

How to Research the History of Your Historic Building

The Basics

YouTube video by architectural historian, Patrick Thompson

The tutorial covers much of the information below, and in greater detail. It conducts a step-by-step walkthrough on how to use the County Assessor website, research township records/original land patent records, how to search online newspaper archives, and other state/local resources.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guRi_LJdOKM&t=391s

Douglas County Assessor

Visit the Douglas County Assessor website for basic property information. The report on your property will provide an estimate of the building's address, construction date, legal description, approximate square footage, and some previous sales information. A visit to the Douglas County Register of Deeds may be able to provide additional information, including paper records.

Note: the construction year is often, but not always accurate. It may be an approximation, and can be more accurately verified through secondary sources if desired (Sanborn maps, building permit information, newspaper articles, etc).

The Register of Deeds is located at:
Omaha Douglas Civic Center
1819 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68183

<http://dcassessor.org/home>

Douglas County Engineer

To view subdivision/addition land surveys throughout Omaha's history, in addition to the original owners and surveyors, visit the Douglas County Engineer's website. Click on the link for *Land Survey Records*, and then click *Plat Search*. Using property information from the Douglas County Assessor will aid you in filling out the desired information. Typing in just the subdivision name in the appropriate search bar will give you access to all the completed digitized surveys for that particular subdivision.

Note:

If your property is located in Omaha's original city plan, "City Lots," your only option for viewing those land surveys will be through the online Maps and Atlases section of the Omaha Public Library.

The survey may show an original street name or address, some of which have been changed over time. For example, Sherman Avenue in Omaha is now North 16th Street.

<https://www.dcengineer.org/>

Sanborn Maps

Sanborn insurance maps were created to assist fire insurance companies in assessing the risk associated with insuring a particular property. The maps list street blocks and building numbers, including numbers in use at the time the map was made as well as previous numbers. These maps were made between 1867 and 1970. Sanborn Maps are available on the Library of Congress website, as well as online via the Omaha Public Library. Additional city engineering/Sanborn maps are available at Omaha's W. Dale Clark library in print and/or microfilm.

The maps are a helpful tool in locating and describing a building's construction material, number of stories, and what its historic/original function was (store, dwelling, church, etc). Often, the maps will tell you what type of business was at each location, or in some cases, its name.

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/>

Omaha Public Library

The Omaha Public Library includes a wealth of historical information, both online and in-person. Some of the services the library provides include:

Online Access:

Omaha World-Herald newspaper archives

Omaha Star newspaper archives

Historical images and artifacts

Sanborn Maps

Maps/atlasses

Genealogical records

You can also access the following in-person:

Census microfilms

Omaha city directories

Have research questions?

Email the library at research@omahalibrary.org

<https://omahalibrary.org/>

Click on the *Resource Center* tab for more information

Douglas County Historical Society

Visit the Douglas County Historical Society for access to research services, genealogical services, maps/plats/atlas, online photo and newspaper archives. As the online collection is relatively small, an in-person meeting may be necessary for further assistance.

Address:

5730 N 30th St #11b

Omaha, NE 68111

402.455.9990

director@douglascohistory.org

Library Archives

Monday – Friday

10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Saturdays by Appointment

<http://www.douglascohistory.org/>

Omaha Daily Bee

The *Omaha Daily Bee* was one of Omaha's major news publications from the 1870s to the 1920s. The online content is searchable, and provides a wealth of information about all things Omaha, often including building permit announcements, names of architects/builders, business advertisements, and supplemental information about original or early owners. The archive includes other historic newspaper publications from across Nebraska.

<http://nebnewspapers.unl.edu/search/advanced/>

Durham Museum photo archive

The Durham online photo archive is home to over 1 million images from the 1860s to the 1990s. Images include notable buildings and street scenes, spanning from downtown to the surrounding neighborhoods, in addition to historic events, patterns, and people.

Please email photoarchive@durhammuseum.org or call 402-444-5071 to schedule an appointment or request an image. The archive is open 10:30AM-3:30PM, Tuesday-Friday.

<https://durhammuseum.org/exhibits-collections/photo-archive/>

Other online sources

Google Books: books.google.com

HathiTrust: hathitrust.org

Google Books and HathiTrust both contain large collections of books, journals, and periodicals that are fully searchable online.

Omaha Illustrated: A History of the Pioneer Period and The Omaha of Today, published 1888
<https://archive.org/details/omahainillustrated00omah>

Omaha Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission

Your house or building may already be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a local landmark, or in a national or local historic district.

The website is rich with information about, homes, commercial buildings, churches, districts, and sites on the National Register of Historic Places, and/or on the Omaha Landmark registry, with links to the nomination forms. These reports provide detailed information on historic buildings in Omaha, and may be helpful in other research purposes.

Online resources include:

A history and overview of the Omaha's preservation program

The 1980 reference book, *An Inventory of Historic Omaha Buildings*

Reconnaissance surveys of historic Omaha neighborhoods

Historic images/postcards

Architectural drawings of notable historic homes and buildings

Overview of prominent historic housing styles

This website may be helpful as well:

<https://www.thisoldhouse.com/ideas/american-house-styles>

<https://landmark.cityofomaha.org/>

Nebraska Placemakers archive

Online resource for referencing the built history of Nebraska, showcased through architects around the state. The archive showcases the names and/or addresses of known works by each Nebraska architect, as well as prominent national architects who completed projects in the state. You can often locate buildings/homes by their historic name, or the address in the search bar. If you already know the name of the architect who designed your building, you can see a list of their other known works.

http://www.e-nebraskahistory.org/index.php?title=Place_Makers_of_Nebraska:_The_Architects

Nebraska State Historical Society (History Nebraska)

Learn more about the National Register of Historic Places, historic markers, and to determine if your income-producing or taxable property may be eligible for financial incentives to aid you in the rehabilitation process.

<https://history.nebraska.gov/historic-preservation>

History Nebraska also has an extensive online collection, available for reference, including: photograph and artifact collections, government records, newspaper index, photographs, and Nebraska maps.

<https://history.nebraska.gov/collections/research-and-reference-services>

City of Omaha Planning Department

Local Landmark designation is a great way to showcase the historic nature of your historic property. Contact the City of Omaha at 402-444-5150 for more information, or to help determine if your property could be eligible for local landmark status. The City of Omaha is also a recommended first step in determining eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places.

National Park Service Preservation Briefs

National Park Service Preservation Briefs provide guidance on preserving, rehabilitating, and restoring historic buildings. Subjects include: repointing masonry, repairing historic windows, and controlling unwanted moisture.

<https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm>