

DOCUMENTING A PROPERTY IN GEORGIA

How and where do you research your historic building? Detailed research into the history of a building involves more than determining the construction date and style. It is important to know something about the neighborhood and era in which it was built, and for whom it was built. What was the owner's role in the community? What was his or her occupation? Was the building built for a prominent family or a working-class household? Was it built for speculation? Was a trained architect involved or was the design purchased from a mail-order house? What social events took place there? The information below is designed to help you find the answers to many of these questions about a historic property.

Many historical records are now digitized and made readily available online at both public and for-fee websites. An excellent public resource is the Digital Library of Georgia located at: <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/> However, most historic land and ownership records are currently only available at the county courthouse and/or Georgia Division of Archives and History (State Archives) so do not limit your research to online sources.

Part One

Every piece of ground has a legal ownership (title), whether it is the site of a prehistoric Indian village, a battlefield, a train depot, or a dwelling. All people lived in some sort of dwelling, but a person's occupation of a location does not indicate ownership, nor does ownership ensure occupation. Many owners have never seen their property. Many of the buildings that survive today are those of persons of some wealth and/or education who have left many records and estate papers. If you know the general historical era in which the building fits, where it is located, and who the present owners are, then the legal land records, estate papers, and other miscellaneous records listed below can help in determining its history.

I. LAND AND OWNERSHIP RECORDS

A. Tax Records: County tax digests are located in the county courthouse in the Office of the Ordinary (Judge of Probate) or the Tax Office, or at the State Archives. Original records for the period following the Civil War are complete for every Georgia county at the State Archives, and many pre-Civil War tax records are located on microfilm at the State Archives. Many Georgia counties have mapped and computerized the current information on every property in the county and have this information available for viewing through the county's tax assessor's office online. Current property records often have an estimated or known date of construction as well as a record of recent additions and/or outbuildings. City tax records are found at the city clerk's office in the city hall, where they often have a card on a building with some drawings, date, and space plan attached.

Questions and Suggestions:

- Is the building currently within the city limits of a town or city?
- Was it within the city limits when it was built?
- If it was not within the city limits when it was built, when did the city limits incorporate that land? (Example: Georgia tax digests indicate the presence of houses only within city limits, because taxable town property was located only within those limits.)
- Remember that many times landowners in Georgia paid taxes for all of their Georgia lands at their permanent residences. (Example: Senator Robert Toombs owned land in five counties, including a cotton plantation in west Georgia, but taxes on these lands were paid to Wilkes County, where Toombs had his permanent residence.) Out-of-state persons who owned lands in Georgia had to pay taxes in Georgia, but they usually did so through agents.
- The valuations of land that appear in the tax digests (until 1851) were based on the owner's personal evaluation (i.e., there were no tax assessors at that time). Therefore, you must consider what types of items people then considered to be valuable. A good example is the Cherokee valuations of 1836, which listed the following:

John Berge - Half Breed	
<u>Description:</u>	<u>Value:</u>
Kitchen 16 x 16 floor and chimney	\$ 35
Outhouse 20 x 18 floor and chimney	25
Smokehouse 16 x 14 floor	25
Crib and Stable 28 x 18	40
Stable 12 x 10	5
Double Stable 4 x 18 and lot	50

Major Ridge House (known as "The Chieftains," Rome, Georgia, today) dwelling house - 54 x 29 feet, 2 stories high, 4 fire places brick, 8 rooms finished in neat style, outside paraded [illegible], balcony on the side of house, turned columns, 30 glass windows, one glass door leading to balcony, 12 door facings and shutters painted, with first rate bolts and locks, parlor upstairs, finished in first rate style. . . neatly underpinned with rock - \$5,100

B. Deeds: These are located at the county courthouse in the Office of the Clerk of Superior Court or at the State Archives on microfilm. (The State Archives has microfilmed only those dating before 1900.)

Questions and Suggestions:

- Remember that deeds were not required to be recorded; they were valid even if they were not recorded.

