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GUIDE TO RESEARCHING OLD BUILDINGS IN ALABAMA

This guide is intended to acquaint the serious researcher with the various sources available for uncovering the history of Alabama's historic properties. The goal of the research is to document the history of the structure for use in local surveys, Alabama Register and National Register nominations.

Secondary sources, such as recent newspaper and magazine articles, family traditions, and local histories, are useful as general guides. Most local histories contain valuable information about public buildings, but if the sources of information are not footnoted. Researchers must verify the information found in these secondary sources through original research.

Often the most challenging task is knowing where to begin and when you have gathered enough material. Use the following questions to guide your research:

- What was the property called at the time it was associated with important events or persons, or took on its important physical character that gave it importance?
- How many buildings, structures, and other resources make up the property?
- When was the property constructed and when did it attain its current form?
- What are the property's historic characteristics?
- What changes have been made over time and when? How have these affected its historic integrity?
- What is the current condition of the property, including the exterior, grounds, setting, and interior?
- How was the property used during its period of significance and how is it used today?
- Who occupied or used the property historically? Did they individually make any important contributions to history? Who is its current owner?
- Was it associated with important events, activities, or persons?
- Which Alabama Register/National Register criteria apply to the property? In what areas of history is the property significant?
- How does the property related to the history of the community where it is located?
- How does the property illustrate any themes or trends important to the history of its community, State or nation? For example, a 1935 school building can tell the story of education in a community, as well as be a good example of a New Deal building program building.
- How large is the property, where is it located, or what are its boundaries?
- Would this property more appropriately be nominated as part of a historic district?

Primary sources are a good place to begin and include deeds, wills, probate records, state records, early maps, and newspaper accounts contemporary with the period for which the building is important.

Consequently, the first task of the researcher is to make a careful survey of the material available in the city or county in question. Using this booklet as a general guide, search the courthouse files, the city records, the holdings of the local library and historical society, as well as the Alabama Department of Archives and History and local colleges and universities.

Whichever sources are used, it is important to ***carefully copy them, copy the full citation and location of the sources, and retain this information in the research file***. Preparing a chronological table of the data will assist in organizing the material and in establishing the date of the structure. It also allows others to evaluate the research.

Types of Research and Resources

CHAIN OF TITLE

Research should begin with tracing the ownership of the property from the present owner back to the first land transaction. This is known as a title search and is only a record of the land transactions. It will rarely mention a building, but large jumps in the price of the property may indicate an improvement on the land. Likewise, a mortgage may indicate an improvement to a building.

A construction date cannot be determined just from the cost of the transaction; however, inflation, recession, speculation, or tragedy can affect price changes, or a jump in price may indicate the construction of an earlier house. For instance, one house was dated as having been constructed in 1845 because of a $5,000 increase in price. The tax records, however, proved that this was a frame structure and not the brick house in question. It was not until 1870 that a brick house was taxed.

A completed chain of title gives the researcher a documented basis from which to continue the investigation of the building. It should be recorded and balanced with all other factors in the research.

A. ***In order to trace the ownership, you must first obtain the name of the current owners and the property address.***

At the local Tax Assessor's Office, obtain the legal description of the property from the plat maps. This will include the block, square, and lot number for city properties; the section, township, and range for rural properties.

Examples:

Isaac Marx House - Block 340, Square 43, Lots 14,15

Glenville Plantation - NW 1/4 of Section 21, Township 3 North, Range 5 East (NW1/4 S21,T3N, R5E)

B. ***With the legal description established, the next step is to trace the title***.

There are two methods of tracing the chain of title. One starts with the original land grant and traces the title down to the current owners. The other starts with the current owner and traces back to the original land grant. It is easier to start with the current owners and work backwards.

If the owner has an abstract, it will show the owners in sequence and the cost of the various transactions. This is a quick and convenient way to trace the title. However, abstracts frequently do not include all of the information the researcher may want and often have some inaccuracies. Information on the abstract should be checked in the Probate Office.

