

TRACING THE HISTORY OF YOUR HOUSE

A Guide to Local Resources

prepared by Mount Clemens Public Library

Unless you are very fortunate, there is no single place or document which will tell you exactly when your house was built. In most cases, finding the date of construction involves research in a variety of local records. After locating and reviewing these records, you may be able to identify the year in which your house was built, but more likely you will be able to identify a short range of years in which the building was probably erected.

If all of this sounds like a lot of work, it is! However, there are great rewards in learning more about the history of your home, your neighborhood, and your town. The following research guide will start you off on your quest.

Your Own Records

The property abstract, if available, is the first place to look for clues to the date of your house. In the days before title insurance came into widespread use, a document proving a chain of title was usually prepared by a professional abstractor when a property changes hands. The previous property owner may have a copy of the abstract. Included in the abstract will be references to deeds, mortgages, wills, probate records, court actions and tax sales relevant to the property's history. This listing will reveal to you who owned the lot, how long it was owned, and the price of purchase.

Financial transactions in the abstract can help to pinpoint the date a house was built. A sizable increase in price from one sale to the next is a good indication that some sort of capital improvement, such as the construction of a dwelling, was made to the property.

Governmental Records

[Macomb County Register of Deeds](#)

10 North Main, Mount Clemens, MI 48043

(586) 469-5175

**(located on the second floor of the Macomb
County Building, corner of Cass and Main)**

Hours: 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., weekdays

The register of deeds office maintains the land records for Macomb County. Here you will find deed records, mortgage records, and subdivision plats. Use the grantor (seller)/grantee (buyer) indexes to trace the changes of ownership of the property back through the years. You may also trace your property through the mortgage indexes. If you have your abstract, take it

with you for reference. If you do not have your abstract, be sure to have your property description, including the lot number. If you do not have your abstract, you may first wish to visit Mount Clemens Public Library to check for names of former owners in the city directories (see explanation below under Mount Clemens Public Library).

Macomb County Probate Court Records
21850 Dunham Road, Mount Clemens, MI 48043
(586) 469-5290
(located in the County Service Center near
Elizabeth & Groesbeck)
Hours: 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Once you know the names of former owners of your property, you may wish to consult probate court records for any transfer of ownership as part of an estate. Such information is found in the deceased person's probate packet. If you are very lucky, documents in the probate packet may describe your house or property. Mount Clemens Public Library has duplicate microfilm copies of some older probate records, and has a searchable index to those records online at <http://offserv.libcoop.net/mtc/probate.asp>. For more recent records, Macomb County Probate Court maintains an online index on its website at <http://www.macombcountymi.gov/probatecourt/index.htm> (click on the Look Up A Case link).

Library records

Mount Clemens Public Library
150 Cass Avenue, Mount Clemens, MI 48043
(586) 469-6200
(located on Cass between Gratiot & Groesbeck,
directly across from Mount Clemens High
School)
Hours: 9:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m., Monday-Thursday;
9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., Friday-Saturday; 1:00 - 5:00
p.m. Sundays, September-May

The library holds several useful tools for dating your house. Most are located in the library's Genealogy and Local History Room at the west end of the main floor. To use the Genealogy and Local History Room, stop at the Information Desk to sign in and ask the librarian for admittance to the room. If you are unfamiliar with the library's collection, the librarian will be happy to provide you with an orientation. Consult the following sources:

Mount Clemens City Directories

The library holds city directories for the span of years from 1896 to 1966, with some gaps. City directories from 1896 to 1902 are an alphabetical listing of names of residents, giving the street address and the employer of each resident. Directories after 1905 include the alphabetical listing, but also have a very valuable street-by-street index to residents. Using this index, locate your street and house number in the 1966 directory. Note the resident's name, then work your way back through the remaining directories. (Caution: some renumbering of addresses was done during the 1920s, so be sure to watch out for a shift in house numbers). If your property disappears from the directory, note the year of the first directory in which it appears, as the first listing year is a possible indication that a dwelling was constructed in the previous year.

Try our online city directory master index at <http://offserv.libcoop.net/mtc/MCDirectory.asp>

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

The Sanborn Map Company drew insurance maps for many cities around the country, including Mount Clemens. These maps are available on microfilm for the years 1888, 1892, 1897, 1903, 1909, 1921, 1930 and 1945. Lots are outlined on each street in the city, and the footprint of any structure located on the lot is drawn in with notations for the number of stories in the building. Locate your lot on the 1945 map and work backwards through the years, noting any changes in the structure's footprint or orientation on the parcel.

Census microfilms

United States censuses were taken every 10 years by census enumerators who went door-to-door to collect information. You will find census entries for Mount Clemens grouped by street, and censuses for 1880, and 1900 through 1930 include the address. In these entries you will find the names of every person in the household, their ages, ancestry, marital status, and occupation, among other information. Census records may be searched through our online subscription databases in the library.

