Your Old House in Cleveland Heights:
Discovering when your house was built and
the people who also called it “home.”

So, you’re wondering just how to get started finding out about your home’s history? This information sheet will provide you with the places in which to find documentation to complete a house history. Make sure that you have the exact property address and your permanent parcel number handy. You can get the permanent parcel number or “parcel ID” from your deed, by calling the County Auditor at 216-443-7092 or go to http://fiscalofficer.cuyahogacounty.us/AuditorApps/real-property/REPI/default.asp. It is also helpful to find your property’s original parcel or lot number--this can be found on your deed, current permanent parcel maps and historic plat maps.

It is highly recommended that you call the places listed below prior to setting out to do research. Many keep unusual hours and several are closed on the weekends. Be sure to bring paper, pencils (many archives don’t allow pens). Digital cameras and flash drives can also be helpful.

Cleveland Heights City Hall, Department of Planning & Development
40 Severance Circle
216.291.4878

Building Permits
City Hall is a great starting point. Original Building Permits are available for many homes built after 1913. These dated permits give the names of the owner, builder, and architect, if one was involved. Additional structural information is included, however, they do not include floor plans. Call 216.291.4885 to see if an original permit for your home exists.

Maps
The Planning Department has plat maps from 1898, 1912, 1914, 1920 and 1941 available for reference. These maps have original parcel numbers and show the “footprint” of all buildings, so you can see if your house had been constructed at any of the above given dates. Other websites also have many maps and aerial photographs that include Cleveland Heights. See the end of this information sheet for links.
Maps
The County Archives are a wealth of information, if you just know what to ask for. Ask to be taken to the room at the southwest corner of the building and look at the “big maps.” They are well organized and Cleveland Heights maps have the City’s name clearly labeled on the spine. There is a map index on the first page of each of the volumes. These maps show the various owners and when they acquired the property. This will give you a list of people who have owned the property, and perhaps lived in the house. Note: It is helpful to know your property’s original lot/parcel number when looking at these maps.

Tax Records
Another way to pinpoint the date of your home’s construction is to review tax records, which are listed by the owner’s name. Once you have a list of owners, you can look their names up in the tax records. Your property's value would have jumped dramatically in the year following the year your home was constructed. For example, if you see a big jump in 1925, your house was built in 1924.

City Directories
These are the equivalent of today’s phone books. However, in addition to the person’s name and address, his or her occupation was also listed. So once you get the names and dates from the map, start looking those names up in the City Directory. Cross check to be sure that these property owners actually lived at your house and what exactly they did for a living. After 1930, a pink section of the directories is sorted by address, so you can simply look up your address and find out the name of the occupant. (This can be fascinating: a bricklayer would have constructed a modest house, but made of brick; a shipbuilder may have used ship-lap siding on his home, etc. Once you find out what these people did, some of the idiosyncrasies of your house may begin to become clear!). There are several paper volumes and others are on microfilm. Some also available at CH-UH Main Library.

Photos on Building Cards
These are tax assessor’s cards and often have a 1950s-era photo of your house on them. Ask for the “Building Cards” for your house (you must have the address and the permanent parcel number). These help to see what your house looked like before windows or siding materials were changed. They’re a great guide if you’d like to restore your home to its original appearance—building materials, dimensions are shown and you can determine what portions of your house were added later.

Cleveland Public Library  www.cpl.org

325 Superior Avenue NE
Photo Archive
Cleveland Public Library has a wealth of information, if you know what to ask for. The Photo Archive has a whole box of photos for Cleveland Heights, however, you must wade through them in hopes of maybe finding a photo of your house. (Warning: odds are very slim!) If you don’t find a photo of your house, the time was well spent--you’ll love seeing all the old photos of our community!
Cleveland Necrology File

Once you’ve discovered the names of the property owners, you can find out more about them by looking through the library’s obituary index. You can also you’re your address (minus “street” and “road” into the database and search “keyword.” Sometimes people listed the address of the deceased in the obituary.


