

Researching Your Old House in Charlestown

The important step in learning about your house is finding out when it was built. If you're lucky, the preliminary research has been done and is waiting for you in the Historical Reference Collection at the Charlestown Branch Library.

That's where you'll find the Boston Landmark Commission's **Charlestown Historic Resources Study 1981**, which covers several hundred Charlestown properties, such as dwellings, historic landscapes, or industrial buildings. Some properties have a page, with information about its approximate construction date, major alterations, architectural style historical significance, sometimes the first owner or builder, and a short bibliography. Other properties, such as a row or pair developed during the same time, are grouped on one form, with the same information above, with particulars about each address.

The study itself is in a half dozen white binders, organized by street. To see if your house is in the survey (only 300 of the 5,000 or so properties are) ask for the index at the desk. If your house is there, you've hit pay dirt. Ask for the volume that covers your street and make a copy of your house page. If the hand written page is hard to read – some are -- the **Boston Landmarks Commission** on the 8th floor of Boston City Hall has the originals.

If you don't want to hit to library, try the **Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS)** at www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcidx.htm and click "Search MACRIS database." This is the Massachusetts Historical Commission database of historic properties, which lists all kinds of structures, from dwellings to diners. You'll find the same elemental information that's in the Charlestown Study, but without the extensive text. Eventually MACRIS will digitize all the survey forms.

If you don't find your house in either place, don't give up. You may be successful in tracing its chain of ownership going backwards from the present in the deed books in the **Registry of Deeds** in Suffolk and Middlesex County. Just to complicate matters, Charlestown was part of Middlesex County until 1874, when it was annexed by the City of Boston and joined Suffolk County. So the deeds are in different places depending on date.

For the present back to 1874, go to the **Suffolk Country Registry** on the first floor of the New Courthouse on New Chardon St (M-F, 8:30 – 4:45). **For pre-1874**, go to the **Middlesex Country Registry** on Third St. in East Cambridge (M-F, 8:30 – 4:45). If your house is very old, the earliest records may be at the **State Archives** at Columbia Point; they are not in open stacks and must be requested, so call before you go.

At the registry, you're looking for the Grantor (Seller)/Grantee (Buyer) records. Bring along a copy of your own property records to find the book and page number that covers your purchase. Then look in the Grantee list for the name of the person from whom you bought the house, and you'll find the name of the person who sold it to that person. Keep on going back as far as you can. You'll get a hang of the lawyer

language after reading a deed or two and find that mortgages have been around for a long time!

Modern Records are online back to 1979, so either start at home & log onto the www.masslandrecords.com or start at the computer stations in the Suffolk County Registry. For deeds from present back to 1979, go to the actual Suffolk County deed books, which are kept in open stacks. Deeds from 1979 back to 1874 are on microfilm.

For deeds earlier than 1874, move on over to the Middlesex County Registry and look at the deed books there, many of which are quite beautiful and are in very good condition, unlike Suffolk County. You can also access Middlesex Deeds online through www.masslandrecords.com but only to 1946, so it's really not helpful to Charlestown.

Middlesex shortcuts: using WardMaps.com or similar site (*see below), find a 1875 Charlestown Insurance atlas; after finding the proper plate, not the owners name in 1875 and use that to begin the grantor/grantee search in Middlesex.

You can make copies of the deed book pages and microfilm records for a fee so take roles of quarters. In addition, though, take careful notes: record any descriptions and references to boundaries or adjacent owners. Note marginal comments especially those that mention other books or pages. Often these indicate a mortgage that's been paid off and can lead to previous deeds.

Other Resources

If you can't find the deeds you're looking for, or if you want to go deeper into the history of your house, here are other places to look:

Land Plan Books: Plan books show the layout of development as streets were planned. Ask for them at the **Charlestown Branch Library; these may have moved to the Copley Square Main Library**. They're indexed by year from 1860 to the 1880s, then alphabetically by street. Be aware that many early pages are missing.

Wills, Probate and Inventories: If people die intestate, deed records stop. But property is often mentioned, alas often divided among the heirs, and you have to look inheritors up in the Registry indices to find the trail again. Male names appear most often. Will and probate records are at the **deed registries**.

