

HISTORIC BUILDING RESEARCH HANDBOOK

by Indiana DNR, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology



Researching your historic building involves reviewing records as well as analyzing the building itself. Before going too far in your record search, be sure to check some obvious sources. Local historical societies may have clipping files or web sites with information on your building. In cities, many local governments have historic preservation commissions with files on buildings under their jurisdiction. It is possible that someone, at some time, researched your property and left the results in one of these local repositories.



Setback, style, and construction methods can tell you a great deal, as these two houses in Lockerbie Square (Indianapolis) show. The house on the left is mid-19th century, its simple style and close frontage reveal. To the right is late a 19th century house, its rich ornamentation and deeper setback are typical of that era. Photo by DHPA.

example, ghost outlines of previous porch posts could give an idea of where a missing porch was located, and what it looked like. Changes in building technology might help date your building.

Wood framing technology is an excellent example of using your building's materials in your research. Most early Indiana frame houses were built using a heavy timber frame system, what most would recognize as "barn framing." Consisting of massive four or six inch square timbers with elaborate mortise and tenon joinery, heavy timber frames required the work of a skilled carpenter. In the 1830s, Hoosier Solon Robinson published articles about a revolutionary new framing system, called "balloon framing" by later builders. Robinson's system called for standard 2x4 lumber, nailed together to form a sturdy, light skeleton. Builders were reluctant to adopt the new technology, however, by the 1880s,

THE BUILDING AS ARTIFACT

Every historic building is a record of its time and place. Its form, materials, and appearance are products of its culture, the same as a piece of music or a painting. Your first clue to dating your house is its style or type. Using the DHPA's **style guide** will help you narrow down the time period of your house. Alterations to a building might be recorded in the building itself. For



Cast iron storefront, Linton, Indiana. The nameplate on the left pilaster gives the name and city of the manufacturer. Some manufacturer's catalogs of cast iron architectural elements are still available. Photo by DHPA

some form of 2x4 framing was standard. Lumber of the 19th century was dimensional – a 2x4 was a true 2x4 inches. By the 19-teens, lumber industry standards had changed. The standard 2x4 was reduced in size. Nails changed too, from square headed, square profiled spikes to round headed wire-cut nails. Similar improvements in brick making, concrete technology, and other materials can also be traced. By following these changes, you may be able to date alterations or additions to your house.

HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS

You will be fortunate if you find historic images of your building. Some common historic structures were photographed by family members or owners; those images may have been discarded or remain unidentified in private collections. Many were simply never captured by an artist or photographer. In some cases, images that have survived at public archives are due to conscientious family members who passed the images on for later use. It is worth your time to attempt to locate old photos or drawings, especially if

you plan to restore your property. But realistically such documents do not exist for the majority of buildings in Indiana.



Historic photo of the former Allison Plant 1, in the Speedway Historic District, Marion County. Source unknown.

The Indiana State Library has a good collection of historic photographs. Also, contact the Indiana Historical Society to see if their collections include your community. Local historical societies may also have archives. Owners of rural properties should be sure to consult county atlases, especially 19th century atlases. In the days before photography, many publishers hired artists to draw farmsteads to illustrate their atlases. Though subject to artistic license, most are accurate.

ATLASES AND MAPS

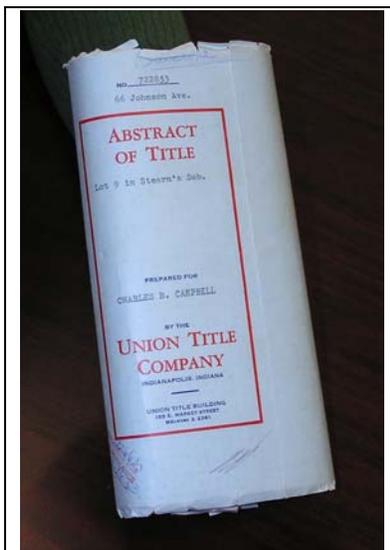
All of Indiana's 92 counties were mapped in the 19th century. These atlas maps often are detailed enough to record parcels of land, owners, locations of schools, churches and cemeteries. They are less useful in cities or towns. Here, other kinds of maps are very useful. The Sanborn Map Company recorded most Indiana towns of at least 1,000 – 2,000 residents with a series of color-coded fire insurance maps. Many towns were recorded several times during the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries. These maps are available at the Indiana Room, Indiana State Library, or, they may be available at local historical societies, or public libraries. Most libraries will require you to use microfilm. Web based versions of the Sanborn maps are available to university students or, to paid on-line customers. In Indianapolis, the Baist's Map Company recorded the city in 1908, 1916, 1927 and 1941. These can be found at the Indiana State Library and the Indiana Historical Society but are less detailed than the Sanborn maps.

