

Tracing the History of a House or Building in Bellingham

Tracing the history of a house or building can be a fun and intriguing process. You can find information about the people who lived or worked there; learn the architectural style of the building, discover who designed and built it; and when it was constructed. Your research may even uncover facts about people and/or events associated with the building, as well as the historic landscape, or context, within which it emerged. Above all, researching the history of a house will give you an appreciation for its history and lend insight into the customs and lifestyles of your predecessors.

There are a variety of reasons people become interested in researching information about a building – genealogists may seek family information, realtors may be interested in quality selling points, and some may want to restore or remodel their home based on its original layout and design. Research will also reveal information necessary for historic nomination of your building. In this case, the information you gather should be focused on key points required by the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation survey forms, bringing you one step closer to local, state or national designation.

- **Local History and Migratory Patterns**

Understanding the history of your house is not just about dates and people, it's also about historic trends and patterns. Which ethnic group settled in your area and when did they arrive? Where did they come from? What local resources were available for construction? What were the prevailing architectural trends of the time? Answering these and other questions will provide the important broader context before you begin compiling the specific history of your house.

- **Getting Started**

If your home is located in the City of Bellingham, the first step would be to visit the Permit Center on the 1st floor of City Hall at 210 Lottie Street. Ask to see the microfiche on your address for building permits issued from the mid 1970s to the late 1990s. Permits from the late 1990s to the present are in the archiving process and need to be requested at the counter and pulled from storage. Their hours of operation are M-F 9-12 and 2 -4. Permits on file at the City show requests for remodeling, additions, and other changes to properties, and can provide leads regarding the construction history of more recent renovations. There are two viewers -- one prints for 25 cents per page.

- **Find the Legal Description of your House or Building**

You can find the legal description of your property by consulting the county tax records. You can access this online at <http://www.co.whatcom.wa.us/assessor/> and click on "Real Property Search." Read their terms for use and click on "I agree." This will automatically take you to the "Property Attributes" search page. Enter your street name, house number, select "Bellingham" from the Town/Area field and then click the "Address Search" button at lower right. Once this is confirmed, click the "Address Search" button

at the lower right again. You will find your house and others on the same block, with your parcel number listed in blue. Click on your parcel number and, you will access information about the property. (The Whatcom County parcel number is a 16 digit number comprised of the Township, Range and Section and other pertinent numbers.) This "Parcel Summary" contains the Legal Description of your property and includes the plat, block and lot number, enabling you to research additional information by parcel number or legal description. Besides tax history and details, this online resource also has fields at the top of the page for *Appeals/Permits/Sales*. These often provide ownership history from the early 1980s to the present. Additionally, in the *Building Details* field, you can find the (estimated) date of construction, square footage, foundation type, roof type, number of stories, etc.

You can also visit The County Tax Assessor's office on the 1st floor of the County Courthouse in downtown Bellingham on Grand Avenue to obtain this information, as well as copies of photographs from the 1930s - 1950s taken for assessment records. These images have been digitized and are on an in-house database that can provide some great views for exterior restoration work.

- **Tracing the Owners of your Home**

A chain of title can be accomplished with a visit to a title insurance company or a visit to the regional archives. A **chain of title** is the sequence of historical transfers of title to a property, and runs from the present owner back to the original owner of the property. Chicago Title has "Track Books" from 1889 with clean chain of ownership arranged conveniently by piece of property. Availability to the public varies with their business cycles—call ahead. If desired, they will prepare a history of ownership with copies of all deeds for \$50.00. Other title companies have this information on microfiche. You will need the legal description of your property to initiate a title search, and you may be charged a service fee. You can research your own chain of title at the Washington State Regional Archives branch on Bill McDonnell Parkway at Western Washington University.

- **Tracing the History of your home's Owners and Renters**

You can begin your search with the *R. L. Polk Bellingham City Directories*, which date back to the late 1890s and list the names and occupations of Bellingham residents. Beginning in 1931, directories were cross-referenced so that information can be searched by both address and last name. For example, once you establish who the homeowner was in 1931, you can trace the name (or other names you may have obtained through a title search) backwards and forward in time with the address section – referring to the name section to verify occupation or spouses. It is important to note that prior to 1904, there were two towns on Bellingham Bay – Whatcom and Fairhaven separated by today's Consolidation Avenue. New Whatcom and Fairhaven existed with the same boundaries from 1890 – 1901, and prior to 1890, there were four towns around Bellingham Bay – Whatcom, Sehome, Bellingham and Fairhaven dating back to the 1850s. Street names have also changed over the years, so a working knowledge of the history of your street name is helpful in this search as well. City Directories can be found at the Whatcom Museum, Bellingham Public Library, and the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies at Western Washington University.