With the name of the current owner and the legal description of the property, ask to see the Deed Indexes. Locate and copy down the property transactions that include the name of the current owner as GRANTEE (this is the buyer of the property). If the owner has purchased several pieces of property, his name will appear several times. For each transaction also copy the name of the grant or (seller of the property) and the references - for example, Deed Book 215, page 406.

Ask to see Deed Book 215. Page 406 will have a copy of the deed that will refer to the particular piece of property involved in that transaction. If the legal description matches that of the property in question, then the person listed as grantor is the previous owner. A note of caution - the transaction may include more land than your property, so look carefully to see if your property is included in a larger transfer.

In recording the deeds, it is important to carefully copy:

1. The county, book, and page (usually abbreviated as BK. 215/406)
2. The date of the transaction
3. The grantor and the grantee
4. The type of transaction: warranty deed (W.D.), quit claim (Q.C.), deed of trust (D.T.), or mortgage (mtge.)
5. The property description, noting the exact footage and directions given in the description. If there is a structure (appurtenances thereon), this should be recorded. It may be the structure in question.

Out of courtesy to the current owners, it is customary not to record the value of the purchase or tax records of the most recent owners, unless their permission is given.

Using the name of the grantor obtained in the most recent transaction, go back to the deed indexes and look for his name as grantee. This process should be repeated until you have worked back to the original land grant. Some structures unquestionably date from the late 19th or early 20th century, and it will not be necessary to carry the title all the way back to the early 19th century. However, many two-story Victorian-era houses began as one-story cottages in an earlier period.

The Bureau of Land Management offers an online Land Patent search that can help you determine when the land was first granted by the federal government to an individual. Records are available for all states, except the original thirteen colonies. To search, visit www.glorecords.blm.gov/PatentSearch/Default.asp

C. *Wills and Court Cases*

On occasion, wills will include an inventory of all property owned, including household goods. This information can provide an excellent picture of the life of the owner. The reference should be copied or a note made of it.

TAX RECORDS

With the names of the owners, proceed to the Tax Assessor's Office and ask for the old tax records. The tax records will list the owner's name and all his property, both real and personal. In some counties, the list will include the location of the various lots or buildings that the owner possessed and the value of each possession. In others, the lots will be lumped together with a single composite value.

While tax records are most useful in determining the existence of houses on specific pieces of property and the value of the property from year to year, note should be made of personal property, as a large purchase of household furniture may indicate a new house. It is worth noting that improvements are usually made at the time of purchase and are reflected most accurately in the tax records. Tax records usually reflect the evaluation for the previous year.

The following information should be copied:

1. The year of the book and the page, if given
2. The name of the owner
3. The description of the particular property - vacant lot (v.l.), brick house (br.h.), frame house (fr.h.),etc.
4. The tax value

The tax records should be arranged in the same sequence as the deeds.

CITY DIRECTORIES

A city directory is a list of the people who work and live in a certain city. Directories are often arranged both alphabetically by last name and street address. Directories will often contain the names of city officials and other information about the city. One Montgomery directory lists all of the buildings constructed in the past year with the name of the owner, contractor, and cost of the structure!

For larger cities, directories date back to the mid-19th century, but smaller towns frequently did not publish directories until the latter part of the century. Directories can be located in city libraries, historical society libraries, and the State Archives.

Check the owner's name in each directory available and record the following information:

1. Name (spouses are often listed in parenthesis and will be listed separately if they also have an occupation)
2. Occupation
3. Address or name of the place of business, if given
4. Address of the residence. This may be very general for early directories. If the directory uses

the abbreviation "bds," this means that the person is a boarder.

If the owner is listed as living elsewhere, this should be copied. It may mean that there is no house on the lot yet, or that the property in question is rental.

Keep in mind that street addresses may have changed over the years.

