

## RESEARCHING THE OLD HOUSE

The two approaches to researching and dating an old house are through the study of its physical features and a detective type study of the paperwork associated with the home. A combination of both procedures is usually necessary to construct an accurate history of a dwelling. Each house has its character, its own story and architectural reflection. Old houses are a connection to the past and can reveal much about the builders and subsequent owners.

"Old" houses, as research defines them, are east of the Appalachian Mountains and pre-Civil War Era, or older than 1860. The styles that are included in this category include the Colonial (1670-1820), Georgian (1735-1790), Federal (1790-1820), Greek Revival (1810-1860), and Gothic (1840-1860).

Colonial homes were fashioned after the immigrants' homelands, including England, Holland, Sweden, Germany, France and Spain. Huge, massive chimneys, plank window frames and hand forged nails and hinges typify these dwellings.

The Georgian structures were more formal, using a square plan with hipped roofs, classical columns, brass hardware and double doors. They were styled for the wealthy and were detailed and generous with decoration.

Federal period architecture included brick or frame clapboards or smooth-fitted matchboard with a rectangular plan. Curving stairs, end chimneys, center entrances and dentil cornices are indicators of this time period, as well.

Greek Revival characteristics are the gables, small spindly chimneys, massive columns and attic windows beneath the eaves.

Gothic period homes feature vertical or arched windows, steep pitched roofs and "carpenters lace" or "gingerbread" trim.

These "old" homes themselves aren't located here in the Midwest but their architectural influence is. As with all building, ideas were merged and houses became composites of a variety of designs. Originality on the part of carpenters and owners, coupled with regional trends and styles, contributed to a wide variety of constructions.

Following the Civil War, the Victorian house style, named after Queen Victoria of England, became popular. The main trait is an abundance of decorative trim. Other characteristics are high porches, steep gable roofs, tall windows and towers or "turrets". Inside they featured high ceilings, long halls and dark stairways.

Other styles of this post Civil War era are Italianate, Empire or Mansard, Stick style, Queen Anne and Shingle style. Italianate features overhanging eaves, cupolas and towers and cast iron hardware. The empire is a square house with a Mansard roof, sometimes of metal or slate, decorative

dormers, and windows with colored glass. Stick style structures used geometric designs of wooden strips to resemble framing, intersecting gables and large verandas. The Queen Anne elements are corner bays and turrets, small recessed balconies, decorative shingles and encircling porches. The Shingle style is a rambling, rustic style, shingled in cedar, and having big room-size hallways, stone fireplaces and wide porches.

Aside from the clues given by the overall architectural style of a dwelling, specific construction methods and materials that can also add information to the search and study of the house are the foundation, framing structure, masonry, plaster, floor boards, doors and windows, roofs, hardware, and nails. Each of these elements has a number and wide range of variations, with individual histories for each. An example would be the nail. Prior to nails, wooden pegs were used. In the 1600's, hand forged nails were made of soft iron. As methods of production changed, so did the product and nails can be dated to aid in solving the mystery as to exactly when a house was constructed.

The complications and hurdles in completing a house search are primarily caused by remodeling through the years. As trends changed, walls were removed, room use altered and additions constructed. Paneling, coats of paint or texture, conceal many hidden clues in a home. A major task awaits those who attempt to restore a home to its original state!

The paperwork aspect of researching a house's history can be intriguing. Records found at the County Court House provide dates and data through wills, deeds, mortgages, and tax and ownership maps. Historical societies may have diaries, bills of sale of materials used or letters with information. If the house is less than 100 years old, all of the deed information may be available if a Title Search has been conducted.

Though the time consuming process of record studying may become exhausting, eventually the pieces of the puzzle as to the origin of the structure will fall into place. The advantages of completing this process are twofold. One is purely psychological, allowing you to get a feeling for the building's past, and the other is practical, should you want to restore it to the original state. The skills necessary to complete the task are a combination of those of historians, archaeologists, and master detectives.

## RESOURCES

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