By comparing one year of map to another, you can narrow down the date of your building. You can also detect additions or other large scale changes to your building. These maps also record changed street names and addresses.

PUBLIC RECORDS SEARCH TECHNIQUES

A. Use of Auditor's Records for Authentication of Structures

Every County Auditor in Indiana since 1840 has been required to maintain a set of plat books showing the ownership of all real property in that specific county, and a set of index books called transfer books showing the names of owners of each parcel of real estate and the assessed valuation of land and improvement for each parcel owned. This is a primary source for authenticating the age of any structure built since 1840. If you can locate an abstract of title for your house, it will save you a great deal of time and effort. Abstracts are condensed versions of transfer, deed, and mortgage information on your property. In the 1970s, changes in property laws rendered abstracts obsolete. Past owners may have retained abstracts or passed them down to other owners.



An original abstract looks like this. Very often they are rolled up, and have a heavy paper cover...

Some of the ways a property can be transferred to another owner or encumbered include:

Administrator's Deed – is issued by an estate administrator when an estate is being divided due to death.

Sheriff's Deed – is issued when a property is sold to cover unpaid taxes.

Warranty Deed – is issued by the grantor (seller), insuring that they have clear title to the property.

Quit Claim Deed – is issued by the grantor (seller), stating that they relinquish any rights to a property, but cannot guarantee that others might have legal interest in the property.

Mortgage – recorded as a claim on a property, a way of securing a loan to purchase a property.



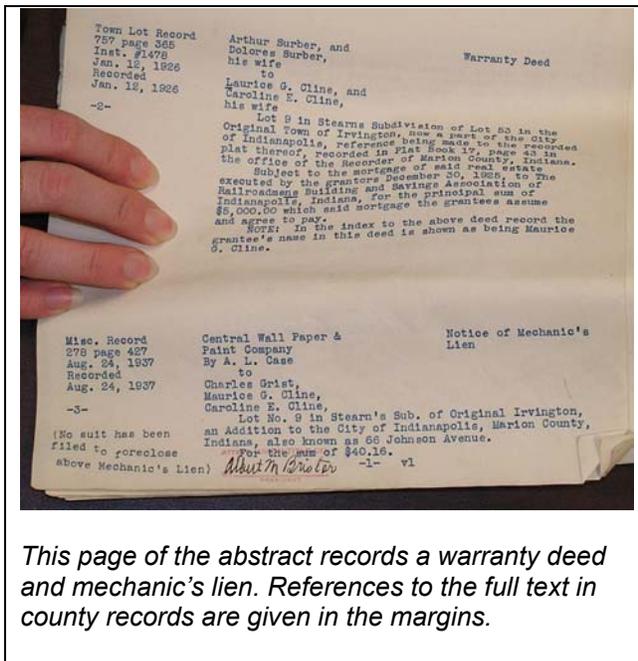
Mechanic's Lien – a lien is a claim against a property, a mechanic's lien is a claim filed by a contractor or worker for work performed on a property. A lien is filed when payment has not been made, it allows the claimant to collect proceeds when the land is sold or transferred.

Tax assessments – note improvements made to the property and their value.



...unroll the abstract and it looks like this..





This page of the abstract records a warranty deed and mechanic's lien. References to the full text in county records are given in the margins.

1. Plat Books

The Auditor's Plat Books in most Indiana counties are kept reasonably current. Every twenty or thirty years the books are usually revised. In the interim, the books are corrected by the Auditor or his transfer clerk, showing the changes in ownership of each tract. The plat is a physical drawing of a section of the county, usually arbitrarily set at some convenient scale, like 1:400 scale. The tracts in a given one square mile or two square mile map plat are given numbers, and adjacent to each plat map is a list of owners by number.

The first step in inventory work is to locate each structure, site or underwater site on a county surveyor's map or similar map showing quarter sections for the County. The Plat Book for the county is usually organized by civil townships outside urban areas, and by towns and cities. For any urban area, locate and mark sites and structures in an atlas or map showing subdivisions, since the plat book for urban areas is kept alphabetically by subdivision names. Run the index for your township, city or town for the section or subdivision you are interested in. Turn to the appropriate page in the plat book and locate your historic property on the Auditor's parcel map. Find the number of the tract in which your historic property is located and look up in the list of owners the owner of your tract. You have established current ownership.

