

Office of HISTORIC RESOURCES

OHR's "How-To" Guide to Conducting Historical Research

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While "historical research" may sound like a dry and daunting task better left to professionals and academics, this type of research is, in fact, possible for anyone with an interest in history and some time and patience on their hands.

Historical research is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding aspects of my work in historic preservation. Much like the old family photos and newspaper clippings we look through to experience our own histories, historical research in preservation is like opening up a photo album and diary of the city, from entire neighborhoods and communities to individual buildings and properties. Good historical research is fundamental for completing Historic-Cultural Monument applications, submissions to SurveyLA, or for pursuing proper rehabilitation and restoration work on buildings. A few basic tips can open an entire world of historical information to anybody with an interest in our built heritage.

Photodocumentation

My first advice for starting research on a particular building or property is to first photograph it ("photodocumentation"). With good photos on a digital camera, you will not only have recorded your building, you will have handy images to show anyone else interested in the building and to individuals who can offer further insight on the building ("That house looks like a Craftsman from the 1910s." "I think the windows were changed out...") You will also have documented the building in case alterations occur during your research or if, in the worst-case scenario, it is demolished. When searching for historical images of a building or site, you can use two major sources of historic photographs of Los Angeles: the Photo Collection of the Los Angeles Public Library at www.lapl.org and the USC Digital library at <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/search/controller/index.htm>

ZIMAS

The next important step is to use the Department of City Planning's ZIMAS (Zone Information & Map Access System). ZIMAS offers an unprecedented amount of information on individual parcels. I use it every day to pull information about specific historic buildings as well as for buildings not registered as historic resources. While it takes some time to learn to use the system, a section of our website at www.preservation.lacity.org/status/zimas offers a step by step guide on how to use ZIMAS for confirming if a building is registered as a historic resource. Exploring the other menus in ZIMAS will provide to you the range of addresses, the Assessor Parcel Number (APN), the Tract name, Council District area, the building's construction date, the number of buildings, and a host of other information.

Permit Research

Once you have the construction date, it's time to move on and actually take a look at the oldest building

permits on record with the Department of Building & Safety. This requires you to go physically to their Records Department at 201 N. Figueroa in Downtown Los Angeles or 6262 Van Nuys Blvd in Van Nuys. Simply provide the address to a staff person who will then provide you copies of any building permits for a fee. If you are lucky, you will find the original building permit which should have the construction date, owner, architect, builder, and a small description of the building.

Keep in mind that many of the entries were handwritten so you may have to unravel someone's sloppy penmanship from the 1920s! As a rule, the City of Los Angeles does not have buildings permits from the late 19th century so that many Victorian-era buildings do not have their original building permit on record. Also remember that not all buildings were designed by certified architects and may have only had a builder.

Sanborn Maps

Once you are an expert at locating historic building permits and have mastered ZIMAS, move on to learning how to research the amazing Sanborn Maps. Beginning in 1867, the Sanborn Company surveyed and mapped major American cities for assessing fire insurance liability, leaving us with a stunning amount of detailed information about the built environment. You can embark on researching Sanborn Maps in relation to your particular building by using the Los Angeles Public Library's online Databases services at <http://databases.lapl.org/> and clicking "Sanborn Maps 1867-1970" (you will need a library card). Like ZIMAS, using these online services takes some time to learn and use. You may also opt to see an original set of Sanborn Maps by visiting the Central Library in Downtown Los Angeles.

Proquest - LA Times Archive

Another great service available on the Databases section of the Los Angeles Public Library website is the ProQuest Newsstand. Imagine being able to search the entire contents of the Los Angeles Times from 1881-1985 at your fingertips. This is literally what you are able to do through the ProQuest service through their search engine, where you can find entire articles and newspaper pages from the Los Angeles Times (you will need a library card as well). In the search engine, type in the address of your building, as well as the names of the original owner, architect, or builder. You may find articles related to the construction of the building, discussion of the owner, and maybe even a profile of the architect. You may sometimes even find a drawing of the building as proposed or a picture of the building when completed. Obituaries are good sources of finding information about a person's life if you are researching the people associated with the building.

Learning to use just some of these amazing resources will make you a pro at historical research! You will soon find that every building in the city has its own history to share.

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