How to Research Your Historic Home

Mark Kiefer, Beacon Hill Architectural Commission
October 25, 2011
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.
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
- 2nd 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:

**Federal** (before 1820)
- Belt course
- Trapezoid lintels
- Triple hung windows
- 2nd story parlor floor
- Flemish bond

**Greek Revival** (~1820s-1850s)
- Ornamental portico
- Greek columns

**Victorian** (~1850s-1900)
- Bay Window
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
  - 2 Chestnut Street (1806)
  - Flemish bond pattern
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

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<th>Organization</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historic New England</td>
<td>141 Cambridge St.</td>
<td>617-227-3957</td>
<td>historicnewengland.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Athenaeum</td>
<td>10 ½ Beacon St.</td>
<td>617-227-0270</td>
<td>bostonathenaem.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bostonian Society</td>
<td>206 Washington St.</td>
<td>617-720-1713</td>
<td>bostonhistory.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Public Library</td>
<td>Copley Square</td>
<td>617-536-5400</td>
<td>bpl.org</td>
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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

Images from Beacon Hill Site Through Time (http://web.mit.edu/fayefaye/www/Site_Thru_Time_040310.html)
The Suffolk County Registry of Deeds maintains records of ownership dating back to the 17th 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
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

- 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 19th 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 Morrisey 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