The Auditor's Office may have older plat maps stored away. Ask if they do. A one hundred year old plat map of your historic district or county may be very useful in authenticating early improvements.

2. Transfer books

The Transfer Book system tells you when real estate was first improved for tax purposes. It also tells you the current assessed valuation and ownership of the real estate upon which your historic property is located. After you have located an owner in the Plat Books, then go to the Transfer Book for the township, city, or town which shows current owners and valuation. This is kept alphabetically by last name. Many counties have also computerized current records such as this. If using a book, turn to the name of your owner. Do not be surprised if a marginal notation to the right of his or her name shows that someone else now owns the property. Many plat books are 5 to 20 years out of date. If your owner cannot be found in a current book, go back through the earlier books until you find your owner. Check the right entries under "To Whom Transferred" and see if the real estate has been transferred to another party. Then look that party up to see if he/she still owns the property. Follow up this claim until you arrive at the current owner in the current transfer books.

From 1915 to 1932, most Indiana counties maintained overlapping four year books, effectively covering three years in each book. From 1932 until 1950, transfer books were erratically kept. Currently, transfer books tend to be rewritten at each reassessment of property (last in 1968) or ten year intervals. By running the names of any owner back through the various transfers to 1840, the provenance of most Indiana structures can be determined with precision.



Look at your surroundings, often a neighboring building reveals clues to your building's character. These two houses in the Drover Town Historic District, Huntington, Indiana, were likely very similar at one point. The house at left would assess at a higher value due to the wing. Photos by John Warner.

3. Examples of Search Techniques

For example, the modern owner of your historic property is John Smith. John Smith appears as owner by the current transfer book (1968-to date transfer books). The marginal notations in the book do not show he acquired it since 1968. Go on to the next oldest set of transfer books. John Smith's name appears written in ink and in the margin next to his name appears in the "From Whom Transferred" heirs of Sally Rand 2-12-1966. Turning to Sally Rand, you find that Sally Rand appears as owner from 1962 to 1966. Sally Rand's heirs are shown by marginal notation to have sold the property to Mr. Smith by warranty deed. The To Whom Transferred side shows John Smith. So far the transactions read as follows:

1969-1974 Transfer Book

Transferred	Name	Description	Valuation Land/imp./ total	From whom transferred	To whom transferred
-	Smith, John	Lot 32 AP	350 / 800 / 1150	-	-

1962-1968 Transfer Book

Transferred	Name	Description	Valuation Land/imp./ total	From whom transferred	To whom transferred
-	Smith, John	Lot 32 AP	280 / 800 / 1080	heirs, Sally Rand 2-12-66	-
yes	Rand, Sally	Lot 32 AP	280 / 800 / 1080		John Smith WD 2-12-66 from J. Rand et. al

1950-1962 Transfer Book

Transferred	Name	Description	Valuation Land/imp./ total	From whom transferred	To whom transferred
-	Rand, Sally	Lot 32 AP	200 / 750 / 950	-	-

No further changes are found in going backwards until 1915-1919. The entry reads as follow:

1915-1919 Transfer Book

Transferred	Name	Description	Valuation Land/imp./ total	From whom transferred	To whom transferred
-	Rand, Sally	Lot 32 AP	200 / 1100 / 1300	Joshua Bloomer 4-21-17	-
yes	Joshua Bloomer	Lot 32 AP	200 / 1100 1340 rem. Imp. Assm. 4-1-15		Sally Rand 1917

Two things are shown here. First, Sally Rand acquired the property from Joshua Bloomer by deed; second, Bloomer also had a reduction in his assesment for improvements on the premises in 1915 by the County Board of Tax Commissioners. This could indicate a destroyed wing or secondary building. Watch for these little notations. Again, Bloomer is the record owner from 1915 back to 1881-85. In that old handwritten transfer book, the following notation is found.

1881-1885 Transfer Book

Transferred	Name	Description	Valuation Land/imp./ total	From whom transferred	To whom transferred
yes	Bloomer, Joshua	Lot 32 AP	100 / 1200 / 1300	James Bowie per Sheriff	-
yes	Bowie, James	Lot 32 A..P.	100 / 1200 / 1300	-	Per Sheriff deed J. Bloomer 9-1-1883

This transaction shows the James Bowie owned the property from 1881-1883 until a forced sale of the real estate was made by the Sheriff of the County to Bloomer. Make a note of this proceeding for future reference in searching Clerk's Civil Records for

information on the historic property. Your historic property dates to at least 1883, based this information. Searching back under Bowie's name, you find that following transactions in the 1859-1864 transfer books.

