



RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF A BUILDING

Dallas Public Library web site: <http://dallaslibrary.org>

Texas/Dallas History & Archives Division web site: <http://dallaslibrary.org/texas>

7th floor – 1515 Young St.; 214/670-1435

Sources for information about buildings in the Texas/Dallas History & Archives Division of the Dallas Public Library.

These materials can help you determine when a building was constructed and/or remodeled, for whom it was built, the identity of the architect or contractor, and information about who has lived or worked in the structure.

Researchers will generally need to know three things to begin their research:

1. Address
2. Owner (if other than researcher)
3. Legal Description (Addition name/lot & block number)

1. City Directories -- microfilm 1873-1975; paper 1976- present; a few pre-1911 directories online

Older city directories have three types of listings:

- name (by name of person or business)
- street (after 1901; arranged alphabetically by street name and then by number)
- type of business or occupation (i.e. grocers, attorneys, banks, etc.)

Unless you know that a particular person or firm has occupied the building for its entire existence, it is generally most helpful to begin by tracing the address listings for a property.

To find the estimated date of construction, trace the street address back in time until it no longer appears in the directory. For example if an address is listed in the 1920 directory, but not in the 1919 directory, you can estimate a construction date of 1919. The estimated date of construction is backdated one year from the year of the directory because data was collected for the directory the year *before* it was published.

While you are checking the street listings, write down the name of the occupant for each year that you check. With this information, you can then check the alphabetical name entries, which give information about a person's occupation or the type of business that was conducted.

Watch the way street numbers are listed very carefully--the streets were renumbered at least two times (1891-92 and 1911). The 1911 directory gives both the old and new numbers. Listings by street address do not appear until 1901. Before this, people and businesses are listed only alphabetically with addresses following names or by the type of business. If the building you are researching pre-dates 1901, find the 1901 directory street listing and note the name of the occupant. Then try to trace the name of the occupant in earlier directories.

Online Directories: There are a handful of early Dallas City Directories online. Local historian Jim Wheat has posted directories for 1875, 1878-79, 1884-85, 1886-87, 1891-92, 1901, 1910, and 1911 at: <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.com/~jwheat/index.html#anchor2033590>. When using these directories, remember that the 1911 directory has both the old and new street addresses. If you look for a current address in a pre-1911 directory, you won't find anything!

2. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps – microfilm and online

These maps show the locations and street addresses of buildings, construction materials used, outlines (or footprints) of buildings indicating porches, number of stories, outbuildings, etc. Sanborn maps were not produced every year, but the microfilm for Dallas covers the period from 1885 until 1970 with varying degrees of completeness. See the "Sanborn Map Users Guide" at the Texas/Dallas History public service desk for more information.

Sanborn Maps from 1885 to 1952 are now available online. Researchers with a valid Dallas Public Library card may also access the maps remotely, and you may also access them on computers in the Texas/Dallas History Reading Room. For remote access, go to the Dallas Public Library home page (<http://dallaslibrary.org>) and click on the "Databases" link in the bar at the top of the page. You will see text reading: "To log in now, [follow this link](#)." Click on the link and enter your library card number (without spaces) and pin number (if you don't know it, try the last four digits of your telephone number or the last four digits of your Social Security number). The system will then return you to the database list. Click on "Texas Digital Sanborn Maps" link.

3. Bracey's Block Maps of the City of Dallas -- 1937, 1942, 1949, 1954, 1958

These maps are accessed using the legal description of the property and show ownership as of the date specified. They are available on microfilm filed under "Bracey's."

The Real Estate Data, Inc. guides (Texas/Dallas History holds printed volumes/microfiche for 1966, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1980, and 1984) may also be helpful. The guides list property ownership for Dallas and Dallas County by legal description. For some years, there are also name or street address indexes.