- When was the land beneath the building first opened for white settlement?
- How far back, starting with the present owner, can you trace the ownership (i.e., the deeds or title) of the property? Unless the deed records have been burned or have not been recorded, you should be able to trace the land to the original grantee. It is always best to start with the current legal owner, since 20th-century transactions require a title check of approximately 80 years and this saves much time. Be sure to check with the owner for his/her legal title.
- Remember that many times the deed is actually dated after years of partial payments; therefore, occupation may have taken place several years prior to the date on the deed.
 - What values has this property sold for? Is there any noticeable change of value to indicate the possibility of a house being there or additions being made to the building?
 - What can deeds normally show a researcher regarding the presence of a house? (Actually, very little unless it was located within city limits, and even then, its presence is questionable. For example, a sharp rise in value of the property or the mention of the house indirectly in the deed would indicate its presence.)
 - What if the courthouse has burned and all deeds have been lost? In this case, the following records may be helpful: census lists; city, business, and social or other family papers; the families may have copies of deeds, perhaps in safety-deposit boxes; newspaper accounts of purchase and building; or, as a last resort, oral tradition.
 - Deeds are not the only items to be found in the Deed Index of the Superior Court. Many times, mortgages and liens on property are just as valuable in documenting a building and are either indexed with the deeds or in separate indices, all in the Clerk of the Superior Court's office or on microfilm at the State Archives.

C. Estate Records: These are located at the Office of the Ordinary (Judge of Probate's office) in the county courthouse, and on microfilm at the State Archives for records prior to 1900. They can often help in determining the existence of a house.

Questions and Suggestions:

- Types of estate records include wills, administrations of estates, inventories and appraisements, annual returns, and sales.
- Inventories and sales show values and apparent wealth and size of a dwelling (i.e., the presence of a house is shown when furniture is sold), as well as the placement of furniture in various rooms (in case you want to restore it to a certain period), provided the owner died while in ownership of the house.

- Wills and administrators' records sometimes indicate information relative to property changes. The published index for Georgia wills to 1860, written by Ted O. Brooke, 1976, is *In the Name of God, Amen: Georgia Wills, 1733-1860*.
- Check for sales of land which were never recorded by deeds and for rental information.

D. Census: Census records are located at the State Archives, the University of Georgia, and the National Archives-Southeast Region in Morrow, Georgia, as well as at many local public libraries. Types of censuses to be found include: population (located in the three named repositories as well as many public libraries); slave (1850 and 1860); agriculture and manufacturing schedules (for 1850-1880) located at the three repositories and some public libraries. The agricultural census records show acreage, crops, and livestock. Population census records for 1880 and afterwards indicate house numbers and in 1900 whether someone owns or rents their property. Georgia population census records exist from 1820-1880 and 1900-1930. There are census indexes of some type for each of these years.

II. INSURANCE RECORDS

Check to see if the insurance records for the property exist either in the hands of the owner, previous owners, or at the insurance company's main office. The main office could be overseas; for example, insurance records in England turned up plans to a warehouse in Savannah. When checking with an insurance company, always ask for the owner by name, since that is how the files will be set up, not by a name given to a house. (Example: *A View of Richmond, Virginia, 1796-1805 Through the Mutual Assurance Society Records*, by Elizabeth Z. Macgregor, University of Virginia, master's thesis, 1972). If the original records exist, they will include a floor plan and date of construction. If nothing else, the insurance company logbook will show data that will indicate an increase in premiums when changes were made to a building.

III. MAPS

The best sources for Georgia maps are the Library of Congress, the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the State Archives/Surveyor General Map Collection, the University of Georgia Map Collections (Hargrett Rare Book Library and the Science Library), and the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah. An excellent online source is the Digital Library of Georgia: <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/>

Following is a list of maps that can be obtained:

- **U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Topographical Maps** Current USGS maps are available for purchase online from the U.S. Geological website at: <http://store.usgs.gov>. The National Register of Historic Places uses the 7.5 minute topographical maps. Historic USGS 15, 30, and 7.5 minute topographic maps for Georgia from the 1880s through the 1950s are available online at the Digital Library of Georgia website or at the

State Archives.