MAPS

Old maps are very useful documents. Old plats, tax parcel maps, bird's eye views of town, and survey maps can all provide useful clues about the history of a property, as well as changes in the property over time. A careful search of the county records, the local historical society, or the State Archives may turn up local maps and surveys that will be of value. Snecdor's 1850s map of Greene County shows buildings and names and owners. Family papers occasionally contain surveys of the property, showing the main house, outbuildings, and orchards.

Sanborn Maps. Particularly valuable are the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, which date from the late-19th and early-20th century. The Special Collections Library at the University of Alabama and the Alabama Department of Archives and History both maintain a large collection of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. These maps show all of the structures in a given area and are color-coded to indicate whether the building is brick or frame. The maps show the location and the dimensions, number of stories for each structure, window and door openings, and footprint of the building on a lot. The maps date from the 1880s to the mid-20th century and were updated every few years. Consequently they serve as an excellent source for dating construction and additions from the late-19th century.

OLD PHOTOGRAPHS, DRAWINGS, AND BIRD'S-EYE VIEW MAPS

Old photographs, drawings, and bird's-eye view maps may be very helpful, but only if they are accurately dated. Artists often utilized a freedom of expression, so keep this in mind.

Several cities have well-maintained photographic collections - some in public possession, others in private collections. Don't forget to check the negative files of local photographic studios. Family descendants often have saved scrapbooks with photographs of the house. Neighbors, too, may have useful snapshots. If at all possible, the photograph should be copied and a note made of the location of the original. If this is not feasible, note the existence of the photograph and the features that differ from the present appearance of the building.

The American Memory Collection at the Library of Congress contains a large collection of photographs and maps from the 19th and 20th century. The collection includes the Historic American Building Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) documentation. A great number of collections are available online at http://memory.loc.gov.

BUILDING CONTRACTS

For public or religious buildings, there are sometimes building contracts in the city, county, state, or church archives. These will give the dates, name of architect and/or contractor, and the cost of the project. Frequently specifications will be included.

BUILDING PERMITS

Starting in the late-19th century, many cities required building permits. Building permits may reveal the architect, existence of architectural drawings, client, contractor, cost and date of work, and clues to alterations. Building permits may be on file with the municipal building inspector, city/county records office, or with a city/county/State archives.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspaper articles, which date from the time under consideration, can be excellent sources of information.

If you have narrowed date of construction down to a period of a few years, reading the local newspaper for those dates can sometimes turn up a notice of the completion or initiation of construction, particularly for public buildings, or notable homes and stores. Papers usually followed the progress of construction for these buildings and frequently give the name of the architect, the contractor, the cost of construction and, on several occasions, the specifications.

Advertisements for commercial establishments often give addresses and notice of new construction. Social notices can also aid in establishing the presence of some buildings.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Collections containing manuscripts, diaries, brochures, old letters, and advertisements are also fertile ground. These materials often contain clues or precise information about buildings. Minutes of a club, church, or corporation may contain data about the construction of a building. Planter's diaries will generally include information about new construction.

CENSUS DATA

The first Federal Census for Alabama was done in 1820. Raw census data can provide information about the names, ages, and occupations within a household. Census records can indicate when a family moved into the state. If older children were born in South Carolina and younger children in Alabama, a likely date for the move can be established. Detailed census information is available 75 years after the census date.

Agricultural schedules provide crop and acreage information; slave schedules provide lists of slaves, age and sex by owner/plantation. There are also censuses for pensioners, widows, Confederate soldiers, Masonic lodges, mortality, free black populations (antebellum), African-American households (post-bellum), manufacturers, etc. Availability of information will vary by county and some is available online at:

http://www.census-online.com/links/AL/. Many libraries have census data on microfilm, so be sure to check with your local library to find out how much information is available in your area.

Aggregate census data at the county and state level can be found online at:
http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/

OTHER SOURCES

City Prospectuses, published by business groups, often contain valuable information on commercial establishments and public facilities. These brochures were written to attract businesses, so look out for hype.