Old Mount Clemens newspapers on microfilm

Mount Clemens newspapers are available on microfilm in the library from approximately [1880 to present](#). There is no index to the old newspapers, but if you know an approximate date of an event related to your house, you may scan the newspapers for items about that event. Examples of items to look for are: obituary of a former owner or resident; news item about a fire or other damage to the structure; news items about the platting of a subdivision; or classified ads offering houses for sale. If a former owner of your property was prominent in the community, the newspaper may have carried an item about the building of his home.

Panoramic map of Mount Clemens, 1881

The panoramic view of Mount Clemens is a map of the city drawn in 1881 as if from a bird's

eye view. The artist drew each building in its proper location, so dwellings may be located by following the streets. An original lithograph of this map is available for viewing in the library auditorium. A reduced copy is available for viewing on the library's web site at <http://www.libcoop.net/mountclemens/birdseye.htm>, and a higher resolution copy with zoom capability may be found on the [Library of Congress American Memory Page](#).

Telephone directories

Current and historical telephone directories may be used as aids in locating former owners or their descendants. You may be fortunate enough to locate a former owner or descendant who is willing to show you family photographs which include the house. The library has area telephone books from 1980-present, and [Burton Historical Collection at Detroit Public Library](#) has East Area directories (includes Mount Clemens) from 1958-present. Researchers may also consult current directory information for the entire U.S. by searching a World Wide Web nationwide directory at <http://www.switchboard.com>.

Digital Resources

The Suburban Library Cooperative's online digital media archive contains thousands of historic photographs, including street scenes and images of residential buildings. Search the archive by street name to determine if any photos relevant to your research are included at www.libcoop.net/archive.

The State of Michigan offers digital access to subdivision plats throughout the state. Search for a plat of your subdivision at http://www.dleg.state.mi.us/platmaps/sr_subs.asp

The Michigan State Archives offers digital access to the rural property inventories which were compiled by WPA workers in the late 1930s. These inventory cards provide a drawing of the footprint of structures on the property, as well as some physical details. They may be searched online at <http://www.seekingmichigan.org>

Other research aids

The following "how-to" handbooks on house research may be checked out from the library:

- Howard, Hugh. *How Old Is This House?* New York : Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989 (call number 728.028 H)
- Light, Sally. *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*. Spencertown, NY : Golden Hill Press, 1989 (728.09 L)
- Green, Betsy J. *Discovering the History of Your House and Your Neighborhood*. Santa Monica, CA : Santa Monica Press, 2002. (call number 907.2 GRE)

For assistance in dating a house by identifying its architectural features, consult these reference books:

- McAlester, Virginia. *Field Guide to American Houses*. New York : Knopf, 1984 (R917.304 M).
- Carley, Rachel. *The Visual Dictionary of American Domestic Architecture*. New York : Henry Holt, 1994 (R728.0973 C).

Also request from the library the local history vertical file labeled MOUNT CLEMENS - HISTORIC SITES - OLDEST HOMES. This file contains miscellaneous newspaper clippings about residential dwellings in the city and may provide some useful information.

Mount Clemens Historical Commission
contact through
Mount Clemens City Manager's Office
1 Crocker Blvd., Mount Clemens, MI 48043
(586) 469-6803

Mount Clemens Historical Commission holds the files on all buildings which have received plaques through the Commission's historical marker project. Check with the Commission to find out whether a nearby house has already been researched, as that house's history may hold clues to your own. Commission members are very knowledgeable about Mount Clemens history and may be able to offer suggestions for further avenues of research. Search the library's online database of marked buildings at <http://offserv.libcoop.net/mtc/markers.asp> to find other structures on your street that have been granted markers.

Macomb County Historical Society
Crocker House Museum
15 Union Street, Mount Clemens, MI 48043
(586) 465-2488
Hours: Tuesday-Thursday 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

After you have exhausted other avenues of research, you may wish to inquire of the Macomb County Historical Society regarding any holdings in the collection related to your property or its previous owners. Call Crocker House and ask for an appointment to discuss your research. Crocker House is staffed mostly by volunteers, has limited hours, and receives no state or federal funding, so please be generous with your donations.

When You Finish

After you have finished your research, please consider placing a photocopy of the

information on file at Mount Clemens Public Library, so that other historians may benefit from your work.

Also, if you have located historic photographs or documents relating to the history of your house or your neighborhood, please consider making copies of these items available to the local history collection at Mount Clemens Public Library, so that other researchers may have access to them.



Mount Clemens Public Library

150 Cass Avenue | Mount Clemens MI 48043
586-469-6200 | www.libcoop.net/mountclemens

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