



How to Research Your Home in Rhode Island

Every house has a story to tell, and uncovering that story is like a treasure hunt. Take the time to sift through the records and the history of your property will slowly unfold. You will come to learn more about the history of the structure, its residents, and its role in a larger neighborhood story.

1. Determine what research has already been completed on your property.

a. If your house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, thorough research is on file with the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission (RIHPHC). Check the electronic RI National Register Search (www.ri.gov/preservation/search/) to see if your property is included. If it is, contact the RIHPHC office (150 Benefit St., Providence or 401-222-2678), to receive a copy of your property's National Register nomination form.

b. Your local historical society may also hold a completed history or architectural survey of your property, especially if it is located within a local historic district.

2. Determine an approximate date of construction for your property.

a. Start your research at home, using what you already have. Your house's **architectural style and building materials** can give you hints about its past. Use an architectural field guide such as Virginia & Lee McAlester's *Field Guide to American Houses* to identify features that may reveal a date range in which your house was built.

b. Consult **historic maps and atlases**. Maps are a great way to determine an approximate date of construction. Search for a map on which your building *does not* appear and then the first subsequent map on which it *does* appear. The years between the publication dates of these maps will most likely be the time period in which your property was constructed.

- The Rhode Island Historical Society Research Library (121 Hope Street, Providence) holds a number of Rhode Island and city atlases.
- City maps and atlases are also typically found at your local city or town hall, historical society, and/or public library.

3. Create a chain of title for your property.

A chain of title is the progression of a property's ownership from the present to the original owner. To create one, read the deeds of all past transactions. Deeds are the legal documents that record land transfers.

a. The first step is to determine the location of your property's current deed.

- This can typically be found at your City/Town Tax Assessor or Clerks Office. Here you should find an index that will provide you with the deed book volume and page number of your property's current deed. This index may be searchable by address, current owner's name, or your property's plat and lot number.

- b. Next, locate and read through this deed to learn more about your property.
 - Deeds are typically stored at your City/Town Clerks Office.
 - From each deed you can gain insight into the features of the property being transferred, such as the boundaries of the property, number of buildings on the lot, or if the property was previously part of a larger parcel of land. Often you can also learn more about the individuals transferring the land, such as the buyer and seller's occupations and their relation to each other.
- c. Finally, read the deeds of past transactions to complete your chain of title.
 - Typically, each deed will reference the previous transaction and the correlating deed book volume and page number. If it does not, most City/Town Clerks Offices hold a "Grantor/Grantee" index. Search this index for the name of the grantor (seller) in the deed you are currently reading. You should find a reference to a deed in which the grantor (seller) is the grantee (buyer) in an earlier transaction. You should read the deed to confirm that the boundaries described include the property you are researching.

4. Explore additional documents to learn more about your property and its past owners.

City Directories

City directories are similar to today's phone books. They list the city's residents and businesses, and their corresponding addresses.

- Historic directories are typically located at your local historical society and/or public library.

Directories are a great source of information and will provide insight into the building, the neighborhood, and its residents over time. You can learn, for example, if the building was a single-family home or contained separate apartments. Who owned and/or who rented the property, and what their occupation was.

Census Records

The U.S. Census has been taken every ten years since 1790. There are also 1774 and 1782 Rhode Island censuses.

- The U.S. and Rhode Island censuses are available through Ancestry.com, which is likely accessible online at your local public library.
- The Rhode Island censuses, and any city specific census, may also be accessible at your local historical society.

The range of information offered by censuses differs depending on the year. Among other things, you can gain insight into whether the building is being owned or rented, the value of the house, the number of household members and their occupation, age, race, or place of origin.

Newspapers

There are a number of Rhode Island newspapers that can provide insight into your property and its residents.

- Rhode Island newspapers are available through an online database called *Newsbank*, likely accessible at your local public library.
- Historic newspapers are also typically located at your local historical society.

Newspapers have the potential to offer a wide range of information. Anything from an advertisement for the rent or sale of your property, to the obituary of one of its residents. Be creative in what you search for and how you connect the dots!

Probate Inventories

A probate inventory is the complete listing of the property owned by an individual at the time of their death.

- Probate Inventories are typically located at your City/Town Clerks Office.

Probate Inventories are a great way to learn more about the interior of your property. The individual's possessions are listed in the order they were found, and often the room in which they were found. From this you gain insight into the number and type of rooms within the house. Compare this to your property's current floor plan and discover what has changed over time!

Building Permits

Building permits record physical changes made to a property, including new construction or changes to a pre-existing structure.

- Permits are typically located at your City/Town Building and Zoning, or Planning Office.



How to Research Your Home in Newport, RI

Every house has a story to tell, and uncovering that story is like a treasure hunt. Take the time to sift through the records and the history of your property will slowly unfold. You will come to learn more about the history of the structure, its residents, and its role in a larger neighborhood story.

