hall — assessor's records
- Memorial Hall Library — Andover Room collection
- Andover Historical Society — genealogy, local history, photographs
- North Essex Registry of Deeds in Lawrence, MA
- Essex County Registry of Deeds in Salem, MA
- Peabody - Essex Museum Research Library, Salem, MA — genealogy, local history
- Massachusetts State Archives in Boston
- Haverhill Public Library — Special Collections Room
- Newspapers: Andover Advertiser, Andover Townsman, Lawrence–Eagle Tribune
- National Register Building Survey Inventory — copies at Andover Historical Society and Massachusetts Historical Commission, Boston
- Local Cemeteries: Spring Grove, South Church Burying Ground, West Parish Garden Cemetery, Christ Church Burying Ground, Academy Burying Ground, St. Augustine's Cemetery, Jenkins-Woodbridge family lot and the Gould family lot

How to Begin — Deed Research

Step One — Deed, Book & Page at Assessor's Office

To find the approximate age of your home and past chain of ownership you must do a deed search. If you have a copy of your original deed at the time of purchase it will include the book and page number of your recorded deed in Lawrence. If you mislaid the deed go to the Assessors Office at Town Hall and look in the index books for your deed book and page. There are two index books, one a list by owners and one a list by address. There is also a computer terminal for obtaining information on your home and property. While you are there, request a copy of your plot plan by map number and lot number. This map will give the dimensions of your property, square footage and abutters.

Step Two — Deed Search at Registry of Deeds

The Registry of Deeds in Lawrence is located on the third floor of the former Wood Mill Buildings on Merrimack Street; Sal's Pizza is in the same building on the ground floor. All deeds for property in Andover, Lawrence, Methuen and North Andover from the present date back to 1869 are contained in books at the Lawrence Registry of Deeds. Recent deeds are available on computer.

Locate your book in the center shelves and open to your page number. The deed is recorded by Grantor (the seller) and Grantee (the buyer). It will give the dimensions of the property; date of sale; the names of all owners, buyers and spouses; sometimes the sale price; and almost always the book and page number of the previous owner. Locate the books in descending order and record all the grantor and grantee names, book, page and date of sale. Banks often hold the deed until mortgages are paid off but the grantee names are still the legal owners. Sometimes the owner will use his property as collateral to obtain a loan from another individual and transfer the deed over to him; it is transferred back when the loan is paid back. Some deeds may refer to a Plan number. Record that information too, as it will also give a map of your property or the former farm or estate that the neighborhood development was created from.

Essex County Registry of Deeds – Salem, MA

The Salem Registry of Deeds contains all recorded deeds and probate records for towns in Essex County. The deeds for Andover from 1750 to 1868 are housed here in book form. The lowest number currently on the shelves is #100, which includes the year 1750. All earlier deed books from the 1600s to 1749 have been transferred to the Massachusetts State Archives Building at Columbia Point in Boston, located near the Kennedy Library. These books have also been microfilmed and are available to the public at the Peabody Essex Museum. Call the library for the hours they are open for researchers.

What if a book and page is not referenced in the deed?

If this happens during your search there are additional books you can reference to continue through the deed documentation. Two additional sets of books record the Grantors and the Grantees separately in alphabetical order by date of the transaction. These books are located at the far end of the floor as you enter the registry. Both books list date, location and the book and page number of the next deed book. If your house was built before 1869, once you have reached the last book of your search in Lawrence the deed will reference a book and leaf at the Registry of Deeds in Salem, MA, the county seat for Essex County.

Things to keep in mind as you read through the deeds

The deed concerns the property transaction and not necessarily your house. Pay close attention to major changes in lot size. This could be a clue that the property has been divided off from a larger lot or estate. Most deeds will state “with buildings thereon” or a certain “message of land” which means with buildings. If neither is mentioned, it is likely the property was sold and your house was built sometime later by a new owner.

Houses burned to the ground and were rebuilt. You can't assume that the structure mentioned in your deed is in fact your house. If a map number is given within the deed, record the number and then ask to see the plan. The clerks will guide you through the use of the computers if the maps have been added to the system. If they have not, staff can provide you with a hard copy. Copies can be made and purchased for a small fee.

Street names and numbering system

Streets and roads close to the town or village center were often named quite early in the 19th century. As you travel farther out from the town center the roads were often referenced as “the way from Mr. John Smith's to Mr. James Abbot's,” each living at the extreme ends of the road.

Andover finally adopted street names for all roads in 1905. Some names were changed at this time — Mineral St. became Red Spring Rd. and Green St. was renamed Morton St. Deeds will reflect these changes by stating, “Formerly known as...”

Street numbering systems were adopted with the numbers increasing as you travel away from the town center. In most but not all cases, odd numbers were assigned to houses on the right and even numbers to the left. In 1959 it was necessary to renumber most houses in town as lots began to be subdivided, especially in West Andover. Some changes were dramatic — #183 Argilla Rd is now #93. Don't assume that a significant street number change means that the resident moved.

What if my house was moved to the property?

Deeds follow the land, and not the structure. Deeds do, however, mention land “with buildings” at the time of sale. If your deed no longer states “with buildings” it is likely that your house was either built at this time or moved to the lot if the house dates from an earlier period. Moving structures was a common practice in 18th and 19th century New England. Moving a major structure, however, would have been an event and possibly written about in a local newspaper. Often a brief news line may state “Mr. Smith has purchased the former James Abbot house and relocated it to his new lot.” Now you have the former owner's name. Maps can reveal where Mr. James Abbot lived.