- **County maps** can be obtained at:
<http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/DOTmaps/DOTmaplist.htm>. This web site also has a Historical Atlas section and contains historic maps, listed by county. Historic maps are also available at the State Archives and on the State Archives website at:
<http://sos.georgia.gov/archives/>
- Older **town maps** are hard to find, and there is no general source, so check at the courthouse, city hall, or in printed books. A guide to Georgia's circular town plans, dates of creation, and town limits is Howard A. Schretter's *Circular Corporate Limits in the United States, Their Origin, Distribution, and Implications* (master's thesis, University of Georgia, 1959). Another source is *The First One Hundred Years of Town Planning in Georgia* by Joan N. Sears, (1979).
- An example of **private maps** is the collection of those associated with Hofwyl Rice Plantation, which was held by the family and acquired by the State of Georgia when it received the property.
- An example of **insurance maps** are the Sanborn Company's maps. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps were published for most incorporated towns. They are useful maps for determining a building's age, location, use, footprint, construction material, and number of stories. Sanborn Maps are one of the most useful resources for historic preservation research in Georgia. These are now available on-line at:
<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/sanborn>. Another good source for the maps is the University of Georgia's Science Library map collection. They are also available on microfilm at Georgia State University, and in the Decatur, Georgia, public library, and at the Atlanta History Center in Atlanta. A list of all Sanborn Maps known to exist is published in *Fire Insurance Maps in the Library of Congress: Plans of North American Cities and Towns Produced by the Sanborn Map Company* (1981).
- Check with the State Archives/Surveyor General Map Collection for **land-ownership maps**, which are most helpful primarily where rural areas are concerned and where the deeds might be lost.
- **Panoramic or bird's-eye-view maps** can also be found by checking with the State Archives/Surveyor General Map Collection, local historical societies, and the Library of Congress. These are useful in showing buildings, especially outbuildings, which existed at a certain point in time. See John W. Reps, *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* (University of Missouri, 1984).

IV. DIRECTORIES

Most directories will be located at local historical societies or at city libraries, as well as at the Library of Congress. Some types of directories are:

- **City directories** usually include only property within city limits, and they contain information such as occupants of dwellings by alphabetical listing and by addresses and businesses. Some contain information on farm property, as well as architects. A listing of known Georgia city directories and their locations can be found in *Georgia Research: A Handbook for Genealogists, Historians . . .* (2001) compiled by Robert S. Davis, Jr., and Ted O. Brooke for the Georgia Genealogical Society.
- **Business directories**, similar to city directories, apply primarily to large cities. Some general ones are the *Southern Business Directory* and the *General Commercial Advertiser* [sic] (Charleston, South Carolina, 1854), which list merchants and advertisements.
- **Social directories** contain good advertising, with individuals being listed alphabetically and by streets. Individuals listed are usually the socially "elite" group in each particular city; directories usually contain good engravings, as well as lists of hotel occupants.
- **Telephone lists or directories** are only available for the years following the invention of the telephone in 1876, usually after 1900.

V. BOOKS

Consult the *Georgia Bibliography: County History* (1979) which is a list of county histories. Other sources include the *United States Local Histories in the Library of Congress: A Bibliography* (1975, five volumes). James E. Dorsey's several bibliographies of Georgia books, include *Georgia Genealogy and Local History: A Bibliography* (1983), which is important because it lists articles and books by county. Also check Dorsey's annual updates of Georgia history and genealogy in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* and the *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly*. There are many more ways to search for books using the Internet.

VI. NEWSPAPERS

Check the University of Georgia's listing of microfilm in the state newspaper collection (available at: <http://www.libs.uga.edu/> or at the Main Library). Search at the county courthouse, the newspaper office, the local library, and the *National Union Catalog of Newspapers* to locate any newspapers for the period you are researching. Many pieces of information may be found in newspapers, including architects and building dates. Some digitized and searchable newspapers are located on the Digital Library of Georgia's website: <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/MediaTypes/Newspapers.html>

Questions and Suggestions:

- Was the building mentioned in the newspapers of the period (which newspapers may or

may not still be publishing)? Normally, only buildings built within a town are mentioned, since those in the country were too far away from the center of activity.

- Newspaper clippings are kept by the Historic Preservation Division, filed by county, since c.1960.
- Legal advertisements are also sometimes found for regular or estate sales, in which the house and outbuildings, especially of plantations, are described.