1. Determine what research has already been completed on your property.

- a. If your house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, thorough research is on file with the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission (RIHPHC). Check the electronic RI National Register Search (www.ri.gov/preservation/search/) to see if your property is included. If it is, contact the RIHPHC office (150 Benefit St., Providence or 401-222-2678), to receive a copy of your property's National Register nomination form.
- b. If your house is located within the Hill, Point, or Kay-Catherine-Old Beach neighborhoods, the Newport Historical Society will have a Historic House Survey that describes its architecture and history.

2. Determine an approximate date of construction for your property.

- a. Start your research at home, using what you already have. Your house's **architectural style and building materials** can give you hints about its past. Use an architectural field guide such as Virginia & Lee McAlester's *Field Guide to American Houses* to identify features that may reveal a date range in which your house was built.
- b. Consult **historic maps and atlases**. Maps are a great way to determine an approximate date of construction. Search for a map on which your building *does not* appear and then the first subsequent map on which it *does* appear. The years between the publication dates of these maps will most likely be the time period in which your property was constructed. See below for a list of Newport maps and the repositories at which you can obtain them.

Newport City Hall = NCH, Newport Historical Society = NHS, Newport Public Library = NPL, Redwood Library = RL, Salve Regina University Library = SRU

Copies of a few maps are available in *The Architectural Heritage of Newport Rhode Island*, by Antoinette F. Downing and Vincent J. Scully, Jr., 1967. = DS (Page #)

Stiles, Ezra, *Map of Newport (1758)* –DS (34), NHS (copy), RL (original)

This map does not delineate building footprints. Instead it identifies properties and their use using a number and letter system; a legend is included on the map.

de Barres, J.F.W., *Map of Newport (1776)* -DS(97), NHS

This map identifies the location of public buildings, streets, and wharfs. It does not delineate the footprints of private residences.

Blaskowitz, Charles, *Map of Newport (1777)* –DS(93), NHS

This map delineates the footprints of private residences unless there is a large concentration of structures in one area. While the map may not identify your property individually, it may tell you if it was part of a dense neighborhood.

Dripps, M., *Map of Newport, Rhode Island* (New York: M. Dripps, 1850). -NHS

Dripps, M. & B.J. Tilley, *Map of the City of Newport, RI* (Newport, RI: M. Dripps & B.J. Tilley, 1859). -NHS

D.G. Beers & Co., *Atlas of the State of Rhode Island* (Philadelphia, PA: D.G. Beers & Co., 1870). -NCH

Hopkins, G.M., *City Atlas of Newport, RI* (Philadelphia, PA: G.M. Hopkins, 1876). -NHS, NPL

Atlas of the City of Newport, Rhode Island (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, 1883). -NCH, NHS, NPL

Newport, R.I. (New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., 1884). - RL, SRU

Newport Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1891). -RL, SRU

Elliot, Charles L. and Thomas Flynn, *Atlas of the City of Newport, RI* (Massachusetts: L.J. Richards and Co., 1893). -NHS

Atlas of Rhode Island (Everts and Richards, 1895). - NCH

Insurance Maps of Newport, Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1896). -RL, SRU

Insurance Maps of Newport, Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903). -RL, SRU

Atlas of the City of Newport and Town of Middletown and Portsmouth, Rhode Island (Massachusetts: L.J. Richards and Co., 1907). -NCH, NHS, NPL

Atlas of Newport, Jamestown, Middletown and Portsmouth Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1921). -NCH, NHS, NPL, RL, SRU

Insurance Maps of Newport, Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1953). -RL, SRU

3. Create a chain of title for your property.

A chain of title is the progression of a property's ownership from the present to the original owner.

a. The first step is to determine the property's **plat and lot number**. This can be done in one of two ways:

- Online
 - Visit the Tax Assessor's "Maps and Plans" webpage; www.cityofnewport.com/departments/planning-zoning/maps-plans/home.cfm.
 - Here you will find the "Plat Map Key." Locate your property and its correlating plat number from this map.
 - Next, go back to the "Maps and Plans" page and find the plat map you just recorded. This will download a .pdf on which you will find the lot number for your property.
- Tax Assessor's Office, first floor of Newport City Hall. Here a plat map key is posted on the wall where you can locate your property and its correlating plat number. Next use the maps on the desk below, organized by plat number, to determine your property's lot number.

b. The next step is to locate your property's **title card**. To do this you will need to visit the Tax Assessor's Office.

The title card records all legal transactions regarding your property between 1889 and the present.

Obtaining the complete title card for your property is a two-step process.

- Transactions between 2001 and the present are recorded in the *Assessor's Taxpayer Information System* database accessible on the computer in the Tax Assessor's Office.

- Transactions between 1889 and 2001 are recorded in the file cabinet below the Tax Assessor's desk. The files are organized by plat and lot number
- Transactions before 1889 have not been recorded onto title cards and can only be established through more detailed deed research as described below.

c. You now have the preliminary chain of title for your property and you can begin **deed research**. To do this, visit the Recorder of Deeds Office in the basement of City Hall.

