



# How to Research Your Historic Home

Mark Kiefer, Beacon Hill Architectural Commission  
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# Overview

- Some basic rules of good research
- When was it built?
- Who built it?
- Who lived there?

# Some basic rules of good research

- Don't reinvent the wheel
  - Someone else may have done the work for you
  - Bibliographies from secondary sources are a great resource
- Go to the source
  - Hearsay doesn't make good evidence
  - Official records are most authoritative
- Trust but verify
  - “Facts are stubborn things”

# The history of Boston's buildings has long been the subject of scholarly research

- *Beacon Hill: Its Ancient Pastures and Early Mansions*  
Allen Chamberlain (1925)
- *Boston: A Topographical History*  
Walter Muir Whitehill (1959)
- *Beacon Hill: A Walking Tour*  
A. McVoy McIntyre (1975)
- *Beacon Hill: The Life and Times of a Neighborhood*  
Moying Li-Marcus (2002)
- *Beacon Hill: A Living Portrait*  
Barbara Moore and Gail Weesner (1992, revised 2008)



*Out of print books can often be found at local used bookstores (Brattle Book Shop) or through Amazon.com.*



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# When was it built?

- Three rules of real estate: location, location, location
  - North Slope developed first, but has also been more gentrified
  - Flat of the Hill is landfill and therefore newest
- Style and materials provide clues to dates of construction
  - As in fashion, designs follow distinct trends
  - Earliest houses were wood, and early brick has distinct appearance
- Photographs, maps, and atlases can chart a building's history
  - Historic maps show whether a lot has a building on it
  - Also show building footprints (aid to dating later additions)
- The government keeps a record of your deeds
  - Title deeds can confirm dates of construction or alterations and original owners

# Architectural style is an important indicator of the period of a building



## Federal Style (~1790-1820)

- Trapezoid lintels
- 2<sup>nd</sup> story parlor floor/tall windows
- Belt course
- Coarse brick in Flemish bond

**Swan Dowry Houses  
13-17 Chestnut Street  
Charles Bulfinch (1806)**

# Architectural style is an important indicator of the period of a building



**Greek Revival**  
(~1820s-1850s)



**Victorian**  
(~1850s-1900)



**Colonial Revival**  
(early 1900s)

Likewise the style of individual architectural elements reveals when they were likely added to the building

### Victorian (~1850s-1900)

- Bay Window

### Greek Revival (~1820s-1850s)

- Ornamental portico
- Greek columns



### Federal (before 1820)

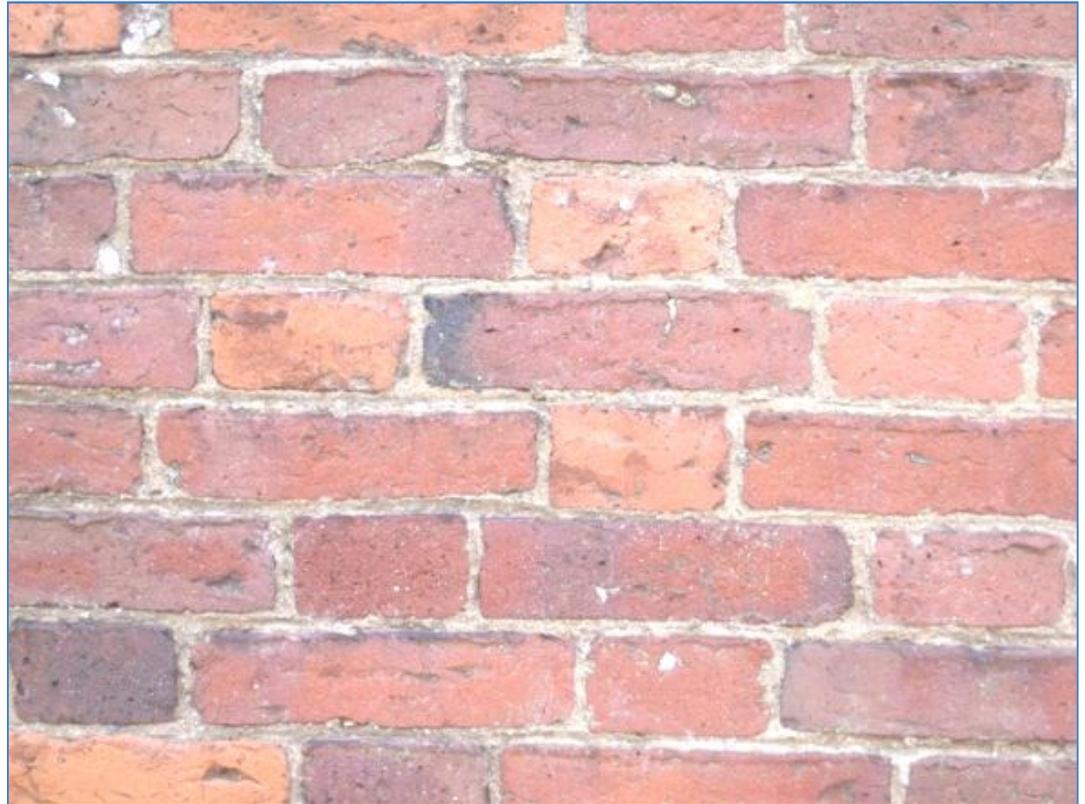
- Belt course
- Trapezoid lintels
- Triple hung windows
- 2<sup>nd</sup> story parlor floor
- Flemish bond