VII. FAMILY HISTORIES AND RECORDS

Family histories may indicate various persons who owned the house, or a change of owners, which could be due to marriage, remarriage and/or inheritance, particularly where a deed was not mandatory. Check with the present owners, at the State Archives, and in the *Genealogies in the Library of Congress: A Bibliography* (1972, with supplements). Always be sure to check for family papers, as well as diaries, ledger books, record books of any type, and letters, pictures, deed, and estate papers relating to the family that owned the building. Many families who have lived in the same building for a century have, in many instances, never thrown anything away. Again, also consult the Internet.

VIII. ARCHITECTS AND PLANS

Check for city tax records and also contact the city clerk; cards are kept on file in some cities concerning each house, with an outline of the building included on its card. In the case of railroad depots, school buildings, post offices, Masonic temples, and other such buildings, check with the headquarters of the present organization or firm that built the building. Another possibility is that the building was built by a well-known person or architect and thus perhaps rated mention in the press at the time of its construction or at a later date. There is also a possibility of drawings and plans still in existence for the building. The Atlanta History Center has collected the original plans of many Atlanta-based architects. Other libraries and archives with collections of architectural plans are: the State Archives, Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Georgia, Columbus State University, the Washington Memorial Library in Macon, and the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah.

IX. UNUSUAL SOURCES

Among those sources which may not be readily known are the following:

- An article by D.J. DeLaubenfels, "Where Sherman Passed By," which appeared in *The Geographical Review*, Vol. XLVII, No. 3 (1957), pp. 381-95, and in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* (under another title), Vol. XLI (1957), pp. 288ff, indicates houses Sherman passed on his way from Decatur to Milledgeville, Georgia.

- The 1798 Federal Direct Tax Assessment, "An Act to provide for the valuation of lands and dwelling houses." (Acts of the Fifth Congress, Second Session, November 1797). This will indicate the size of houses, the materials used in construction, and the owners of these houses. This tax record exists only for a few Georgia counties in existence in 1798. Those existing on microfilm can be found at the State Archives. There are several new publications on this source, so search the Internet.

X. CITY RECORDS

These records, which are located at the office of the city clerk in the city hall, consist mainly of the town minutes, ordinances, and local laws, which may be of some benefit. Also, business licenses may be available to prove when someone started a firm. City tax records (see above) are also of assistance to the researcher, as well as a published list of improvements appearing in newspapers.

XI. GAZETTEERS

Gazetteers can be good sources for information on rural areas, businesses, and towns. Although earlier gazetteers exist, those that are helpful in documenting historic buildings are those that were published in Georgia from the mid-1870s to about 1915. Gazetteers include valuable details about small communities. The information is arranged in alphabetical order by name of community and within each entry is a list of businesses or owners of businesses. The entries resemble a mini-city directory. They do not list street addresses but give useful statistical data on the community: population, rail connections, churches, banks, etc. They do not list all citizens, just ones in key businesses, or in small towns, all businesses. One of these, *The Georgia State Gazetteer and Business Directory* for 1881-82, lists owners by types of business. (For example, flour and gristmill owners are listed by towns, alphabetically; other occupations are listed as well.) The University of Georgia, the State Archives, the Georgia Historical Society, and the Atlanta History Center are the best repositories in which to seek gazetteers.

XII. PHOTOGRAPHS AND POSTCARDS

Be on the lookout for photographs and postcards pertaining to the site you are researching. Daguerreotypes were introduced in 1839, so photographs after this year may be available. After the 1890s, photographs were sometimes made into postcards. Present owners of the house may know of the location of this type of material. The only large collections of postcards are found at the University of Georgia, the Georgia Historical Society, the Atlanta History Center, State Archives, and the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library. Many of the institutions mentioned here have now digitized their photo collections, so be sure to check their online collections, as well as their Special Collections. The Digital Library of Georgia can be searched by county, time period, collection, and holding institution. The comprehensive list of photographs available is located at: <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/MediaTypes/Photographs.html>

