

Researching the history of your house

A Brief Guide
By John Sykes

Getting Started

In order to research the history of your house, you have to know its *legal* description. Check your deed for a description of your property; it should provide your lot number and a block number for its location. However, a number of Baton Rouge properties are located on smaller portions of originally much larger lots. Your deed might simply denote the length and width of your lot. But, it should reference the particular section or subdivision of town for your property. At the time of your closing, a title company researched the title to your property which provides the names of former owners (in order) with reference to the actual courthouse records. (However, for some properties, your title abstract might not go far enough back to document the first owner or builder of your house.)

Who lived here first?

Tracing a property's ownership is somewhat like researching a family tree and many of the same resources can provide important clues to unravel the history of your house. Once you've determined your property's lot and block number, pay a quick visit to the Tax Assessors office (First Floor, East Baton Rouge Parish Government Building). For every property in the parish, the assessor's office has a small card for every lot which denotes the ownership information. Some cards have information as far back as the 1940s and could give you a good head start on finding the history of your house. The office will not photocopy these cards, but as public records, you may copy the information on your card. Be sure to note every reference on the card. These are important clues that refer to probate records and conveyance records concerning your property.

Using Court House Records

When researching a property's title (really, the history of its ownership), you should start with what you know and work backwards. The East Baton Rouge Parish Government Building is the repository of all land records. The earliest records are housed in a separate Archives building, but you may gain easy access to these records from microfilm copies available at the Government Building.

Conveyance Records-----record the transfer of property from one individual to another. The seller (vendor) and the buyer (vendee) can be found in microfilm indexes which will provide the date of the transaction and a reference to the original document or its copy in a conveyance book.

Probate Records-----in the case of the death of an owner, property passes to heirs, and this transfer might not appear in the conveyance records. Individuals die *testate* (with a will) or *intestate* (without a will), and in either case, in order to dispose of their property, a "succession" record must be filed. These records are indexed according to the Judicial Court division existing for Baton Rouge at the time of the filing, but not *necessarily* at the time of death.

Using Public Library Records

There are numerous records available at libraries in the Baton Rouge area. The East Baton Rouge Parish Library System concentrates its local history materials in the genealogy section of the Bluebonnet Regional Branch on Bluebonnet Road. Many of these same resources are available at the Louisiana section of the Louisiana State Library and at Special Collections at Hill Memorial Library at LSU. Be sure to call before you visit, because the hours often change.

City Directories

An important source of information about homes, neighborhoods, owners and renters of property can be found in city directories for Baton Rouge. Although a few early directories exist (1857, 1890, 1895 and 1899), a regularly published directory of Baton Rouge does not begin until 1905. These directories contain a "cross-reference" which lists each street and the

name of residents at each house. The directory also lists residents alphabetically and gives other important information, like occupation, name of spouse and the number of occupants in each dwelling. LSU and the East Baton Rouge Parish Libraries have some of the city directory series. The Louisiana Room of the State Library has the most complete set, although some years are available only on the microfilm edition.

Newspapers

Each week (beginning in the 1890s), the Baton Rouge area newspapers printed a weekly list of real estate transfers. About 1912, these lists included applications for building permits received by the parish building inspector. None of these early applications were saved by the parish, so these weekly newspaper lists are *the only source* for this information. Microfilm copies of Baton Rouge area newspapers are available at local libraries, but can be a tedious search unless you have a good idea of when your house was built.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

The *Sanborn Fire Insurance Company* of Chicago regularly provided maps of local communities which detailed the construction details of houses and the location of the nearest fire prevention equipment. (These maps provided local insurance underwriters information in which to provide rates for homeowners.)

Originally contained in large books, these map “sheets” contained several blocks and were updated about every five years. These are an excellent source for learning the evolution of a house over time. Both LSU (Middleton Library) and the State Library have copies of the Sanborn Maps on microfilm.

Census Records

The U. S. Constitution requires the enumeration of the citizens every ten years for the purposes of determining representation in Congress. Since the first census in 1790, each succeeding census has added information on U. S. residents. Specifically helpful for Baton Rouge residents are the 1900, 1910, 1920 & 1930 Census records for East Baton Rouge Parish. For these censuses, each resident of town is identified with a *specific address*, listing every resident of the house, their age, occupation, and information about literacy and birth. Microfilm copies of the Census can be found at LSU, East Baton Rouge Parish Library’s Bluebonnet location, and the Louisiana State Library.

East Baton Rouge Parish Library
(Bluebonnet Branch)
763-2283

Louisiana State University Library
Information: 578-5652

Louisiana State Library
5th Floor, Louisiana Section
(M-F, 8:30-4:30)
342-4913

General References:

(Both available for check-out at the East Baton Rouge Parish Library)

Howard, Hugh. *How Old Is This House? : A Skeleton Key to Dating and Identifying Three Centuries of American Houses* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1989).

Light, Sally. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*. (Spencertown, NY: Golden Hill Press, Inc., 1989).