

**Researching the History  
of your  
Sonoma County Building**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Why do people rummage through libraries, museums, and County records to explore the history of their homes and other buildings? Often, the family's emotional and financial interest in the house spurs the effort to research its past history, or to document a relatively new home for future generations. Researching the residence may provide many useful clues to those studying their family history. Sometimes the search is inspired by the planned drastic alterations, relocation, or demolition of an admired building. Another reason is that it is simply fun to do.

Whatever your goal, certain techniques and sources will be basic to your search, and we hope this brochure will make those techniques and sources more accessible to you as a researcher. Where you begin will vary with information you have already accumulated. Your goal may be met early in the process, or you may need, or wish, to pursue additional steps. You may want to put a few names and dates in your file for future reference, or you may decide to write up your findings with documentation, or even seek official recognition for your building. Your structure could be so significant that it may be eligible for landmark designation by your city, county, state, or the National Register. In the latter cases, you might even consider offering a copy of your completed project to the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library, where it could be of help to future researchers.

## **I. BEGINNING THE SEARCH**

### **A. Overview**

Most often a researcher will begin with little information beyond the location of the property, and the first stop may be the offices of the Sonoma County Assessor and the Sonoma County Recorder. If you already know many names associated with the property, your first visit might be to one or more of the libraries or museums listed in Section II. As you accumulate more information, you will probably find yourself returning to both the libraries and the Recorder's office for further searching, and also pursuing other sources, such as family interviews, business and church records and newspapers. Also, visit your county or city planning departments to learn if your property is in an historic district.

The building itself may prove a primary source of information. Plan to walk through it, taking note of distinctive features and obvious alterations and changes. If possible, examine any associated buildings and structures. Examine the grounds, noting roadways, paths, fences, vegetation, and other features, as well as signs of previous buildings or activities, such as foundations and wells.

Discovering that a building is connected with important names or events, is a significant example of its architectural style, or was designed by a notable architect will increase the likelihood that it may be eligible for designation as a local, state, or national landmark. In recent years, historians have emphasized the building's place within a wider framework such as its style as representative of its period or of the work of its architect, and its relationship to the economic development of the area, the settlement of the neighborhood, and its cultural or ethnic significance. Refer to section III for criteria for such recognition, as well as for addresses to write for the most current information.

Even if you do not want historic designation, it will be interesting to discover any historic information that may be available concerning your property. Establishing a construction date, relating the building to historic events and the development of the community, finding additional names of persons who owned or lived in the building, and any names by which it has been known, will make your work more informative and valuable to those who read it later.

Two good rules to follow from the beginning are to write down all relevant discoveries, along with an accurate and complete identification of the source. Photocopies will be very helpful. Later you can extract the most pertinent information and keep the rest for background files to return to if and when needed.

## **B. First Steps to Researching the History of Your Home**

1. Has your home been included in a Historic Resources Survey? Check with the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library and your local planning department. Sonoma may have already gotten a head start on your research.
2. Do you know the architectural style of your home? Knowing the style can help you come up with an approximate construction date. *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia and Lee McAlester is a good resource when trying to determine characteristics of a particular style of architecture.
3. Is your house in an urban area or the county? If your house is in an urban area you'll want to check to see if any Sanborn First Insurance maps exist. These maps are available on microfilm at the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library.
4. If your house is in a rural area you may want to start by looking at county atlases and maps such as:
  - The A.B. Bowers 1867 map of Sonoma County
  - The Thomas H. Thompson 1988 Illustrated Atlas of Sonoma County
  - The 1897 Reynolds and Proctor Illustrated Atlas of Sonoma County
  - The 1908 Official Map of the County of Sonoma by McIntire and Lewis
  - The E. A. Pugh's 1934 Official Map of Sonoma County, California

## **C. Assessor's Office**

You may wish to visit the Assessor's Office first, even if you already know the assessor's parcel (AP) number of the property. Locate the property on the wall map and obtain the corresponding book at the counter. This will show the property in relation to adjacent properties. It is worthwhile to purchase a photocopy of the map you will refer back to it many times. You may also purchase a Property Profile and residential Building Record that provide extensive information such as assessed evaluation and official records (OR) number of the last purchase. The OR number is your key to obtaining further information from the Recorder's office.