- **Where to Look for Sources of Information in Whatcom County**

The following is a check-list of repositories and public offices in Bellingham that you should visit when conducting a house or building history:

1. Bellingham Public Library, 210 Central Street, 778-7323
<http://www.bellinghampubliclibrary.org/>
 - Polk City Directories list names, spouses, and occupations of previous owners. Beginning in 1931, cross-indexed with addresses.
 - Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps (microfilm and bound volumes) for various years provide structural data of properties in “footprint” format.
 - Local history collection provides community history, town leaders, etc.
 - Bellingham newspapers on microfilm are the diaries of the community and its early pioneers with social events, legal entanglements, and obituaries.
 - Bellingham Herald (microfilm) includes special real estate features for many houses (a partial index is available at the Reference Desk of the main library).
 - Guidebooks for researching your home’s history
 - Census data on previous owners <http://www.heritagequestonline.com/index>
2. Whatcom Museum’s Photo Archives Research Room,
201 Prospect St., 778-8952 <http://www.whatcommuseum.org/>
3. Washington State Archives Northwest Regional Branch,
Western Washington University, corner of 25th and Bill McDonnell
Parkway, 650-7934
http://www.secstate.wa.gov/archives/archives_northwest.aspx
 - Building permits issued after 1926
 - Historic deed books with “inverted index”.
 - Historic tax assessment records
 - Probate records of previous owners (requires death date—available at the Bellingham Public Library)
4. Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Washington University,
corner of 25th and Bill McDonnell Parkway, 650-7747
<http://www.acadweb.wvu.edu/cpnws/>
 - Photograph Collection (though houses are usually not the main feature)
 - Map Collection (original plat maps and historic features)
 - Michael Sullivan Collection (inventories by neighborhood)
5. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints -- Family History Center,
2925 James Street, 738-1849
6. City of Bellingham Permit Center, 2nd Floor, 210 Lottie Street, 778-8300
7. Whatcom County Tax Assessor’s Office, 1st Floor, 311 Grand Avenue,
676-6790
8. Family members of previous occupants

Resources at the Whatcom Museum's Photo Archives Research Room:

- Photographs, film, ephemera, maps, oral histories, videos of persons, places events and homes.
- PastPerfect database [An in-house searchable database on objects, archival materials, and photographs donated to the Whatcom Museum since 1941. Many of the materials may pertain to families or businesses in Bellingham.]
- City directories, cemetery records, books on local history
- Index to books on Whatcom County history
- Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for 1904, 1913, 1930 and 1962 in bound volumes.
- Copies of Tax Assessor Images from York, Columbia, Lettered Streets and South Hill Neighborhoods.



1200 Block West Holly Street, 1931

J. Wilbur Sandison, photographer; Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, WA

• **What to Look for when tracing the History of Your Home or Building:**

Archives, museums, libraries, and research centers have some similar research tools or sources. The following are items that should be explored at all repositories when researching for information about a building or the people associated with it:

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| ✓ Building permits | ✓ Ephemera |
| ✓ Cemetery records
(for info on date of death and in turn finding an obituary in <i>The Bellingham Herald</i> that will tell you tons of information about the home owners) | ✓ Estate or probate records |
| ✓ Census records (1920, 1910 [lists addresses}, 1900, 1890, 1880, 1870, 1860, etc.) | ✓ Manuscript collections |
| ✓ City directories | ✓ Maps and plats |
| ✓ County histories and atlases | ✓ Mechanics liens |
| ✓ Deeds | ✓ Newspapers |
| | ✓ Oral histories |
| | ✓ Pattern books (for houses) |
| | ✓ Photographs |
| | ✓ Physical examination/material culture of the house |
| | ✓ Sanborn Fire Insurance maps |
| | ✓ Tax assessments |