



# CITY OF BOSTON

## THE ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

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### **How to Research a Historic Building in Boston**

Boston is home to a wealth of historic architecture. Since its creation in 1975, the Boston Landmarks Commission (BLC) has worked to identify, document, and analyze the City's historic structures, the results of which can be found in Boston's *Comprehensive Cultural Resource Inventory*, located at BLC headquarters in Boston City Hall, room 805. This multi-volume document is a great place to start for anyone interested in researching a historic property within the city limits; however, there are several other resources in the City than can provide information about Boston's numerous historic structures.

When conducting research on buildings, two distinct types of information are generally sought:

1. architectural data, such as date of construction, name of architect, builder or housewright, building dimensions, construction materials, and physical changes over time; and
2. historical data, such as information on the original owner, residents over time, or any interesting events associated with the building or area. This guide focuses on the use of primary sources, such as public records, atlases, and historic photographs which, if used correctly, will yield information on almost any building.

### **Boston Landmarks Commission – National Register of Historic Places and local Landmarks**

(617) 635-3850      [www.cityofboston.gov/landmarks](http://www.cityofboston.gov/landmarks)

All National Register of Historic Places nomination forms and Landmark study reports for Boston properties are on file with the BLC and contain basic historical and architectural information and a bibliography. Staff is currently in the process of uploading all study reports to the BLC website. To learn if your property is listed on the National Register or is a designated or pending local Landmark, please contact BLC staff. For more information about the difference between the National Register and local Landmark designation visit: [www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcpdf/difference.pdf](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcpdf/difference.pdf).

### **Massachusetts Historical Commission - MACRIS**

[mhc-macris.net](http://mhc-macris.net)

If you are interested in whether or not your property has any designations, or to see if it has been included in an inventory or survey, MACRIS (Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System) will allow you to search the Massachusetts Historical Commission database for information on historic properties and areas in the Commonwealth. MHC is in the process of adding scanned forms and photographs to MACRIS. Users of the database should keep in mind that it does not include information on all historic properties and areas in Massachusetts, nor does it reflect all the information on file on historic properties and areas at the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

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## **City of Boston Inspectional Services Department – Building Permits**

(617) 635-5300      [www.cityofboston.gov/isd](http://www.cityofboston.gov/isd)

Located at 1010 Massachusetts Avenue, this department is the repository for all building/alteration permits issued from 1886 to the present. Building permits have been scanned and are searchable by a variety of fields, including address, online at [www.cityofboston.gov/isd/permitsearch](http://www.cityofboston.gov/isd/permitsearch). Original building permits are especially useful, listing the original owner, architect, builder, construction cost, dimensions, materials, and date. Alteration permits provide clues as to the building's physical evolution over time. While reviewing these documents, you may find a reference to a "bin number." Save this number as it corresponds to a storage bin at the Boston Public Library where the original blueprints may still be filed. Contact the Library's Research Services Department at (617) 536-5400 for assistance locating these plans (only pertains to buildings constructed from 1900-1970).

## **City of Boston Assessing Department**

(617) 635-3742      [www.cityofboston.gov/assessing](http://www.cityofboston.gov/assessing)

Property parcel data is available online through the City of Boston Assessing Department. Available information includes the assessed value, location, ownership and tax information for each piece of property in the city.

## **Suffolk County Registry of Deeds**

(617) 788-8575      [www.suffolkdeeds.com](http://www.suffolkdeeds.com)

Though often a tedious process, a title search is the only exact method to establish a chain of ownership for a piece of property. In addition to securing all owners over time, deed research reveals construction dates, original owners, changes in value and uses, and plot. While all Boston title searches begin at the Suffolk Registry of Deeds, many research efforts will require a trip to either the Middlesex County Registry (repository for Charlestown's and Brighton's pre-1874 deeds) or the Norfolk County Registry (repository for West Roxbury's pre-1874 deeds; Roxbury's pre-1868 deeds; Dorchester's pre-1870 deeds; and Hyde Park's pre-1912 deeds). The procedure for tracing a title is as follows:

- Beginning with the present owner's name and the building address, consult the most recent Grantee Index, an annual list of all Suffolk County property transactions (organized alphabetically by purchaser's name).
- Proceed backwards in time until a transaction involving the present owner and subject property is located; this will yield a reference to the Book and Page where the deed for the present owner is recorded.
- Locate this deed. Each deed contains the Book and Page number of the previous property transaction. This process is repeated until the original owner is found, with careful attention given to the description of the buildings and parcels conveyed as well as changes in boundaries or price. Buildings can be dated by noting the shift in a property's description from "a parcel of land" to "a parcel of land and the buildings thereupon."
- Retain a record of each deed reference, noting the following: Book and Page number; names and addresses of Sellers (Grantors) and Purchasers (Grantees); dates; prices; and property

descriptions. Breaks in the chain of title occasionally occur, indicating unrecorded transactions or inheritance of a property by an heir (see Probate Records).