# Building *materials* can also provide clues to the date of a building's construction



- Wood construction (not brick)

**Middleton-Glapion House (1797)**



- Rough, uneven brick
- Flemish bond pattern

**2 Chestnut Street (1806)**

# Historic photographs can help establish the history of both architectural features and a building's use



**Chestnut Street in 1869**



**Myrtle & Joys Streets in 1870**

# Extensive archives of historic photographs are maintained by several neighborhood institutions

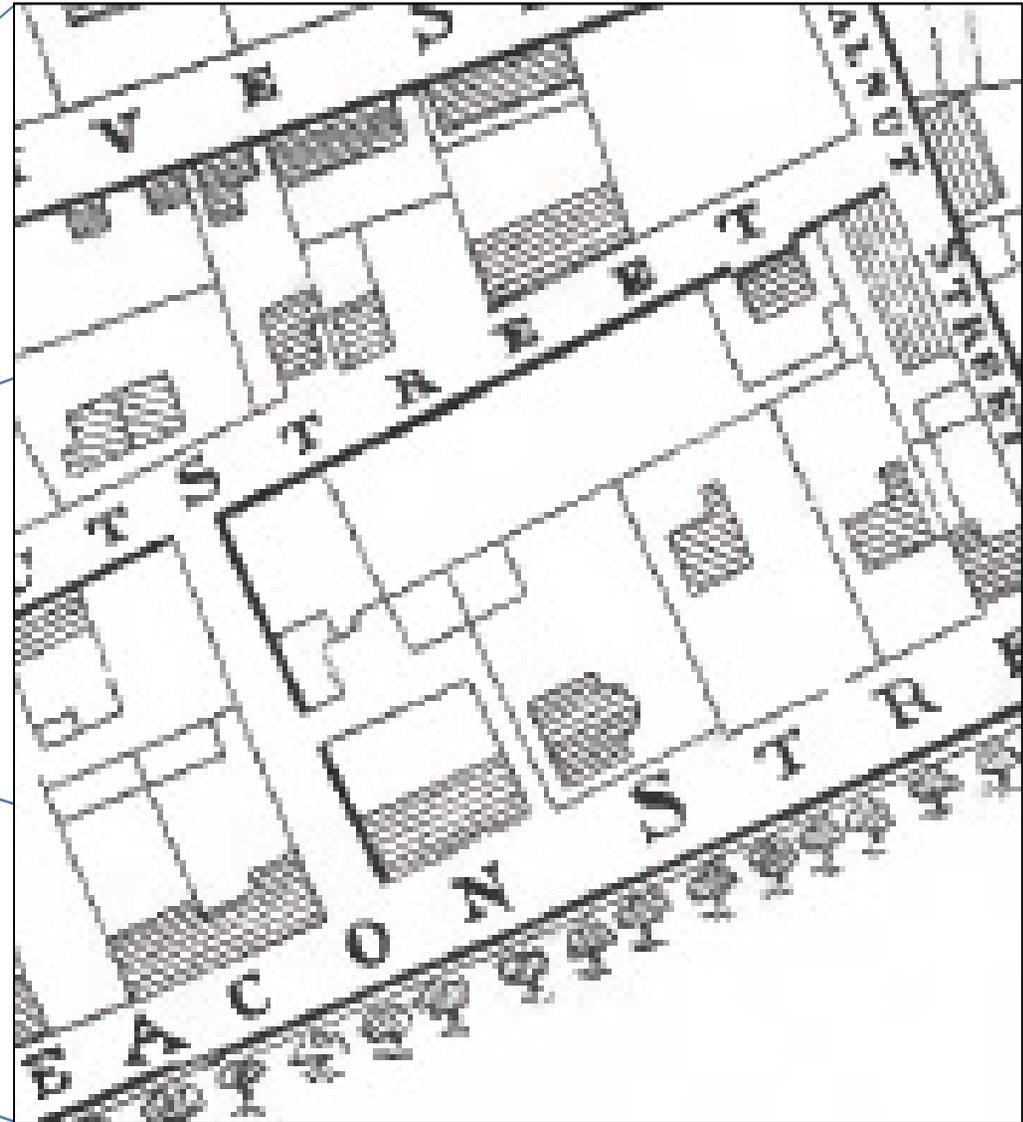
Organization	Address	Phone	Website
Historic New England	141 Cambridge St.	617-227-3957	historicnewengland.org
Boston Athenaeum	10 ½ Beacon St.	617-227-0270	bostonathenaeum.org
Bostonian Society	206 Washington St. (Old State House)	617-720-1713	bostonhistory.org
Boston Public Library	Copley Square	617-536-5400	bpl.org