Transferred	Name	Description	Valuation	From whom transferred	To whom transferred
			Land/imp./ total		
-	Bowie, James	Lot 32 AP Add. Imp. 4-1-63	100 / 1500 / 100 Add. Imp. 4-1-1860	A. Pyle 2-21-1860	-
yes	Pyle, Andrew	Lot 32 AP	100 / 0 / 100	-	To J. Bowie per WD

This shows that James Bowie built your historic property in 1863 before the additional improvement assessment was laid on the real estate by the County Assessor. The transfer to Bowie was by warranty deed.

The example set out above is a simplified review of transactions in County transfer indices. In each county, individual problems will be encountered for specific structures and sites. The system is, however, the same throughout the state. In inventory work, the only thing you absolutely must find is the name of the present owner. Transfer book search from the present back to 1840 is a satisfactory method, in most instances, of authenticating the building date of post-1840 structures. Early transfer books from the 1840-1859 period may not show separate listings for land and improvement valuation. This should not defeat you, for a combined value of land and improvements of more than \$100 for a town lot, and more than \$300 for a farm usually mean that the property was improved.

B. Use of Deed and Mortgage Records

Deed and mortgage records are kept by the County Recorder. The records consist of general indices of deed in the last name of the sellers (Grantors) and also in the last names of the buyers (Grantees). In many counties, the indices are divided into urban and rural indices, such that deeds to town lots are indexed separately from deeds to farm ground measured by quarter section. These records show all deeds recorded in the County from its establishment to date. Transfer by deed is the most common way of selling real estate. Indiana law requires that every buyer (grantee) record his deed to real estate in order to protect his title against other people. Modern real estate transactions are handled by lawyers and bankers. These items are accounted for. In the old days, people were responsible for doing their own recording, and many deed went unrecorded for many years.

The mortgage records of most counties show by the real property mortgages and chattel mortgages or mortgages on personal property up to 1964. These records begin around 1840. Prior to 1840, mortgages were treated as deeds and recorded in deed records. These records are indexed in the name of the mortgagor and the mortgagee. A mortgage, of course, is a lien given by the owner of land to secure a debt, usually shown by a note for money. Other liens, such as mechanic's lien notices were also recorded in mortgage records up to about 1900. A mechanic's lien is a special lien which a skilled tradesman has when he works on a house or building. If he is not paid

within 60 days of completing his work, he may record a notice of lien in the Court House with the Recorder, and have the right to foreclose and sell the house and land to pay his bill.

1. Deed Record Search Techniques

In survey work, it is usually wise to prove ownership from deed records. This requires determination whether or not the person shown in the Auditor's transfer book owned the real estate you are interested in. The easiest way to prove this is to look up the name of your original or early owner in the Grantee Index. To use our hypothetical illustration, let us go back to James Bowie. Bowie is listed as the owner in the transfer books, but only a deed into his name (or some transfer by will or otherwise) will prove it. Let us go to the City of Hamberg General Index of Deeds for the period 1860-1872 and look up under "Grantee" (Buyer) Bowie, James. The following is a typical listing:

Grantee	Grantor	Lot	Date Deeded	Date Recorded	Consideration	Book	Page
Bowie, James	A. Pyle	Lot 32 AP	2-8-1854	2-21-1860	\$800	5	188

Our transaction in the deed records index shows that the ground was conveyed in 1854, but Bowie did not record his deed until much later. It also shows that Bowie paid \$800 gold dollars for the lot, a great deal more than his assessment value would indicate it was worth. The book and page numbers show us in what deed book and page this instrument can be found and read. Going to the deed records themselves, take down Deed Book 5, blow off the dust, and turn to page 183. You will find a handwritten (in some early books a filled in printed form) copy of a warranty deed showing the actual conveyance. For a moment ignore the antique legal phrases. This confirms that Bowie bought the land in question. Note the transaction for your survey form, and include it in sources as "Deed Andrew Pyle to James Bowie 2-8-1854, Deed Record 5, page 188". By searching forward under the name of Bowie, James, in the Sellers "Grantor" Index, YOU could determine if Bowie ever sold the land in question. No Indiana deed is supposed to be recorded unless the Auditor has first had his hands on it and made a transfer entry in his books. This law was not always followed in the old days. The Sheriff's deed by which Bowie lost his land can be found by checking under "Grantee" for Bloomer, Joshua, or under "Grantor" for "Sheriff, Clod County" as a grantor.