## **D. Recorder's Office**

With the official records (OR) number, you can find documentation on microfilm of the last transaction. You then know the names of the current owner (grantee/buyer) and the previous owner (grantor/seller), purchase price, and possible unique information about that sale. This document and subsequent documents can be photocopied for a small fee.

You can pursue the sale chain, grantor to grantee, back to 1835 using computer, fiche, film, and old books. Breadboard maps and block books for 1889 to 1924 may provide a shortcut. Note that prior to 1921, deeds and all other records were listed in separate books and will require some additional search. After 1921, documents have been grouped together as Official Records.

Because the same person may buy or sell several properties in a given year, take care that the property is the subject one, and note varied name spellings. In early records, if a city is involved, it will be listed under the C's as "City of Petaluma" rather than the P's as Petaluma. All the names you find listed in the documents are names that you will probably want to pursue when you go to the Library.

As you acquire names involved with your property, you will become aware of the value of the other documents at the Recorder's office: births, deaths, mortgages, historic maps, and idiosyncratic information that may be valuable to your research. You will also acquire dates and names that will help you make informed use of other organizations and agencies listed in Section II.

### **E. Libraries, Museums and Historical Groups**

Several indexes are available in the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library, both as part of their online catalog and in book format. Local newspapers are available on microfilm. Don't overlook the census and the Great Registers, city and County directories, the several County historical atlases and maps, or the photograph collection. If a certain resident of your house becomes important to your research, you may consult with the Sonoma County Genealogical Society or Family History Center, LDS Church. When you visit the libraries and museums appropriate to your search, ask questions and be alert to unexpected sources such as high school annuals, business records, and family scrapbooks.

### **F. Churches, Cemeteries, Additional Governmental Agencies, Community Associations, Businesses**

After you have verified names and dates, consult other city and county departments and agencies, such as planning and landmarks, or historical review boards. Local heritage or preservation associations may not be listed in the phone book, but the museum or library can usually direct you to an officer. A business related to the construction of your house, or one associated with a former resident, could have valuable information. Cemeteries are more than interesting gravestones' inquire about records maintained in their office. The historical resources of businesses and churches, and many private and public agencies, are often handled as a peripheral assignment. Call in advance to explain your goal and make an appointment.

## **G. Telling the Story**

The format will be determined by your goal, which may have changed during the course of your search. If you've kept notes and photocopies, with full citation of the source of each, your main task may be to extract the most telling information. Organize it so that it will engage and inform readers. Photographs and quotations enrich the story. Footnotes and bibliography will help establish the value of your work. Please retain a copy of your records for family members and future owners. A copy donated to the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library could be helpful to other researchers.

## II. GUIDE TO THE SOURCES

### A. Types of Research Materials

*(Note: See section II.B to learn where these and other materials may be found)*

**Deeds** are the beginning of the search. These can be used to find the names of the previous owners, the price of the property, and a description of the property. The grantor/grantee indexes in the Recorder's Office can be used to locate the deeds.

**Mortgages** are similar to deeds in content and language. Here one can find a description of the property, terms of payment and value of the house. A mortgage on an already existing house may indicate new construction on the house, or construction of an outbuilding, such as carriage house or barn on the property.

**Abstracts of title** are a way of finding who owned the house, how long they owned it, and how much it cost, as well as a description of the property. Title companies as well as libraries may have these.

**Wills, Probate Records, and Decrees of Distribution** also document the transfer of property. Specific information on the house may be found here; sometimes often the original furnishings may be listed.

**Historic Property Surveys** have been completed in several cities and some areas of the county. These will provide a framework for your research, and part of the work may have already been done for you.

