

Researching an Old House

by Doris Sherrow

It's fun to research an old house, and relatively easy, being only about as hard as your average computer game! The starting point is Town Hall, in the land records at the Town Clerk's office. The trick there is to trace the buyers back until someone buys an empty piece of property.

If it's your house, you know who you bought it from--look that person up in the Grantee index to find the deed that will tell you who he or she bought it from. ("Grantor" is seller, "Grantee" is buyer.) If it's not your house, you can find the current deed reference from the Grand List in the Town Clerk's office (on paper or online!), or from the card for that property in the Assessor's office. Since those cards are only done every ten years, they often list earlier deed references, as well.

The first deed will tell you basically, "I, James Fauntleroy, ...do give, grant, bargain, [etc.] to Obadiah Fingersnap, ...a piece of land being about four acres, bounded north by ..., east by ..., south by..., and west by..." Often it will say "a piece of land with buildings," or "...with Dwelling House thereon," or something that indicates the house you are researching.

And if you're really lucky, at the end it will say something like "being the same property purchased from John Smith and recorded in Portland Land Records volume X, page Y." Those words are wonderful, because they mean you go to that deed, rather than rooting through the Grantee index. Of course it's a tendency that declines as you go back through time, so that you will almost certainly have to hit the Grantee index eventually.

If Joe Jones sold the property on August 10, 1949, and neglected to say, "being the same property as," then you go to the Grantee index that would cover the time prior to 1949. Look for "Jones, Joe" (keep a weather eye for "Jones, Joseph" too!) and jot down all the references for Jones's land purchases. You might offer a small prayer that he's not like Sylvester Gildersleeve, who must have been the Grantee in 500 deeds before he shuffled off the mortal coil!

From the first deed for the property, get a description of the land. I find it easiest to draw a small square with north on the top, then write in who's on the north, east, south and west. You'll need to match that description as you go back through time. Often one abuttor (neighbor) will change, but most things--acreage, the other abuttors, the side on which the street goes by!--will stay the same. And if you're a real stickler for detail, you can trace the abuttor who changes to confirm that, yes, Abuttor X did sell the parcel next door to Abuttor Y.

Stationery stores sell pads of title searching forms. I prefer to use them, because it's annoying to realize you forgot to put the date of the sale down when you get home. If the form's blank space is staring at you, you may remember to get the date!

Probate records--wills, inventories, distributions of an estate--are also useful and interesting, and at some time going back into the 1800s, they become necessary to do a title search. Some land transactions went through probate in the 1700s and 1800s without being recorded in land records. During those years, there were relatively few volumes of land records and fewer still of probate papers, and so the Town Clerk, who was keeping these things at his house anyway, thought nothing of poring over both sets to establish ownership. Now there are a heck of a lot of both types of volumes, and inheritances from the last century or so seem to be recorded in land records as well.

Portland Probate records go back to 1824--before that, probate information is found in Middletown Probate. When Portland split from East Hampton in 1841, East Hampton kept the town, vital and land records--Portland kept the probate. But "Chatham" probate had only separated from Middletown in 1824.

Inventories from the 1700s can offer a beautiful insight. At that time, the deceased's possessions were listed room-by-room, so that you will learn in which room was the bedding, the loom, the side board, the barrel of onions--you will be able to see--dimly--just how your house was furnished two hundred years ago, if you are among the lucky few with a fully inventoried 18th century house.

Two wonderful old maps can be an invaluable aid in old house research, the huge 1859 Walling map of Middlesex County, and the 1874 Beers Atlas. These maps show all the then-existing roads with tiny squares or rectangles for the houses, and the homeowner's name at that

time printed nearby! I have used the maps for Portland, Middletown, East Hampton, Middlefield, Haddam, and the 1855 and 1869 (Hartford County) maps for East Hartford, and I have NEVER found a name mistake!

I thought I had one once, the Edward Shepard house at 132 Glastonbury Turnpike. The 1874 map billed it as "O.Loveland." No deed supported this claim, nor any probate papers, and I thought, Ah hah! a mistake! Then I learned that, until the 1877 Married Women's Property Act, women who married automatically turned over all their property to the husband. Edward Shepard's widow Sarah had married Orlanza Loveland, so the Greek Revival style house was automatically his!

There is one mistake on the enlargements for Silver Lane in East Hartford--proportion-wise, the east-to-west street was contracted to show as many houses as possible in the unfortunately vertical space allotted. Otherwise the distances and proportions on these old maps are so accurate that you can match them to the modern 1:200 maps in the Town Hall!

At night, when the Town Hall is closed and you can't burrow back through the papers of the centuries, you might study an architectural history book. Some title searches will say "with Dwelling House thereon" back and back and back through the decades, when, in fact, the existing house was built later, either to have a newer, fancier house, or because the old one burned. The Ebenezer Pelton house on Penfield Hill Road is an example---deeds at least as far back as 1820 cite a house. But this building is so classically Greek Revival style that almost certainly it was built in the 1840s or -50s.

Unless---and here the architectural history book will help again---the earlier house is part of the newer house! 311 Main Street is a later colonial-shaped house, probably finished by Capt. John Diggins in the later 1700s. But the southwest front room, with its low ceilings and foot-wide summer beam, is probably part or all of the ca. 1712 Samuel Warner house!

If you get stuck in your title search, it may help to research the property next door. That parcel will cite the owner of your parcel going back through the years. Plus, there is a tendency for abutters' names to be old. When many? (most?) people sell their property, they just repeat the description under which they bought it. So you may read from the deed to the property next door the name of the person who owned your property fifty years previous!

It may also be interesting to research your whole block, or all the way back to the original land grant on which your house stands. You may find--and be able to locate--much earlier houses which disappeared over a century ago. The part of Main Street between Covell Hill Road and William Street has houses built between 1915 and 1953. But there were two earlier houses, roughly opposite 448 and 478 Main Street, built in 1705 and 1720, respectively. They were gone by the early 1900s. So the beautiful brick house at 479 Main was not built in 1915 on a strip of virgin forest--at least one of two ancient houses still stood nearby.

Vital records can offer useful information, like maybe the maiden names of sisters selling a property inherited from their father. Supposedly marriage dates tend to coincide with house buildings, as well. I know of two 1770s houses, 584 Main, and 5 Indian Hill Avenue, which were built for young marrieds. 584 Main was built during the year of 1774 for Ebenezer White's son David, who married on December 29th of that year. But 5 Indian Hill was built in 1779 for David Bates, who had married in 1775 and had two small children, and a third on the way, by the time his house was finished. The young Bateses lived with his or her parents until they could manage to build their house.

Birth, marriage, and death records also offer a small window into the house's past. When I first looked at my house in 1972, I remember looking at the huge kitchen fireplace and thinking, Wow! Someone probably left this hearth to go off to the Revolution! Now I know that the house's builder, Job Bates left the hearth to go off to the French and Indian War, and his son Samuel left to fight in the Revolution, only to return from captivity with smallpox, and die on January 30, 1777...on or near that hearth.

There are also tidbits in town records, court records, things at the State Library, old genealogies--many different places. For example, Job Bates bought the piece of Wangunk land where he built my house in 1765. That means he built it in 1765, doesn't it? No! The Indian Archives at the State Library preserve, among other things, Bates's 1760 petition for English settlers to be allowed to buy the Wangunk Reservation because "through mistake I have set my

house on the same." That means that my house was built before 1765, by at least five documentable years!