For properties bought and sold prior to 1855, no seller's indexes are maintained in most Indiana counties. The proper way to prove the age of a structure more than 134 years old is to consult the "Buyers" (Grantee) indexes for the name of the then-owner, which should show from whom he acquired the property. Work back this chain until you find a cash sale of \$50-\$100 for a town lot. In most cases, that sale represented a sale of unimproved real estate. Estimating any farm home is more difficult, since land values varied wildly between 1815 (end of War of 1812) and 1840 (last year of great depression of 1837-40). Average land values for the community for the period vary in each region of Indiana.

Government land was initially sold for \$1.00 gold per acre, later at \$1.25 per acre (by 1833 almost all Indian land had been entered). Average prices for unimproved real estate from 1820 to 1830 in those parts of Indiana then settled would range near \$5.00

per acre. In any case, the authentication of the construction of farmsteads prior to 1840 depends upon a close reading of actual instruments, and interpreting the consideration in light of a local tradition of land sales for the period in question. Ask a veteran title abstractor to help you with this portion of your research.

2. Mortgage Record Research Techniques

County mortgage records are indexed in general indices under the name of the mortgagor and the mortgagee. The mortgagor index will be most helpful to you since it may be possible to tell when a structure was built by finding a mortgage covering the land on which it stood. Mortgages were not nearly so common before the turn of the century as they have become today. Still, quite a number of building projects were financed by mortgage loans. If you cannot authenticate the improvement of any real estate during a given period of years from the Auditor's Transfer Books, run the name of the property owner through the general index of mortgagors for the period. You may find a real estate mortgage during that period from which it is a fair inference (though not conclusive) that the structure located upon the land was built with funds from the mortgage.

Mechanic's liens were also indexed in mortgage records from 1840 to approximately 1900. If you are lucky enough to find a mechanic's lien upon the land upon which your improvement is located, you can usually establish the builder of the improvement, something about its construction and its exact date, since a notice of mechanic's lien must be recorded within sixty days after completion of work in order to be valid. Search under the name of your early owner or owners in the mortgagor index.

Chattel mortgages (liens on personal property) may also be found in mortgage record indexes. If the owner of the real estate you are interested in gave a lien on his furnishings to obtain a loan, that will appear of record in chattel mortgage records. Chattel mortgages prior to 1890 or so are usually found in mortgage records along with real estate mortgages. Information derived from chattel mortgages on contents should be noted, and put in source materials for eventual restoration of any structure on the register. It is better not to run a complete check on all owners of any historic property, but only to check the dates and persons owning the property during important periods in the history of the structure. Chattel mortgages are invaluable in authenticating early grist and saw mills. Most such commercial operations were sold by bill of sale secured by chattel mortgage.

C. Use of Court Records

The Clerk of Court in each Indiana county keeps several records which are valuable source material for researchers in historic preservation. First, all decedents' estates are indexed in fee books and in general indices to estates. All wills are filed in will records, which are usually indexed separately from probate estates, though in the fee books for estates, wills are listed in each estate in which a will is found. Second, all judgments taken against any person are listed in the judgment docket. Third, all actions taken by the court are recorded in civil and probate complete records and order books. This set of records is more complicated to use than recorder's records. Unless a particular estate or will is necessary to authenticate the age of a structure or the use of a site, specialized probate research is best left to researchers engaged in restoring properties.

Until 1953, real estate which was not willed specifically to anyone, passed according to certain rules of law called the canons of descent. In many families, no probate estate was opened since a family settlement of real estate would be effectuated by an exchange of deeds after the death of a common ancestor. Most early estates are very brief affairs consisting of appointment of an administrator or executor, and a settlement of accounts. In estates in which the deceased had a will, a researcher can find details on property ownership and family tree material. In many cases, a wife's dower was set off to her by will, as well as her personal property in a family home. In some areas, notably Fayette County, a complete itemized inventory of dower property was taken. This is highly informative, but does not authenticate construction.

Judgment records have to do with civil lawsuits. A judgment is a decree of court stating that a party owes money to another. The usual remedy for satisfying a judgment was levy and sale of property. In the 19th century, such levy often resulted in the sale of realty. When your historic property was sold by the Sheriff, a levy of execution was taken against it. Sometimes the levy will describe the property levied upon. The fact that the property was improved or vacant cannot normally be proved from a return on execution.