**Maps and Atlases** provide more than just location. The Sanborn maps indicate construction materials, location of porches, number of stories, location of out buildings and wells, for city locations. The exact size of the original property can be found as well as the position of the house. The historical atlases give the names of the owners of property. Aerial photographs and Geological Survey maps will show the terrain. Surveyors and civil engineers may also have these in their offices.

**Tax and Assessment Lists** will give the name of the owner and the money value of the real and personal property. The development of the property may be indicated by a jump in the assessed value.

**City and County Directories** will show the names of persons living at a particular address as well as their occupation. The earliest directories do not have an address cross reference. Many times a female head of household will not be listed. The earliest city directory is 1877 and there are many years with no directories. Start with the most



recent directory and work back.

**County Histories** may yield biographical information on previous owners of a house. A date for the house may even be found as well as a description of the original structure.

**Mechanic's Liens** When available, will provide information related to the construction or remodel of a building (*source: Sonoma County Recorder's Office*)

**Water Hook Up Records** may show the date service began to the house.

**Building Permits** where applicable, may show the date the house was built. These will show alterations to existing property as well as new construction. The name of the architect and the contractor will be found. Building permits were not required until 1961. The Assessor will have some records previous to this time.

**Vital Statistics** will yield information on the births, deaths, and marriages of the residents of your house.

**Census Records** may show nationality, place of birth, whether the house was rented or owned, and other information about the individuals living in the house.

**Photographs** of street scenes may show your house as it looked originally. The full neighborhood may be shown.

**Newspapers** are particularly useful but only when you have an approximate date. Few have been indexed. During the '20's and '30's, subdivisions and new houses, their builders and costs, were often listed. Obituaries, birth and marriage notices, advertisements, notices of tax sales, sheriffs' sales, or auctions can be helpful; there may be related news stories as well.

## B. Location of Selected Materials

<u>Materials</u>	<u>Potential Information</u>	<u>Sources</u>
Abstract of Title (1850-present)	Summary of deeds, mortgages, and litigation. Owner names and dates. Boundary descriptions	Sonoma County Library, Sonoma County Museum, other museums and local libraries, title companies
Architectural/ Construction Drawing	Original plan, alterations, building materials, names of architect or builder	Sonoma County Museum (Lindsay Construction), Sonoma County Recorder (1885-1918), previous

		owners, architects/builders, newspapers
Assessment Rolls/ Tax Records	Value of property and Value of improvements	Sonoma County Library (Sonoma Co.: 1867- present, Santa Rosa: 1882-present), Petaluma 1867-1948, Sonoma County Assessor, Sonoma County Tax Collector, Sonoma County Museum, some local libraries and museums. Cotati Planning Dept.
Building Permits	Owner, builder Architect, contractor Date, cost	Cities, County, City Clerks, Planning depts. building inspectors
Cemetery and Church Records (1850-present)	Birth and death dates, baptism, marriages, family relationships	Sonoma County Recorder, Sonoma County Library, local museums, churches, cemeteries
Census Records (US & CA 1850-1920, no 1890)	Name, age, ethnicity, family relationships, occupation, property size, crops, value. Information varies with each census.	Sonoma County Library
Deeds	Buyer/seller, property description, date and sales price	Sonoma County Recorder
Directories (city and counties)	Occupants of dwellings. Some indexed by street. Businesses listed; also ads	Sonoma County Library (1877- present), Sonoma County Museum, local museums, libraries, Some city clerks
Genealogical Records/ Personal papers	Family histories, biographies	Past owners, local museums, libraries,

		Sonoma County Genealogical Society, Family History Center, LDS Church
Great Register of Voters	Residence, occupation Information varies each year	Sonoma County Library (1867-1939), some local museums and libraries
Historic Building Surveys and EIRS	History of building and residents; neighborhood, architectural style	City and County planning departments, local libraries, and some museums
Land Records	Information about property, people, dates, homestead records, mining claims	Sonoma County Recorder
Maps/ Historical Atlases	Maps in historical atlases show owners and acreage, and other built features. Atlases contain bios and business, commerce and real estate information	Sonoma County Recorder, Sonoma County Library, local libraries and museums
Maps, other Town maps Assessor maps Aerial and land surveys	Locations, boundaries	Sonoma County Library, museums, city and County offices, businesses
Master's Theses/Doctoral Dissertations	Research papers on local subjects	Sonoma County Library and SSU Library
Mortgages / Deeds of Trust	Loans on property	Sonoma County Recorder
Newspapers	Birth, death, and wedding notices; obituaries, news articles about new buildings, architects, ads, relevant social history	Libraries, some museums, and historical societies
Photographs and	Architectural and	Libraries and museums,