The Registry clerks are available to assist you. Property deeds filed after 1/2/1978 are searchable online at [www.masslandrecords.com/malr/controller.plans](http://www.masslandrecords.com/malr/controller.plans). Scanned indexes from 1639 to 1920 and deed books from 1640 to 1900 for Suffolk County are available online at [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org).

### **Suffolk County Court House – Probate Records**

(617) 788-8300

Probate records relating to the inheritance of property are often necessary to complete the chain of ownership. The name of the deceased person is listed alphabetically within chronological volumes of an index, yielding a case number. The numerically indexed volumes listing these case numbers in turn provide volume and page references for each instrument related to the probating of the deceased estate (will, inventory, division of estate, etc.). These volumes are then consulted for copies of the instruments, many of which are now located in the Massachusetts Archives building at Columbia Point in Dorchester.

### **Massachusetts State House Library (Special Collections) – City Directories**

(617) 727-2595      [www.state.ma.us/lib](http://www.state.ma.us/lib)

Published sporadically between 1789 and 1800, and consistently thereafter, the City Directories list heads of households alphabetically and by street address, along with their occupations and ages. The business section contains addresses and advertisements for city merchants, artisans, and manufacturers.

### **Massachusetts State House Library (Special Collections) – Fire Insurance Atlases**

(617) 727-2595      [www.state.ma.us/lib](http://www.state.ma.us/lib)

Compiled by private surveyors (such as Bromley, Hopkins, and Sanborn), these maps depict lot lines, building foot prints, and building materials for all parcels within the City of Boston. Boston's first fire insurance map dates from 1874, and subsequent maps were published every five years. This collection is a valuable resource for dating individual buildings as well as the topographical development of whole areas. Incomplete atlas collections are held by the Bostonian Society, the Boston Athenaeum, and the Boston Public Library.

### **Boston Public Library – Norman B. Leventhal Map Center**

(617) 859-2387      [maps.bpl.org](http://maps.bpl.org)

Boston Public Library's Norman B. Leventhal Map Center has a large collection of maps of Boston. Many have been scanned and are available online. Other online map collections include [www.wardmaps.com](http://www.wardmaps.com) and [www.historicmapworks.com](http://www.historicmapworks.com).

### **Boston Public Library – Fine Arts Department (Copley Square)**

(617) 859-2275 or (617) 536-5400 [www.bpl.org](http://www.bpl.org)

This department's extensive card file contains eclectic information on specific Boston buildings and architects, including references to magazine articles, obituaries, prints, photos, and plans. For buildings constructed between 1878 and 1902, consult the *Index to the Boston City Inspection Reports*. Similar to building permits, the inspection reports are often filed with a sample floor plan.

### **Boston Public Library – Micro Text Department (Copley Square)**

(617) 536-5400, ext. 2018 [www.bpl.org](http://www.bpl.org)

Contemporary newspaper articles and obituaries can provide descriptions and other detailed information on buildings and biographical data on architects and owners. Complete copies of virtually all Boston newspapers are available on microfilm, however only obituaries are indexed. Thus it is helpful to establish the date of construction before searching for relevant articles. Some historic newspapers in the library's collection have been scanned and are searchable online at [www.bpl.org/electronic/newspaper.asp](http://www.bpl.org/electronic/newspaper.asp).

### **Photographs and Prints**

Early photos and prints are often useful in documenting the historic appearance of and subsequent changes to buildings and areas. Large and well-indexed collections of architectural photographs can be found at Historic New England ([www.historicnewengland.org](http://www.historicnewengland.org)), the Bostonian Society ([www.bostonhistory.org](http://www.bostonhistory.org)), the Boston Public Library ([www.flickr.com/photos/boston\\_public\\_library](http://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library)), and the City of Boston Archives ([www.flickr.com/photos/cityofbostonarchives](http://www.flickr.com/photos/cityofbostonarchives)). Smaller but still useful collections exist at the Boston Athenaeum ([www.bostonathenaeum.org](http://www.bostonathenaeum.org)) and the Boston Landmarks Commission ([www.flickr.com/people/bostonlandmarkscommission](http://www.flickr.com/people/bostonlandmarkscommission)).

### **New England Historic Genealogical Society**

(888) 296-3447 [www.newenglandancestors.org](http://www.newenglandancestors.org)

The Society's collection of manuscripts, diaries, published genealogies, and antiquarian histories are an invaluable resource in establishing the social prominence and community involvement of past property owners. For additional information on previous residents and tenants you may wish to consult the obituary index and the U.S Census Records at the Boston Public Library's Micro Text Department.

### **Boston Preservation Alliance**

(617) 367-2458 [www.bostonpreservation.org](http://www.bostonpreservation.org)

The Boston Preservation Alliance keeps files on major historic buildings and districts throughout Boston, which include newspaper articles, planning and development project permitting documentation and information on past advocacy initiatives.