

## Biography of a House Assignment

One of the most common tasks of a public historian is to research the history of a particular piece of property. Often the focus is less on the building itself and more on the people who lived there. This research exercise will help familiarize you with some of the sources most commonly used in such efforts--city directories, assessor's notebooks, architectural field guides, census and other vital records, and trawling the internet. In a few hours you will be amazed at how much you learn about the history of a single house. It is a short step from completing this assignment to writing a Historic Register Nomination. For the purposes of this exercise I will assign you a house, giving you the address and the city permit files. Here is what you will do:

1. Find the permit file for your home at the [City of Spokane Permit Archive](#). Don't get lost in every electrical permit, but do try to pull out important and relevant information. When was the home built? Who were its owners at different times? Were there significant remodels or changes recorded? Record the names of owners in particular.
2. Contact the owners! Email them first to set up a time to talk on the phone. See what they already know about the property. Questions to ask include: Who did you buy this house from? When did you move in? What do you know about previous owners? Do you have any old pictures or documents of the house (and if so, may I have copies)? What questions are you hoping that I will be able to answer? Take notes.
3. Use the City Directories to create a complete (if possible) list of who lived in the house, from the original owners to the present. This is sometimes called a chain of custody. What did the inhabitants do for a living? Were they owners or renters? What other facts can you get from the directories? (Hint: Check out the advertisements!) Make copies or take photographs of some of the most significant pages, making sure also to record the year and page number of the image. City directories for Spokane are available at the Eastern Region Branch of the Washington State Archives in Cheney (ERB), the Northwest Room at the Spokane Public Library (NW Room), and the Joel E. Ferris Research Room at the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture (MAC). UPDATE: City directories are also available online through Ancestry.com, which you may use at the city or (I think?) country libraries.



4. Find the parcel number for the property through this online tool:  
<http://www.spokanecounty.org/pubpadal/default.aspx> ~~or by using Google Earth Pro.~~  
Then request the historical Assessor's notebooks at the ERB. What additional information did you discover? Make a copy of the picture (if there is one) in the assessor's notebook. (Note: A very few of the assessors notebooks, including those for Cheney and the Shadle Park neighborhood of Spokane, are online at the Washington State Digital Archives at [digitalarchives.wa.gov](http://digitalarchives.wa.gov)).
5. Are there any covenants on the property? Covenants are legally-binding restrictions on what can and cannot be done with a property. Created by the developer who promoted the neighborhood, these are usually things like a minimum value for a home and restrictions against farm animals. [But some are much darker](#).
6. Do a Google Street View of the property. Go to [www.google.com/maps](http://www.google.com/maps) and search for the address. Once you find it, drag and drop the little stick figure man to the street in front of your property. Does the building still stand? How does it compare to historic images of the building? Sometimes you can see additional older street views-click on the clock symbol in the upper left-hand corner of the screen and use the slider. Do a screen capture of the images.
7. Now that you have an image of the home, what is its architectural style? See this page for help: <http://www.dahp.wa.gov/learn-and-research/architectural-style-guide>
8. Now go to the [Washington State Digital Archives](http://digitalarchives.wa.gov) and do some research on the owners. Look for marriage, birth, and death records, and whatever else you can find. How does this flesh out the story?
9. Do a general internet search for some of the home owners. You can also look for some of the employers of the people who lived in the house. What do you find? Here are some specific ways to search for people:
  - a. Use [FamilySearch.org](http://familysearch.org) for genealogical information. [Ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) is particularly valuable if you have access.
  - b. Make sure you poke around in the census records at the above--you can see where people were born, their race, and much more.
  - c. Use the [Google News Archive](http://www.google.com/news/archive) [Chronicling America](http://www.chroniclingamerica.com) to search for your people. You might also try [Google Books search](http://books.google.com).
  - d. [Mapping Inequality](http://mappinginequality.org) Is a fascinating website that will illustrate how your neighborhood was seen in the 1950s or so. Copy down some quotes.
  - e. Search [Spokane high school yearbooks](http://www.archive.org) at Archive.org for owner's children.
  - f. Finally, perform a general Google search for your owners. For common names try searches like "John Doe" + Spokane. Be careful in evaluating what you find--is that serial killer in San Jose in 1950 really the same John Doe who lived in your home in 1945? It is?! Wow.

10. Now you will need to take a trip to the NW Room at Spokane Public Library, Bring a camera as well as your notebook. Your tasks:
- a. Look up your house in the Sanborn Maps. These colorful maps include a wealth of information. Photograph the house you are researching and also the key at the beginning of the book so you remember what those symbols mean! (Note: The NW Room and the MAC research library have early Sanborns dating back to the 1890s. The ERB has a set from the 1950s.)
  - b. Check the clippings files at the NW Room for your people and neighborhood.
  - c. Check for photos of your house or neighborhood or people. Almost all of the photos held by the NW Room have been scanned and are online. Update: MAC photos are online as well.
  - d. Check the "Reverse City Directories" in the genealogy section of the library to see where you people got to as they moved away.
11. The final challenge is turn the raw information into a concise history of the home. Write a biography of the home. Include an appendix with copies of the original documents that you have found, neatly organized and clearly labelled. You might follow this outline:
- a. Introduction
  - b. History of the Building
    - i. When it was built and by whom
    - ii. A paragraph or two on the architectural style
    - iii. Paragraphs on any major changes and remodels. Keep an eye on the permit file.
  - c. History of the owners
    - i. A paragraph or two on each owner, so far as you have the information. You can write about where the people came from, what they did for a living, where the children went to school, and where they moved to.
    - ii. Follow with a simple list of the owners and dates of occupancy
  - d. History of the neighborhood
    - i. Working from Sanborn maps, what was the neighborhood like when the house was built? Were the streets wide or narrow? How did people get around--was there a street railway line nearby? Where would the children have played and gone to school? Where would the wife have shopped for groceries?
    - ii. How did the neighborhood change from then until now? Compare the early Sanborns with those from the 1950s to how the neighborhood appears today. Have the streets changed? Are many of the original buildings absent or altered? Has the socioeconomic structure changed? The Redlining site is useful here as well.
  - e. Bibliography of sources

12. Create a folder or binder with all the information, beginning with the biography. Assemble the entire thing into a single PDF file--the easiest way to do so might be to use the scanning stations at the JFK library.

For even more ways to research the history of a house, see this excellent page at the Spokane Public Library: [House History](#).

**Add to sheet:** <https://recording.spokanecounty.org/recorder/eagleweb/docSearch.jsp>  
& <https://ferrisarchives.northwestmuseum.org/>

## City Directories Recording Sheet

Address of Property: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]