4. Archives Collections

Check the "Archival Holdings/Manuscripts Collection" guide or online at: <http://dallaslibrary.org/texas/archives/index.htm> to see if any of the holdings are relevant to your project. Among the most useful collections may be:

Emrich Survey Materials (MA 85.21) and *Historic Research Survey Materials of Dallas* (MA 88.22)

This project identified architecturally and historically significant properties in areas of Dallas that were within the Dallas city limits in 1940. The surveys are divided into geographic sub-areas, and the properties are listed alphabetically by street address. The survey includes photographs of the buildings as well as some stylistic and limited historical information.

City of Dallas Building Inspector Record Books (MA 86.9)

1905 - March 1970. The volumes contain handwritten records of building permits issued. Building permit records will give you a date of construction and any significant changes or additions. They may also give you the name of the architect or contractor responsible for the building. Permits were not required until 1925, but may have been issued earlier. You may also wish to contact the City of Dallas, Building Inspection Division, Central Files--located in the Oak Cliff Municipal Center. The telephone number is (214) 948-4318. They have microfilm of *some* (but not all!) of the actual building permits.

Dallas County Historical Commission Files (MA 86.7)
City of Dallas Landmark Records (MA 86.16)

These collections contain nomination forms and research for buildings that have received either Texas Historical Markers or the City of Dallas Landmark designation.

Dines, Kraft & Hexter Collection (<http://dallaslibrary.org/texas/archives/08918.html>)

This collection contains abstracts for property in the Lakewood area of East Dallas and a small area of Highland Park as well as job files (including architectural plans) from the Dines and Kraft Building Company for some residences in the Lakewood area. There are three indexes to the collection: a name index for property owners; a street index (with job numbers); and a job number index (with street addresses where known). The property abstracts are not indexed, but can be listed by legal description.

5. Newspapers

- Clipping files arranged alphabetically by subject or name; view subject headings online at <http://dallaslibrary.org/texas/vertical/index.htm>
- Dallas newspapers (microfilm); see <http://dallaslibrary.org/texas/newspapers.htm> for titles and date runs

- *Dallas Morning News Historical Archive (1885-1977)* is available online at all Dallas Public Library locations. Researchers with a valid Dallas Public Library card may access the archive remotely. Go to the Dallas Public Library home page (<http://dallaslibrary.org>) and click on the “Databases” link in the bar at the top of the page. You will see text reading: “To log in now, follow this link.” Click on the link and enter your library card number (without spaces) and pin number (if you don’t know it, try the last four digits of your telephone number or the last four digits of your Social Security number). The system will then return you to the database list where you can click on “Dallas Morning News Archive.” Researchers without a Dallas Public Library card may access the fee-based database at www.dallasnews.com. Choose “1885-1977 Archive” from the Archives column at the bottom of the first screen.

Hint: There are two search interfaces for the 1885-1977 database. The one under “Archive of Americana” searches articles and both classified and display ads at the same time. It also uses quotation marks to define phrases (for example: “state fair”). You can often find interesting information by searching the street address of your property – for example: “1234 Main.”

Newspaper articles may provide information about:

- activities that occurred at a specific address
- neighborhood history
- biographical information about property owners or residents
- biographical information about architects or contractors

6. Biographical information

The *Index to Biographical Studies of Texans* is a card file index to more than 165 biographical sketchbooks. It is particularly useful for locating information about relatively prominent persons in Texas from the mid-1800s through the mid-1930s and can be very helpful in locating biographical information about an architect.

Family Search (<http://search.labs.familysearch.org>) is a genealogical site that provides access to Texas death certificates from 1890 to 1976 and the Index to Texas Death Records from 1964 to 1998 (click on “Browse our Records” then on the map of North America – scroll down the list to the Texas databases), as well as records from many other states. It is useful in finding death dates for previous occupants so that you can check an obituary for the names of descendants who might have historic photographs or building plans.

7. Photographs

A number of Texas/Dallas History’s more than one million photographs may be viewed via the online catalog: <http://catalog.dallaslibrary.org/Polaris/>. Click on the “more options” link and then use the “Limit by” drop down menu to select “Digital Collection,” which will limit your search to photographic images. Type what you are looking for in the search box. Remember that sometimes using fewer words will get you more results. Click on the thumbnail image or the title to see a larger version of the image.