Postcards	landscape features; nearby structures; association with persons and events	historical societies, some city departments
Vital Records	Births, deaths, marriages, divorces	Sonoma County Clerk, Sonoma County Recorder, Sonoma County Genealogical Society
Water Hook Ups	Santa Rosa only (1877- 1947), other cities	Sonoma County Library, city offices, mutual water systems, Sonoma County Public Health, Environmental Services
Wills/Probate Records (1850-present)		Sonoma County Clerk, Sonoma County Library

**C. Addresses and Phone Numbers**

*Note: hours are subject to change)*

California Historical Resources Information System Northwest Information Center, SSU 1303 Maurice Ave. Rohnert Park, CA 94928	(707) 664-0880 Maintains national and state registration forms as well as historic resource evaluations and surveys
Cloverdale City Hall 124 N. Cloverdale Blvd. Cloverdale, CA 95425	(707) 894-2421 No records available prior to 1973, appointment advisable.
Cloverdale Historical Society	(707) 894-2067 Hours Some restrictions on use of collection
Cotati Planning Department	No material available prior to 1986 Appointment not necessary but helpful
Family History Center, LDS Church 1725 Peterson Lane Santa Rosa, CA	(707) 525-0399 Open to the Public Mon 1:00 pm - 5:00 pm Tues, Wed, Sat 1:00 pm - 9:00 pm Thursday 9:00 am - 1:00 pm

	<p>Closed 1<sup>st</sup> Sat. April and October Memorial and Labor Day (Saturday and Monday)  Week of July 4<sup>th</sup> and Thanksgiving  Two weeks at Christmas/New Years</p>
<p>Healdsburg Museum  221 Matheson Street  Healdsburg, Ca 95448</p>	<p>(707) 431-3325  Hours  Library access by appointment only;  research fee</p>
<p>Healdsburg Planning Department  126 Matheson  Healdsburg, CA 95448</p>	<p>(707) 431-3346  Appointment needed to view records</p>
<p>Monte Rio Historical Society  P.O. Box 484  Monte Rio, CA 95462</p>	<p>No telephone  Appointment needed</p>
<p>Petaluma City Clerk  11 English  Petaluma, CA 94952</p>	<p>(707) 778-4360  Advance notice of research request is appreciated</p>
<p>Petaluma Historical Museum and Library  20 Fourth Street  Petaluma, Ca 94952</p>	<p>(707) 778-4398  <a href="http://www.petalumamuseum.com">www.petalumamuseum.com</a>  Museum hours  Wed-Sat 10:00 am - 4:00 pm  Research library  Wed 1:00 pm - 4:00 pm and by appointment</p>
<p>Sebastopol City Manager  6120 Bodega Ave.  Sebastopol, Ca 95472</p>	<p>(707) 823-7863</p>
<p>Sebastopol Public Works  714 Johnson St.  Sebastopol, Ca 95472</p>	<p>(707) 823-4331  No records prior to 1964  Appointment needed to view records  No same day service for photographs</p>
<p>Sonoma City Clerk  1 The Plaza  Sonoma, Ca 95476</p>	<p>(707) 938-3681</p>