Probate research requires going through very dusty estate files and reading handwritten inventories, receipts, and old sale notices. This is productive research for one very important structure or site and is not useful in inventory or Survey work of the type required by this program.

D. Use of County Commissioners Records

The County Commissioners have been, since 1803, required to keep a record of proceedings in writing before the Court of County Commissioners. These records, which contain the letting of public contracts and the payment of all claims for services sold to the County for construction projects, are particularly useful in authenticating the construction of public buildings such as court houses, jails, insane asylums, poor houses, etc. After 1840, all contracts for the construction of buildings for the county were required to be copied in full into the Commissioners' Records. All claims for services arising from building projects also appeared. This system of accounting means that a given county court house can be exactly dated by reference to the letting of the construction contract and payment of claim vouchers for the architect and builder. Unfortunately, most county commissioners' records are not generally indexed, and one needs to know the approximate years of construction to be able to go to Commissioners' Records for that year for research on the contract. Since most public buildings have datestones, that task is probably not as difficult as it sounds.

County Commissioners' Records also contain early road petition records which may refer to existing or proposed site and structures. These petitions are indexed in each record book under the name of the person petitioning for the road. In survey work, you might take some time to check County Commissioners' records for the early owners of your historic property for road petitions, and for licenses to vend and sell merchandise. This helps authenticate the use of an early structure. Until 1875 or so, Indiana counties sold licenses to vend dry goods, general merchandise and liquor. These licenses were applied for by a petition of at least five freeholders on behalf of the prospective licensee. All petitions and orders granting licenses are indexed under the last name of the

licensee in county commissioners' record books. This may be a worthwhile search for you in survey work.

CITY DIRECTORIES

Many Indiana communities were canvassed by directory companies in the late 19th centuries on to the present day. Since the directories are usually for urban areas, they are not useful to researching farm properties. Rural directories may have been published for your area, however. These volumes are often on hand at your local Indiana Room, located in your main county library. The Indiana State Library's Indiana Room also has an excellent collection of directories from around the state. The directories are similar to current telephone books. Like a telephone book, city directories list residents (not necessarily owners). Here is a fictional city directory listing in the 1909 Pleasantville, Indiana City Directory:

Smith, Josiah b 1423 Cherry lab Jones Malleable Casting

This listing tells us that Josiah Smith boards at 1423 Cherry Avenue, further, it tells us that Smith is a laborer at Jones Malleable Casting Company. Directories do not list other household members, unless they are of adult age. Information on the Smith household is available in Census form, if needed.

1. Cross Indexes

The example listing is useful if you already had a name to research. But what if you have an address, but have no idea who lived there? By the early 20th century, most directory publishers realized that people needed a better way to find information. At the back of many directories from about 1920 - , a cross index was printed. This listed residents by address, not by name. Looking in the back of the 1920 Pleasantville City Directory, we can find addresses for Cherry Avenue:

Cherry Avenue (2300 north)

1402 Corner Market

1405 Tom's Drug Store

1405 ½ Ewing, C

1423 Smith, J

1424 Michaels, A

Our example shows that you will also find information about the Smith family's surroundings. Note also that the cross index listing does not include information about Smith's occupation. You will need to look under the alphabetical name listings in the front of the directory (the previous example) to find that information. Also, the directory lists both sides of the street. Remember the old rule of thumb, odd number addresses are typically on the south side of the street (for an east-west street) or the east side of a street (north-south street). This could help you count buildings to find your building, if the address is slightly different than listed.

Using these tools, you can work forward, or backward until the city directory for that year does not have a cross index. Beware! Cities changed street names and

renumbered addresses. Historic maps, such as Sanborn Maps, might help you find the street name and address that coordinates with the year of the directory.

BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

County Indiana Rooms and the Indiana State Library, Indiana Division, have indexes to newspaper obituaries. Now that you have a name, based on directory or deed research, you can bring your past property owner back to life with information from obituaries or county histories. The Genealogical Division of the Indiana State Library maintains an excellent collection of otherwise unpublished family histories. Especially if you hope to nominate a property to the National Register for its association with a significant person, this step in your research will be very useful.



General view and detail of the Seybold House, Fountain City, Indiana. Built in the 1830s, this house had been remodeled several times. In this case, a full restoration was essential since the property is part of the Levi Coffin State Historical Site. A team of experts from the Indiana State Museum, DHPA, and local historical groups removed portions of fiberboard siding and discovered original openings. The detail shows framing for a front door and sidelights, not visible here are the remnants of the round arch once over the doorway. Note the newer lumber forming a sill under the added window. Photos by DHPA.