Other historic photographs are filed in a self-indexing subject file called the "Historic Photograph Collection Visual Index." Among the categories you might want to check are: Buildings; Businesses (for commercial structures); Streets; Houses; Schools; Theaters; Views of Dallas and Shopping Centers. Texas/Dallas History also has aerial photographs of Dallas/Dallas County from 1930, 1942, 1950, 1964, and 1979. These images may not be photocopied, but copy prints and scans can be ordered. You may use a digital camera (without flash) to take pictures of aerial photographs because they are in the public domain. Copy prints or scans of other collection photographs are available for purchase.

8. Magazines

- *Dallas* -- a magazine published by the Dallas Chamber of Commerce beginning in the 1920s. Issued monthly, the magazine is not indexed. It contains information about the construction of buildings and profiles on businessmen in Dallas.
- *Holland's Magazine* -- covers 1907-1953 except for 1912, 1922, and 1925. This magazine is similar to *Southern Living*; it is not indexed. Dallas homes are sometimes featured.

9. Books and pamphlets

Texas/Dallas History has many books on Dallas history, people, and events in the development of the city. Among the volumes that focus specifically on architecture are:

<i>American Institute of Architects Guide to Dallas Architecture</i> , 1999	720.97642 A512
<i>Yearbook of Dallas Architecture</i> , 1922	720.9764 D145Y
<i>Prairies Yield: Forces Shaping Dallas Architecture from 1840 to 1962</i> , 1962	720.9764 A512P
<i>Dallas Architecture 1936-1986</i> , 1985	720.9764 T659D
<i>Dallasights, An Anthology of Architecture and Open Spaces</i> , 1978	720.7964 D145

A number of other books with illustrations of Dallas buildings can be found by looking under "Dallas Descriptions Views" in the subject field on the computer.

11. Dallas maps

Texas/Dallas History has a large collection of historic maps of Dallas and Dallas County in addition to the Sanborn and Bracey's Block Maps listed earlier. Plat maps of Dallas additions, subdivisions, and city blocks from about 1880 to 1920 are included in the Murphy & Bolanz maps, online at: <http://dallaslibrary.org/CTX/murphyandbolanz/>. The Texas/Dallas History general map collection contains maps showing specific neighborhoods or areas of town, street railway routes, and utility services. A searchable guide to the general maps in our collection, including some digital Dallas maps, is available at: <http://dallaslibrary2.org/ctx/mapsearch.php>.

OTHER PLACES TO CHECK:

1. County Records

Deed Records (located in the Records Building) are another way to trace the owners of a property. To do this, you will need to know the name of the Addition and the Lot and Block number (or, for rural properties, the survey name and tract number). To start, you should know the name of the current owner. Trace the property back in the indexes going from grantee (buyer) to grantor (seller). Mechanics liens may also provide information about contractors and architects. Other public records such as probate records may also be helpful.

2. Previous Property Owners

Once you know the names of previous property owners, you may be able to find their current address or telephone number in city or telephone directories. Be considerate when contacting former owners, and show them the same respect you would want to receive if a stranger were contacting you to ask questions about your family and home. Some families may have kept personal records (photographs, remodeling records, etc.) pertaining to the history of house and their family. Ask if they have a property abstract, a collection of all the documents pertaining to the property arranged in chronological order. A property abstract can save a lot of work in the deed records.

3. Dallas Historical Society

Note: The Dallas Historical Society Library has limited hours. Please call for an appointment before you visit them. Their number is 214.421.4500.

The Dallas Historical Society has some of the same reference sources (city directories, books on Dallas history, etc.) that the Dallas Public Library holds. They also have picture and archives collections that may be helpful.

2/27/2010 Compiled by Carol Roark. Adapted from "The History Behind the House" by Kate Singleton and "Researching the History of a Structure" by Peggy Riddle.