*These archives are generally well indexed, so call first and ask if they have photos of your address.*

Historic maps show whether a lot had a building on it and the footprint of the building at the time

### J. G. Hales Map of 1814



# Sanborn Fire Insurance maps published between 1867 and 1970 show many building details

light blue: single family dwellings (D)    dark blue: institutions  
green: multi-family dwellings and apartments (F)    yellow: stores (S)



1895



1929



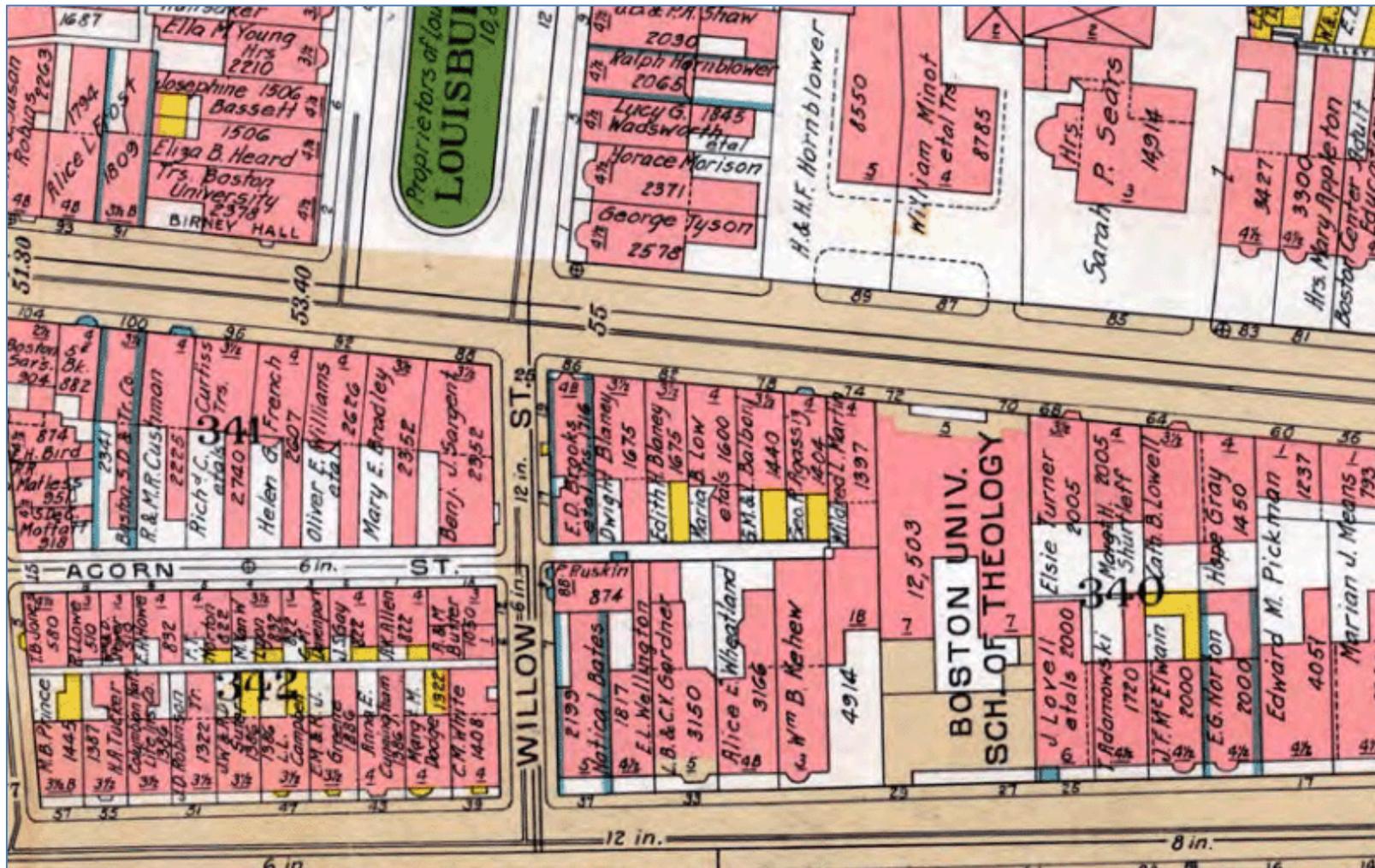
1962

# The Suffolk County Registry of Deeds maintains records of ownership dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century