Maps

Go to the Library’s map room and look around. Sanborn fire insurance maps are quite helpful and show a footprint of the building much like the plat maps available at City Hall. Navigating the database can take some practice, but type in your street name and a nearby cross street to zero in. Database at:


Plain Dealer Historical (1845-1991)

Historical Plain Dealer offers full page and article images with searchable full text back to the first issue. You can access this database only at a CPL branch within Cleveland city limits. Go to www.cpl.org, click “research” then “research databases,” then scroll down to “Plain Dealer Historical.” The collection includes digital reproductions providing access to every page from every available issue. Search by keyword, name, date, date ranges, article type and issue. You can search your address (leave off “road” or “street”), street name only, owner name, architect name, etc. These searches often yield ads for property for sale, lost pets or exciting happenings at your address. Oftentimes when a house was under construction, they didn’t list the street number, only the name, so be sure to search both your address and street name only. It is helpful to put the name in quotes like this: “1234 Main” to try and limit the search. Searching the names of owners can be interesting as well. You can pay per page to print or bring a flash drive where you can save the images free of charge.

Misc.

There is also a newspaper clipping file on microfilm which is arranged by heading. These are best for overall history of an area, rather than of a specific property. The Fine Arts department has files on many Cleveland architects. You might also like to look at their selection of old books and periodicals containing house plans, construction and decorating tips, as well as old architectural magazines, old Society magazines, and Sears Roebuck catalogs from the early 1900s and beyond.

Cleveland Heights Main Library

2345 Lee Road

The Sun Press is on microfilm back into the 1920s. It has gone by various names over the years, but look under Sun Press in the microfilm drawer. Also look at the City Directories from the 1920s and after.

Cleveland State University Library,

1860 E. 22nd Street

The Cleveland Press clipping file is arranged by topic. You can look up names of people, places, or events and search out a file. Call 216-687-2449 for appointment; limited hours of operation. www.clevelandmemory.org is chock full of old photographs, maps, etc. To limit your search to only photos of Cleveland Heights, see www.clevelandmemory.org/chuh
Western Reserve Historical Society (216) 721-5722 http://www.wrhs.org/research/
10825 East Boulevard, University Circle
(There is a fee to use the archive/library facilities for non-members.)
There is a wealth of information available at Western Reserve Historical Society. These include a detailed photo archive, historic postcards, historic maps, books on Cleveland history, City Directories on microfilm, personal papers of prominent Clevelanders, architects’ files, and most importantly, the Women’s Civic Club of Cleveland Heights’ manuscripts. There are many memoirs and interesting historical clippings and facts within this large box of information. The manuscript includes more general Cleveland Heights history, as opposed to specific information on residences.

Cuyahoga County Recorder (216) 443-7318
1219 Ontario; Room 216, 2nd floor
To research the deed history of your property you can go to Recorder’s office or to http://recorder.cuyahogacounty.us/searchs/generalsearchs.aspx. You will need the name and general dates of property owners to use this database. It can be time consuming and tedious work, however, it is much easier if you first have gotten most of the names and dates from the County Archives maps.

Kelvin Smith Library http://library.case.edu/ksl/ (216) 368-3506
11055 Euclid Avenue,
Case Western Reserve University
This library has an interesting archive, Cleveland history books, old plan books, and old architectural, decorating and construction books and periodicals. This is another good place to look for general local information.

Other resources

Google Earth and Google Streetview show much more recent images of houses, but if things were changed relatively recently, information on original appearances could be deciphered.

Genealogical websites can help you research the people once you’ve gotten the names. You can learn about former owners and even try to find individuals who will supply old house photos or other relevant information about the house's history. Ancestry.com is one of the more prevalent sites and available by subscription or can be used free of charge at the Cleveland Heights libraries.

For additional information on completing a house history, call Kara Hamley O’Donnell, Historic Preservation Planner, Cleveland Heights Department of Planning and Development, 216-291-4885.