

# Tracing the History of Your Historic Waukegan Home

The stories behind Waukegan's historic houses and buildings offer a fascinating glimpse into our city's past. Understanding the history of your house or building also helps in making decisions about future additions or changes.

These questions can help you get started:

1. *When was the house/building built?*
2. *Who built the house/building?*
3. *How did the interior and exterior originally appear?*
4. *Who were the previous owners/residents?*
5. *What did it cost to build?*
6. *How does the house/building fit the neighborhood?*

The first step in historic preservation is almost always documentation: that is, tracing the history of the building or other historic resource. Whether your goal is to pursue a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, to locally landmark the house/building, or simply to satisfy your curiosity, these tips will provide you assistance as you begin researching your historic house or building.



## **Begin with the building**

Examine the building carefully, both inside and out. Take precise notes on its current appearance: the building materials, style, and shape, as well as the number and style of windows and chimneys. Pinpoint changes in construction materials, building styles, or floor plan that might indicate additions or remodeling.

Establish an approximate date of your building by comparing its architectural style and building materials with popular trends in domestic architecture. Compare your building with others in the area; similar style and size may point to a common builder.

Read the landscape around the house to discover important features such as foundations of outbuildings, sunken gardens, or original property lines marked by trees or fences.

## **Explore existing resources**

Step back from the individual property and research the history of the neighborhood or area around it. Area histories provide insight how an individual property fits into the broader historical picture. Examine neighborhood, city, and county histories that describe how the area fits within the history of the larger city and often provides research clues for your specific property.

Find out from the Waukegan Historic Preservation Commission, the Waukegan Historical Society or the Illinois Historic Preservation association if your property has been included in a neighborhood survey or a National Register nomination.

Talk with older residents about the neighborhood's history: explore written or recorded oral histories. Talk to others who have lived in or near your building and ask them questions. Ask to see and make copies of old photographs, family papers, etc. that will assist you in determining the history of your building.

## **Delve into the documents**

Many types of documents can help you trace the history of a building – from deeds and tax records to printed maps and published city directories. Visit the Lake County Recorder of Deeds, the Waukegan Library. The Waukegan Historical Society, or other agencies and repositories for the following documents:

*Deeds.* Trace the evolution of property ownership at the Lake County Recorder of Deeds Office. Deeds will reveal who conveyed the property to each previous owner and the price paid. Look up the deed by the address, owner name, map and parcel number, or book and page number. Dramatic increases in land value often indicate that a piece of property was improved, helping pinpoint a date of construction. In Waukegan, the Lake County Recorder of Deeds Office is located at 18 N. County Street, at the northwest corner of County Street and Washington Street.

*Censuses and Wills.* Available for almost every year ending in "0" since 1790, censuses provide information about individual households, and beginning in 1850, information about individuals living within a household, including birthplace, occupation, education, and amount of property owned. Wills yield information about business dealings and family members, and may provide information about the

transfer of property. Check the Waukegan Historical Society and Waukegan Public Library for census records and the Lake County Recorder of Deeds for wills.

*Telephone Directories.* These list the names, addresses and telephone numbers of adult residents of the city. Telephone directories are usually organized alphabetically by last name. Also, advertisements for local businesses, real estate developers, and builders are often included. Some of Waukegan's telephone directories can be found at the Waukegan Historical Society and Waukegan Public Library.

*Sanborn Maps.* The Sanborn Fire Insurance Company published detailed maps of buildings in cities and larger towns from the 1870's to the 1950's. These color-coded maps show street names and addresses, and provide information about the size of a building, its construction materials, the number of outbuildings, and even plumbing and electrical details. Start with the most recent map and work backward; if your building is on one map, but not on the map previously issued, there is a strong possibility it was built in the years between those maps. Sanborn Maps may be available at the Waukegan Historical Society, Waukegan Public Library and Waukegan City Hall.

*Newspapers and Photographs.* Newspapers generally provide little information about specific buildings, unless you can identify a very small time period to research. Newspapers can provide useful information such as the obituary of a former owner, the construction and opening of buildings, or major events such as floods, fires, or tornados that have changed the built environment. Photographs that depict local streets, buildings, people and events can also be very useful. The Waukegan Historical Society and the Waukegan Public Library all have a variety of Waukegan-related newspapers and photographs.

*National Register Nominations.* Buildings may already be listed in the National Register of Historic Places individually or as part of a historic district. Nominations usually provide a great deal of information, including date of construction, architect/builder, and a building history. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency keeps copies of National Register nominations. The Waukegan Historical Society and Waukegan Historic Preservation Commission should also have some nominations.

### Other Resources

There are also several books available to assist you in understanding, describing, and recording the architecture and history of your building. The following is a list of available books:

1. John Blumenson. *Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms.* American Association for State and Local History.
2. Hugh Howard. *How Old is This House? A Skeleton Key to Dating and Identifying Three Centuries of American Houses.* Noonday Press.

3. Barbara Howe, et. al. *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History.* American Association for State and Local History.
4. Sally Light. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home.* Golden Hill Press.
5. Virginia and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Homes.* Knopf.
6. Steven Phillips. *Old House Dictionary: An Illustrated Guide to American Domestic Architecture (1600-1940).* Preservation Press.
7. Carole Rifkind. *A Field Guide to American Architecture.* Bonanza Books.

The following local offices are available to help you locate these and other resources which will assist you in documenting the history of your building:

Waukegan Historical Society  
1917 N. Sheridan Road  
Waukegan, Illinois 60087  
(847) 336-1859

Waukegan Historic Preservation Commission  
c/o City of Waukegan  
Planning and Zoning Department  
100 N. Martin L. King, Jr. Avenue  
Waukegan, Illinois 60085  
(847) 625-6878

Waukegan Public Library  
128 N. County Street  
Waukegan, Illinois 60085  
(847) 623-2041

Lake County Recorder of Deeds  
18 N. County Street  
Waukegan, Illinois 60085  
(847) 377-2575

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency  
IDNR-One Natural Resources Way  
Springfield, IL 62702-1271  
(217) 782-4836

Please call and check hours of operation and make an appointment before planning and research trip to any of these agencies.