

Living 'Inside' History:

Resources To Learn More About Your Historic Home

By David Canright

By definition, houses in Galveston's East End Historic District are full of history. That's part of why most of us moved or bought here. Learning more about your home's history can greatly enhance your enjoyment of it.

A good place to start is The Galveston Historical Foundation's 1940 Sears Building, 2228 Broadway, and the office of Jami Durham, the foundation's manager of historic properties research.

A veteran of 20 years with the foundation in various capacities, Durham has spent the last nine years almost exclusively researching the history of historic houses throughout the city for the Galveston Historical Foundation Annual Historic Homes Tour, for the city's busy real estate industry and for new and prospective homeowners. In those years, she has built up the resources available at the Sears Building, and developed working relationships with other local and state repositories.

"These houses all have wonderful, rich histories," said Durham. "I've never found one I didn't like."

Durham offers a thorough investigation of your house, providing a timeline and narrative account of the architect if known, the owners and their families, any additions or alterations, and tax valuations over the years. The service is provided at \$10 per half-hour, and usually takes her about two and a half hours. She can also provide substantiation needed to claim the Windstorm Exemption on insurance for historic homes. Her work number is 409.765.3453.

If you want to research the history of your house yourself, here's a list of the available resources to help you.

1. Pull the original insurance records. These are archived at the Galveston History Center at the Rosenberg Library, 4th floor, 2310 Sealy. Peggy Dillard is the head of special collections there, and can be reached at 409.763.8854, ext. 117. Most of these records have been copied and are available in Durham's archives at the Sears building.

Insurance has always been of vital importance in Galveston, and still is today. Records dating back to the 19th century show ownership, appraised value, and other data.

Significant jumps in appraised value, can flag major improvements or alterations in the property, and owners' names are a starting point for investigation of the human stories lived in the house.

The full chain of ownership of a property is on record at the Country Clerk's Office on the second floor of the Criminal Justice Center at 600 59th Street. Official records of properties are identified by block and lot number. Street addresses may have changed over the years as lots were consolidated or divided. For maps showing these identifications, current owner, valuation, and other information, see the Galveston County Central Appraisal District website at www.galvestoncad.org.

2. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps are an amazing graphic depiction of the city through time, showing the footprint of each house on its lot, with notations as to the number of stories, roofing material, construction, and outbuildings. This information was important to underwriters in establishing insurance rates, but provide a lot about the history of the house. Did the footprint change from one year to the next with an addition or removal of a wing? Was a kitchen in an outbuilding removed and one built on the house proper? When was indoor plumbing added, shown by the absence of an outhouse and the appearance of a new bump in the footprint? Even the presence of a cistern, once the mainstay of domestic water supply, is indicated until replaced by dependable municipal water mains.

3. Newspaper archives are the next step to telling the stories of lives lived in your house. Continuous archives of the Galveston Daily News, also at the Rosenberg Library, can be searched using dates and names from the insurance records, telling of weddings, fires, and newsworthy events. Transfers of property, with buyers' and sellers' names were listed in the paper until the 1970s.

4. The Galveston City Directory, first published from time to time in 1855 and annually from 1880 to 1996, is another source of information about residents and businesses.

Date paid advertising, and individuals alphabetically by head of household, each with address and occupation. Businesses are listed by category, many with separate paid advertising, and individuals alphabetically by head of household.

5. Building Permits pulled for additions or new construction are valuable in charting the changes in your house, but are not kept in a permanent file at City Hall. They were, however, often printed in The Daily News, and some can be accessed in those records. And, of course, a lot of building went on informally.

6. Census Records are important for genealogists, and the original census, with fine-grained data collected in the house-to-house surveys conducted every ten years are available on microfilm. It tells who lived in your house, at ten-year intervals - except for 1890, when files were lost in a fire. Data is available on paid subscription sites, but Familysearch.org, operated by the Church of Latter day Saints, offers much information free of charge.

Durham tells the story of a client whose grandfather was lost in the 1900 storm, according to family lore. A search of census schedules, however, showed him living in Beaumont in 1910, with another wife and child. He had simply left the scene of chaos and destruction, and started anew. "The scoundrel!" said the client. "Now we have a whole new branch of the family to research!"

7. Galveston Immigration Data Base, an online resource compiled for Galveston Historical Foundation and available at galvestonhistory.org, is another source for looking into the origins of those who previously enjoyed living in your new house. It is searchable by immigrant's home, date of arrival, and vessel name. In the great age of European immigration, Galveston was the second largest American reception point, after Ellis Island in New York. Most people arriving here dispersed to points west, but others stayed and one of them may have bought or built your East End home.

8. Photographs can provide vivid evidence of the changes in a structure over time, and often an insight into the people that cherished them decades ago. Families often posed rapidly before their homes for a shot, and we can share their pride today. The archives at the Sears Building contain some of these historic photos, but

far more are stored in the Rosenberg Library. They are searchable in vertical files arranged by block, and archival quality prints may be ordered.

It takes some persistence to uncover the past, but the resources are there. Jami Durham's advice, finally, to those who want to discover the real history of their East End historic home is: "Don't give up. And don't believe everything your neighbors tell you about your house."