Sonoma County Assessor 585 Fiscal Drive Santa Rosa, Ca 95403	(707) 565-1888 Certain property files open only to owner, or with owner's written consent.
Sonoma County PRMD 2205 Ventura Avenue Santa Rosa, CA 95403	(707) 565-1900 No permits prior to 1970 on file. \$15.00 record search fee. Some records may be copied only with permission of architect or engineer of record.
Sonoma County Clerk	(707) 565-3800
Sonoma County Genealogical Society	<a href="http://www.scgs.org">www.scgs.org</a> No phone P.O. Box 2273 Santa Rosa, CA 95405-0273
Sonoma County Historical Records Commission c/o Sonoma County Recorder 585 Fiscal Drive Santa Rosa, Ca 95403	(707) 565-2651
Sonoma County Historical Society P.O. Box 1373 Santa Rosa, CA 95402	No telephone <a href="http://www.sonomacountyhistory.org">www.sonomacountyhistory.org</a>
Sonoma County Landmarks Commission c/o PRMD 2550 Ventura Avenue Santa Rosa, CA 95403	(707) 565-1900
Local Landmarks Commissions c/o individual cities' planning departments	See phone book for listing under City Government
Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library 3 <sup>rd</sup> and E Streets Santa Rosa, CA 95404	(707) 545-0831 ext. 562 Hours: Weds - Sat 10:00 am - 6:00 pm
Local branch libraries	See phone book listing under County Government: Library
Sonoma County Museum	(707) 579-1500

425 7 <sup>th</sup> Street Santa Rosa CA 95401	Use of collection by appointment only
Sonoma County Planning Department c/o PRMD 2550 Ventura Avenue Santa Rosa, CA 95403	(707) 565-1900 Should have AP number for parcel of interest. Older material may be in storage. Information on Sonoma County Landmarks (fee may be charged for landmark designation).
Sonoma County Recorder 585 Fiscal Drive Santa Rosa, CA 95403	(707) 565-2651
Sonoma League for Historic Preservation 129 East Spain St. Sonoma, CA 95476	(707) 938-0510 Hours: Mailing Address: P.O. Box 766
Sonoma Valley Historical Society Depot Park Museum 270 First Street West Sonoma, CA 95476	(707) 938-9765 Hours: Library hours by appointment only Mailing address: P.O. Box 861
State Office of Historic Preservation P.O. Box 942896 Sacramento, CA	916-653-6624 For both State and National recognition; National Register nomination is initiated through the State Office
West County Museum 261 South Main Street Sebastopol, CA 95472	(707) 829-6711 Thurs - Sun 1:00 pm - 4:00 pm
Western Sonoma County Historical Society P.O. Box 816 Sebastopol, CA 95473	No telephone Appointment necessary to view materials

### III. Could your Property be a Landmark?

Researching a property or site for Landmarks or National Register designation differs from other purposes, as it must be directed toward determining the historic significance of that property. Is the structure or site associated with important events, activities, person, or eras? Does it provide a significant example of an architectural style of the past? Is this property unique or irreplaceable to the County and the community, or provide for this and future generation is an example of the physical surrounding in which past generations lived?

Owners of historic properties should consider obtaining designation as a Sonoma County Landmark, a city landmark, or a listing on the California Register of Historical Resources or the National Register of Historic Places. These designations could provide the following benefits to historic properties:

1. Proper historical rehabilitation of a site which can make possible a contemporary use while preserving the historical integrity. This can be important in the continued value of the property.
2. Property tax and federal tax credits, wherever available. Your city may have set historic building criteria, based on the "Mills Act."<sup>1</sup> This allows a property owner to enter into a ten-year contract with the city. The contract would provide for the property to be reassessed at its "income" value rather than the "sales" value (i.e., rent potential) in return for a plan of improvements which preserve and restore the building to its original design. The lower tax improvements which preserve and restore the building to its original design. The lower tax rate transfers with the property upon sale, along with the obligation for continued maintenance.
3. Continued preservation of a neighborhood which helps maintain the value of all concerned properties.
4. Documentation for any future reconstruction or restoration of the building. This is particularly important wherever "natural" damages have occurred, such as earthquakes, fires, or storms.
5. Documentation if there is a possibility that this historical building may be demolished, moved, or drastically altered in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mills Act is section 439 of the California Revenue and Taxation Code



6. Ability to take advantage of the California State Historic Building Code  
Since each community is unique, and each historical site or structure individualized, one must contact the County, city, and/or state in which the property is located. Sonoma County and most cities within our county have established ordinances and criteria for landmark designation. Each agency may have different requirements, in an attempt to fulfill local needs and conditions. Most ordinances require that a structure be at least 50 years of age. Some agencies charge a fee for landmark designation.