***Town and Insurance Atlases:** These are the Mapquests and Google maps of yesteryear. After the great city fires of 1871/2 in Chicago, Boston, & NYC, Insurance companies prepared them, with notes on number of stories, additions, materials used, etc. Sometimes owners' names are included: that's paydirt! They're at the **Bostonian Society Library, State House Library, State Archives, Athenaeum, City Hall** (in the City Clerk's office), **and the Boston Public Library**, Copley Square. Look (digital cameras are great here) to see changes in materials, a one-story el added, a second story added

later, and so on. **Now many of these are on line**; while actual copies may cost, most of these websites allow one to print from one's computer.

Town Directories: Yesterday's White Pages: private publications that list residents, addresses and occupations, but not necessarily building owners. Women (unless they're widows) don't show a lot. Usually these are street listings. Otherwise look for the names listed in the deeds for the corresponding years. Early directories sometimes omit house numbers, but residents are listed in order along a block. **Charlestown Directories** from 1834 to 1874 are in the **Charlestown Library's Local History Cabinet**. **Boston Directories** from 1875 on are at the Copley Square library.

Charlestown Newspapers: The *Bunker Hill Aurora*, *Bunker Hill Times*, *Charlestown Chronicle*, *Enterprise*, *News and Tribune* were all papers of varying duration. The **Boston Public Library** (Copley Square) and **State House Library** have most of them, but they are not very helpful for dating property.

Tax Records: Unlike other towns, these are difficult to use. They're at the newly created **City Archives in West Roxbury** now can often provide quite accurate house dating information. It's best to get an idea through the deed research of a date range – say 1846-50 – if you can, then contact the Archives with this information. It takes a little while, but sometimes the tax records will assess \$1300 in year 1851 with the notation unfinished, and then say \$2600 in 1852 – that's a pretty good pointer that a new house is completed. As the records in some years indicate occupants of the property (poll taxes are assessed on individuals) as well as owners for real estate taxes, one gets a very clear picture that Charlestown was developed a spec housing by many carpenter developers!

Building Department Records: Recent records are online. They're also at **Inspectional Services** at 1010 Mass Ave. Go in the afternoon after the hordes of contractors are gone, and ask for the "jacket" on your property. Plans, if they exist and may be only of a 1950's electrical upgrade and the like, are on microfiche; building permits that contain dates, names, materials, etc. generally are available but only for properties built since the very late 19th c. But finding the earliest date on a permit and noting the number of stories, owners, etc. can help especially in cases when a 2 story building is rehabbed to become a 3 story apartment – quite common in the 1880s and 90s.

Census and Vital Statistics: The ultimate source for births, deaths and marriages: great if you want to learn about residents, not property. **US Census** records are on microfilm at the **Boston Public Library**, Copley Square. For a small monthly fee, Ancestry.com allows you to access all of the census material on line, as well as directories.

Charlestown Atlases and Maps

You'll find some of these in the Local History Cabinet at the **Charlestown Branch Library**.

Maps: Tufts Map of 1818; 1833; 1852; 1839, 1848, 1851

Sanborn, Bromley, or Hopkins Atlases: 1875, 1885, 1892, 1901, 1911

Middlesex Registry Plan Books: various

Images: Mallory Panoramic View from Bunker Hill Monument, 1848

At the wonderful Leventhal Map Collection at the Copley Square Library is the McIntyre Map of 1852 of Boston, which includes Charlestown (also online). Quite important is there is *the very rare* and not online 1868 Sanborn Atlas of Charlestown and its companion the 1868/71 Atlas; neither has owners names, but do show brick (pink) or wood (yellow) materials, number of stories. The Sanborn company prepared the 1871 atlas by pasting over the old buildings if a new structure had been built. Much of the Leventhal collection is on line. And when next at the Copley Square Library, go to the new Johnson Building monumental stair hall: the McIntyre Map is printed on the floor in huge.

BOX OR SIDEBAR

Hints for House Detectives

Be patient. Some people are lucky and hit the jackpot early on. Some aren't and have to scamper all over looking for needles in haystacks, only to come up empty-handed. House research takes patience, persistence and attention to detail. But the joys of discovery are enormous.

Be prepared. Records tend to be dirty and heavy, so wear jeans and take a light purse/belly bag for your research stuff.

Take good notes. Write questions in a notebook, with space for answers. Pretend it's a term paper and keep references for all your notes: you may need to go back and recheck, and unless your notes are good you'll have no idea what your cryptic shorthand means.

Good luck...and have fun!

This article is excerpted with thanks from a talk given by Judy McDonough, CPS board member and former Executive Director of both the Boston Landmarks Commission and the Massachusetts Historical Commission.