XIII. PERIODICALS

In 1889, the *Southern Architect and Building News*, an Atlanta-based periodical, was established and continued into the 1930s. This is a valuable source for many major works of architects, as well as lists of buildings being constructed in other towns. Plans and other illustrations often accompany various articles. Although there is no known complete collection of this periodical, those issues which do exist at the Atlanta History Center and Emory University provide much insight into the building programs. Similar periodicals exist for all areas of the nation, as well as the national publication, the *American Architect and Building News*, located at Southern Polytech in Marietta or at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. Other titles available in the Architecture Library at Georgia Tech include:

*American Architect
Architect and Engineer
Architectural Forum (Brickbuilder)
Architectural Record*

Some editions of the *American Architect and Building News* are available online through Google books: <http://books.google.com/>

The most useful periodical located to date is the *Manufacturers' Record* that can be used at Georgia State University and on microfilm at Emory University. Some editions are available online at Google books: <http://books.google.com>. It lists buildings underway, and often their architects, from the 1880s through the 1950s. The *Industrial Index*, a similar publication, covering 1912-1950s, can be found at the Bradley Memorial Library and at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia.

Part Two

Georgia's land was originally distributed under two systems: the headright and bounty system and the land lottery system. The first system distributed those lands obtained from the Native Americans prior to 1803 and generally east of the Oconee River (east of present-day Milledgeville). The second distributed those obtained from the Native Americans from 1803 to 1832, which was approximately the remaining two-thirds of the state to the west, north, and south of Milledgeville.

I. HEADRIGHT AND BOUNTY GRANTS

Started in the colonial days after the end of the trusteeship, this system continued until all land in those counties, after they were opened, was distributed. For all lands opened after the American

Revolution, there are plats available which give the size and dimensions of the farms as they were parceled out to the applicants. These do not give any data about dwellings except in rare cases and should not be relied upon for this information.

II. LAND LOTTERY

Eight lotteries were held from 1805 to 1832. By 1832, attempts had been made to distribute all of Georgia's land after the Native Americans were removed. Some land had to be regranted after original grantees failed to pay fees, and many acres in fractions, instead of whole lots, were sold in special sales after the regular lotteries. Indian reserves should also be taken into account, such as the Coweta Reserve, McIntosh Reserve, Indian Springs Reserve, etc., as these were sold separately, as were the town lots. If the proper Land Lot number is known, the State Archives/Surveyor General Department can give you the name of the original grantee and the date granted, from which date the title to the property begins. A person could not legally sell the land he/she held until it had been officially granted by the governor, but many persons swapped land, as they were not required to occupy the land. So the earliest deeds on a property may not reflect the lottery winner, but perhaps a friend or a relative, or the deed may have been recorded in the county of the lottery winner's residence before the new county was ever organized.

A source of information concerning the distribution of Georgia's land is *Hall's Original County Map of Georgia* (1895), which is available at the State Archives. Also check James C. Bonner's *The Georgia Story* (1961), a textbook that includes information concerning the distribution of lands by the treaties that were signed. Farris Cadle's book *Georgia Land Surveying History and Law* (1991) offers a comprehensive study of Georgia's land history.

OTHER SOURCES

Davis, Robert S., Jr. *Research in Georgia*. Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1981. This book includes a special section on Georgia's land records and how to use them.

Merritt, Carole. *Historic Black Resources*. Atlanta, GA: Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 1984. Available on HPD's website at: <https://www.dca.ga.gov/georgia-historic-preservation-division/national-register-research-survey/national-register-historic>

O'Donnell, Eleanor. *National Register Bulletin: Researching a Historic Property*, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991, revised 1998. Includes a research chart and a bibliography. Available online at: <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/index.htm>

Check the Historic Preservation Division's web page at: <https://www.dca.ga.gov/georgia-historic-preservation-division/national-register-research-survey/national-register-historic> for other guides and resources.

The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs serves as Georgia's state historic preservation office. Its mission is to promote the preservation and use of historic places for a better Georgia.

HPD's programs include archaeology protection and education, environmental review, grants, historic resource surveys, tax incentives, the National Register of Historic Places, community planning and technical assistance.

* * *

This publication has been financed in part with federal funds from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, through the Historic Preservation Division formerly of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products or consultants constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior or the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., HPD Historian (2003)
Revised April 2011 by Gretchen Brock and Lynn Speno