- Each deed contains the names of both grantor and grantee
- It also contains a detailed description of the property, making it possible to date later additions
- Deeds are indexed with unique numbers, including the location of the deed on which the property was conveyed to the grantor
- This allows one to trace the history of the property back through its successive owners, possibly to the original
- All you need to know to get started is the address and current owner

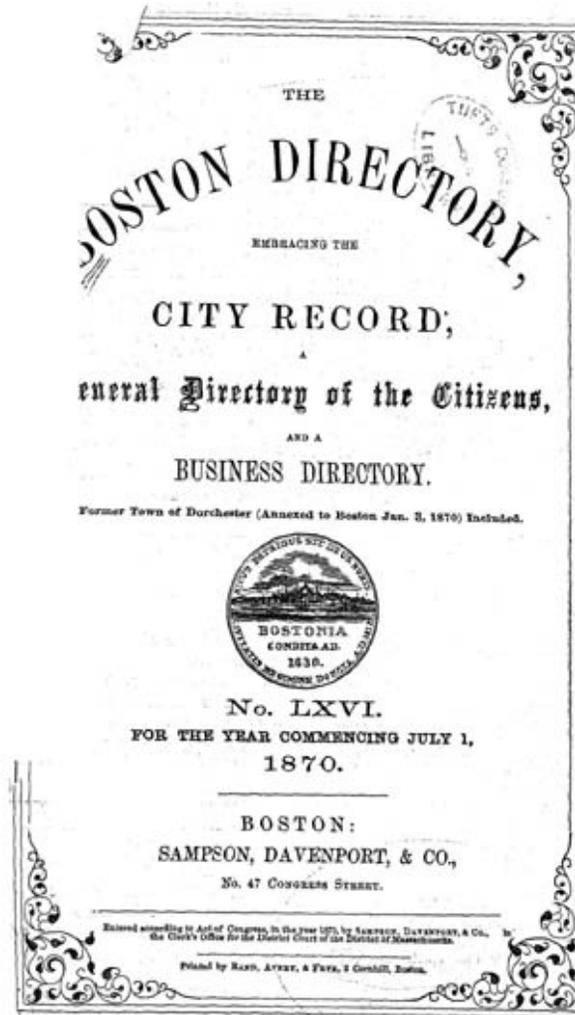
**Suffolk Registry of Deeds**  
**24 New Chardon Street**  
**617-788-8575**  
**[www.suffolkdeeds.com](http://www.suffolkdeeds.com)**

# G.W. Bromley & Co. Atlases show building footprints, lot size, and then-current owners



Bromley Atlas of Boston, 1938

# City Directories were precursors to the phone book and listed residents and businesses by address



- Indexed by street and by name
- Lists residents at each address
- Includes each resident's occupation and their work address
- Available in print at BPL; Tufts University now has several online

# The Museum of Afro American History is a great resource for the people and places of the North Slope



**African Meeting House  
Smith Court  
(1806)**

- Beacon Hill's North Slope is nationally significant in African American history
- Largest area of pre-Civil war black owned structures in the US
- A key center of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century abolitionist movement
- National Historic Site operated by the National Park Service
- The Black Heritage Trail includes 14 historically significant sites, most of which are historic buildings

# Genealogical records can provide more information about the people who've lived in your home

- Massachusetts Archives (220 Morrissey Blvd.)
  - Vital records (births, marriages, deaths)
  - Passenger lists for immigrants arriving at the Port of Boston
  - Census schedules
  - Judicial records
  - Probate records
- New England Genealogical Society (99 Newbury St.)
  - Genealogies
  - Family histories
  - Town histories
  - Genealogical journals

# The records of the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission are also a valuable resource

- All buildings that have been the subject of BHAC review have files maintained by the Environment Department at Boston City Hall
- These files reflect changes made to the exterior of buildings since the Historic District was established in 1955
- This information can help chronicle a building's most recent exterior changes
- They also often include old photographs or other historic evidence submitted in support of applications
- These files are open to the public and can be viewed upon request

# Summary of resources available in and around the neighborhood

- Historic New England
- Boston Athenaeum
- Bostonian Society
- Boston Public Library
- City of Boston Environment Dept. (Beacon Hill Architectural Commission)
- Suffolk County Registry of Deeds
- Massachusetts Archives
- Museum of Afro American History
- National Park Service
- New England Genealogical Society

# Questions?

Mark Kiefer  
Beacon Hill Architectural Commission  
[mark@markkiefer.com](mailto:mark@markkiefer.com)