For industrial buildings such as mills and factories, the Census of Manufacturers (State Archives), Corporation Books (County Courthouse), and newspaper articles dating from the period are particularly helpful.

Published genealogies and marriage records can provide useful clues. Homes were frequently built for newly-weds and additions made as the family expanded. Local and state chapters of the American Institute of Architects sometimes maintain files on early firms and plans.

Finally, use your imagination and hunches. Long shots are always worth a try; when they pay off, they often pay off very well. Don't hesitate to contact members of the family or old neighbors. Mention your project to everyone, particularly people who may be doing research in the same records you plan to use.

COMPILING THE RESEARCH

The data should be organized into a time sequence beginning with the earliest records and proceeding to the most recent. All data and notes, as well as Xerox copies of maps and photographs, should be maintained in the research file.

A careful examination of the material gathered should provide a reasonably accurate date or very short time span for the construction of almost any building.

CITING REFERENCES

Citing the document from which you collect or copy information is extremely important in providing good documentation of your research. Below are a few examples of citations you might use. For items not published or widely available, the location or repository of the information should also be included. Indicate no date or no publisher by including (n.d.) or (n.p.) in your citation.

Book-Single author

Crawford, Margaret. 1995. *Building the Workingman's Paradise*: *the design of American company towns*. New York: Verso.

Book-Multiple authors

Jakle, John A., and Keith A. Sculle. 1994. *The Gas Station in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Book-Edited Volume

Hancock, John. 1980. The apartment house in urban America. In *Buildings and Society: Essays on the social development of the built environment*, ed. Anthony D. King. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Census

United States Government. *1850 Census*. Washington. 1850. p. 291, entry 137.

City Directories

Columbia, South Carolina City Directory for 1910. Columbia: The Walsh Directory Company, 1910. South Caroliniana Library.

Deeds

Tuscaloosa County Deed Book 1120. Page 230. Tuscaloosa County Courthouse. Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Journal Article

Brandimarte, Cynthia. 1995. "To Make the Whole World Homelike": Gender, Space, and America's Tea Room Movement. *Winterthur Portfolio* 30:1-19.

Newspapers

(Columbia) The State, October 18, 1909. Classifieds:10.

Pamphlet-no author given

Wintering in the South: Florida, Cuba, Georgia, The Carolinas, Season 1923-1924. Seaboard AirLine Railway, 1923. South Caroliniana Library.

Personal Interviews

Interview, Mr. Rogers, director of the Columbia YMCA, interview by author. Columbia, SC, 15 March 2001.

Personal Papers

Letter from Katharine Cater to Spright Dowell, January 26, 1949. Personal collection of Mrs. Hattie Smith, Auburn, AL.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

Fire Insurance Maps from the Sanborn Map Company Archives, late 19th century to 1989: South Carolina . Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America. Microfilm, reel 2.

CONCLUSION

The narrow goal of the research is to determine the date of construction, the name, occupation, and status of the first owner and subsequent occupants. But dates and chains of title do not equal significance.

Biographical data on the builder, later owners, the architect, and contractor should be included. If important events took place in the house, they should be recorded and documented. If the owner was involved in important events, a summary of his involvement should be given. A brief summary of the particular period of the history of the town is also helpful. If the building was the result of a housing boom caused by the location of a new industry or other economic or social force, some indication and information should be included. The construction of numerous new commercial buildings often gives clues to the economic prosperity of the town in a given time period.

An architectural evaluation of the building should be sought from a competent architectural historian. Is it a particularly fine example of a type? Is it the only existing example of a once-common style? Does it represent new trends in style or new methods of construction?

A statement of the relationship of the building to the political, economic, social, technological and aesthetic forces of the period places it into historical perspective. The ultimate goal of the research is to tell us what this building has to say about our history. This, not the recitation of past owners, provides us with a rationale for preservation.