You can contact the Sonoma County Permits and Resource Management Department or your city manager's office for the criteria. Also, most cities, planning departments, and your Library have information for listing as a California State Historic Landmark or the National Register of Historic Places. Additional information may be obtained from the Office of Historic Preservation, P.O. Box 942896, Sacramento, CA 94296-0001. The Office of Historic Preservation administers four programs: (1) National Register of Historic Places in conjunction with the National Parks Service for properties of national significance; (2) State Historic Landmarks for places of state or regional significance; (3) Points of Historical Interest for local significant buildings or sites., (4) California Register of Historic Resources.

#### IV. SUGGESTED READING

**Sonoma County History: A Bibliography and Union List.** 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Compiled by the Sonoma County Library, Santa Rosa: Sonoma County Historical Records Commission, 1990

A valuable bibliography of the holdings of local libraries and historical societies that relate to the history of Sonoma County. Headings include the county as a whole, each of the communities, and subjects ranging from agriculture to utopian communities. Under each heading, books and other documents are fully described and the libraries where they may be found are listed. State Library and Bancroft holdings not available in Sonoma County are also included. The bibliography is available at the Sonoma County Library, most local libraries, and most museums; you may purchase your own copy at the Sonoma County Library Reference desk, or the Sonoma County Recorder's Office.

#### **Other General Reference Works available at the Sonoma County Public Library:**

- Butchart, Ronald. Local Schools: Exploring Their History. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1986.
- Danzer, Gerald. Public Places: Exploring Their History. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1987.
- Green, Betsy Discovering the History of Your House and Neighborhood. Santa Monica Press, 2002
- Hower, Barbara J. Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1990
- Kerr, K. Austin. Local Businesses: Exploring Their History. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1990.
- Kirker, Harold. California's Architectural Frontier: Style and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1986.
- Kyvig, David L. and Marty, Myron Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You. Nashville. TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1982
- Light, Sally. House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home. Spencertown, NY: Golden Hills Press, Inc. 1989

### **More Specialized References:**

Federal Historic Preservation Laws. Washington DC: US Department of Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resource Programs, 1989-1990. National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms, Washington, D.C.: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 1991.

Madex, Diane, ed. Landmark Yellow Pages: Where to Find All the names, Addresses, Facts and Figures You Need. Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1990.

O'Donnell, Eleanor. Researching a Historic Property. Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1991.

### **Useful Resources to Contact by Mail:**

American Association for State and Local History  
172 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. North  
Nashville, TC 37201  
(catalog of books, brochures, and technical leaflets)

California Office of Historic Preservation  
P.O. Box 942896  
Sacramento, CA 94396-0001  
(booklet "Historic Preservation in California: A Handbook for Local Communities")

Home History Research Service  
P.O. Box 9 SVS  
Binghamton, NY 13903

Sonoma County Genealogical Society  
P.O. Box 2273  
Santa Rosa, CA 95405-0273  
(publications listed at back of booklet)

Sonoma County Historical Records Commission,  
c/o Sonoma County Recorder  
585 Fiscal Drive  
Santa Rosa, CA 95403  
(Publications listed at back of book)

## Notes to the Reader/Researcher

We have tried to make this manual helpful and relevant within the scope of our subject, researching the history of your Sonoma County building. While attempting to provide both a list of what is available and a step by step process, and finding a wide range and number of documents, dates, and locations, the manual become longer and more complex than anticipated. We hope we have encouraged you in your search, and that it has been fun.

Your suggestions and input are helpful. Send comments to: Sonoma County Historical Records Commission, 585 Fiscal Drive, Santa Rosa, CA 95403