Units of measure

Units of measurement in land surveys have changed over the years. Feet and inches are most common in late 19th and all 20th century deeds. Earlier deeds used the archaic British system using rods, poles, links and chains. A rod is equal to 16.5 feet and a link is 7.92 inches. Twenty-five (25) links equal 1 rod. 100 links equal a chain, which is 66 inches. A pole is 1 square rod.

Copy the first deed you encounter with the measurement change to use as a reference as you continue your search. The further back you go in years, the less accurate the deeds become. Reference points can be trees, rocks, fences, and buildings that have long since disappeared. Keep notes on abutters' names and total acres included within your property to make sure you are continuing on the right property. Best advice is not to try to convert the measurements, but to familiarize yourself with them and keep an eye out for major discrepancies.

Other Resources

Probate Records at the Registry of Deeds in Salem, MA

Personal wills are also a great way to find out more about family and relationships. If a person dies intestate, (without a will) or defaults on a mortgage, the court is required to settle the estate. A complete inventory is done of all personal property and real estate. Alphabetical indexes by date of death are located in books in the probate office on the second floor. Write down the probate number and hand it to the clerk, who will retrieve the estate papers for you to read. Early records have also been relocated to the state archives.

Federal & State Census Records

A search of Federal and State census records will give all family members living at your address during that year. The first Federal Census took place in 1790 and continues to this day, once every ten years. 1910 is the latest available year. Included in the records will be age, occupations, place of birth and marriage status. Sadly, 1890 records were all destroyed in a fire; a search of Massachusetts census records of 1895 may fill in the missing gaps. Haverhill Public Library has the census records on microfilm; call ahead for the hours of the Special Collections room.

Street Lists & Directories

Town Street Lists and Directories are another great resource for locating family members and occupations. Both the library and historical society have copies of directories that were published every other year from 1885 to the 1940s and every year since 1948.

Tax Evaluation Records

Tax evaluation records, published every ten years from 1850 through 1920, give a wealth of information on individual personal property, number of acres owned, and building values of houses, barns and other structures on the property. WHERE?

Vital Records

Town Vital Records on microfilm at the library give birth, death and marriages from 1650s through the early 20th century. Published books containing the same data from 1660 to 1850 are also available for research.

Newspapers

Local newspapers often publish lengthy obituaries or obsequies on prominent town residents and can give vital family member information to aid in your research. Newspapers can be found at the Andover Historical Society and at the Memorial Hall Library (on microfilm).

Cemeteries

The town's Spring Grove Cemetery was established in 1871; burial records are available online for both Spring Grove and the South Church burying ground, est. 1712. West Parish Garden Cemetery also has a website and the superintendent there is always accommodating.

Maps

Maps are also a good source to locate owners of your property. Andover has published maps of 1830, 1852, 1855, 1872, 1882, 1888 and 1906 that include owners' names and house footprints and locations on the map. Several more recent maps have been published that no longer contain individual marked property, but do list new streets and developments.

Collections

The Andover Historical Society has a large collection of research on historic houses in town. Its archives include an extensive photographic collection on individual homes and streets in town. A check of the files by street and house number could provide you with a period photo of your home. Be sure to also check the files of villages of Andover. Once you have names of former

owners, look for individual family files of genealogies and photographs.

Memorial Hall Library has all local newspapers available on microfilm. Town directories, family genealogies, and all town meeting records and school reports in bound volumes are available through the reference desk. Computer terminals are available to guide you to the local town websites and cemetery records.

Dating Your House

Finding the exact date that your house was built is perhaps the hardest fact to uncover in your research. Deeds can lead to an approximate year, but unless you uncover a recorded contract between the builder and owner or a deed that specifically states when the house was built, use the prefix "Circa" before the date. The architectural style of the home will give you a general clue as to the time frame. The historical society and the library have books on period architecture that can assist in identifying styles and periods.

If you are lucky enough to uncover a beam or board with a date and name on it, you will truly be a fortunate homeowner. There is also a scientific methodology called dendrochronology for dating wood samples. Core samples from beams in your home are sent to a lab for examination of the growth rings. From a library of 350 years of growth rings from virgin forest trees in the region, lab technicians can calculate to within a few years when the tree was cut from the forest to build your house. This is a costly method, however, and may not always produce the desired date.

Creating a Story About Your House

Once you have completed the deed ownership genealogy you will have a list of the families who owned and most likely lived in your house. Properties were sometimes rented out or boarders taken in for extra income, so don't be dismayed if the surnames don't match up with the owner. Record the people's names, as they may be relatives of the spouse.

As you gather more information about each family from the sources listed above, a story will begin to emerge. Substantiate your findings with references and sources; don't rely on information through conjecture. Family histories and traditions handed down through generations can be useful tools, but may also be filled with misinformation and myths. Stick to the facts. If you debunk a myth while doing the research, state the myth and the facts that dispute it. If you assume something to be true or false, state your assumption but let the reader know.

Keep your work organized in a binder for easy access. You are now the steward of your property. Most of all have fun while doing the research and don't forget to include a brief history of your own family. If you have made renovations, explain what was done and when it was completed so future generations will understand the evolution of the home.

Applying for a Historic House Plaque

See this page on the Historic Building Marker Program.