Deeds are the legal documents that record land transfers.

- i. Begin by finding the deed for the most recent transaction using the deed book volume and page number that was recorded on your property's title card. This deed will represent the transaction between the current and most recent property owners.
- ii. Read through the deed to learn more about your property. From each deed you may gain insight into the features of the property being transferred such as the boundaries of the property, number of buildings on the lot, or if the property was previously part of a larger parcel of land. Often you can also learn more about the individuals transferring the land such as the seller and buyer's occupations and their relation to each other.
- iii. You can continue reading the deeds of past transactions by referencing the book volume and page numbers from your property's title card. The location of deeds recorded prior to 1889 can be found in one of two ways.
 - Typically, each deed will reference the previous transaction and the correlating deed book volume and page number.
 - If it does not, you can use the "Grantor/Grantee" index to find where a transaction was recorded.
 - The index for deeds recorded between 1910 and the present is located on a computer in the Recorder of Deeds Office in a database searchable by the grantor (seller) or grantee's (buyer) name.
 - For deeds recorded between 1774 and 1910 you will want to search the card catalog also located in the Recorder of Deeds Office.
 - Deeds recorded between 1700 and 1774 are located at the Newport Historical Society (NHS). The NHS also has a card catalog "Grantor/Grantee" index similar to that at the Recorder of Deeds Office.

4. Explore additional documents to learn more about your property and its past owners.

City Directories

City directories are similar to today's phone books. They list the city's residents and businesses, and their corresponding addresses.

Newport City Directories, between 1858 and 2005, are located at the Newport Historical Society. Years 1856 to 1989 are also available at the Newport Public Library.

- Between 1858 and 1922, and after 1986 a property can be searched only by the last name of the present owner or resident.
- Between 1922 and 1986 a property can be searched by its owner or resident, as well as by street address.

Directories are a great source of information and will provide insight into the building, the neighborhood, and its residents over time. You can learn, for example, if the building was a single-family home or contained separate apartments. Who owned and/or who rented the property, and what their occupation was.

Census Records

The U.S. Census has been taken every ten years since 1790. There are also 1774 and 1782 Rhode Island censuses, and an 1889 Newport census.

- The U.S. and Rhode Island censuses are available through Ancestry.com, accessible online at the Newport Public Library.
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The range of information offered by censuses differs depending on the year. Among other things, you can gain insight into whether the building is being owned or rented, the value of the house, the number of household members and their occupation, age, race, or place of origin.

Newspapers

There are a number of Rhode Island and Newport specific newspapers that can provide insight into your property and its residents, including; the Newport Mercury, Newport Herald, Providence Gazette and Rhode-Island Republican.

- Rhode Island newspapers between the years 1732 and 1913 are available through an online database called *Newsbank*, accessible at the Newport Public Library

Newspapers have the potential to offer a wide range of information. Anything from an advertisement for the rent or sale of your property, to the obituary of one of its residents. Be creative in what you search for and how you connect the dots!

Probate Inventories

A probate inventory is the complete listing of the property owned by an individual at the time of their death.

- The index for probate inventories is located in the City Clerk's Office in the basement of City Hall; it is organized alphabetically by last name. The corresponding documents are located in the Recorder of Deeds Office.

Probate Inventories are a great way to learn more about your building's interior. The individual's possessions are listed in the order they were found, and often the room in which they were found. From this you gain insight into the number and type of rooms within the house. Compare this to your property's current floor plan and discover what has changed!

Building Permits

Building permits record physical changes made to a property, including new construction or changes to a pre-existing structure.

- Permits between 1970 and the present are located at the Planning and Zoning Office at City Hall. While permits prior to 1970 no longer exist, reference to the work completed on your property as early as the 1940s will be available in card catalog form.



How to Research Your Home in Providence, RI

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Introduction and formatting by NRF

Every house has a story to tell, and uncovering that story is like a treasure hunt. Take the time to sift through the records and the history of your property will slowly unfold. You will come to learn more about the history of the structure, its residents, and its role in a larger neighborhood story.

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2. Determine an approximate date of construction for your property.

a. Consult **early maps and atlases** (*listed below*) which indicate existing buildings and their locations. If the building does not appear on one map but does appear on the next later map, the building was likely built sometime between the publication dates of the two maps or atlases. This will give a general time frame to guide further research.

Maps and Atlases to Check (in chronological order):

Walling, Henry F. Map of the City of Providence, Rhode Island. 1857.

Beers, D.G. & Co. Map of the City of Providence. 1870.

Sanborn, D.A. Insurance Map of Providence. 1874. (Not inclusive, mostly Downtown)

Hopkins, G.M. Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island, by Wards. 1875.

----- Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island and Environs. 1882.

Sanborn, D.A. Atlas of Providence. 1889. (Not inclusive, mostly Downtown)

Everts & Richards. Topographical Atlas of Providence County, Rhode Island. 1895.

Richards, L.J. Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island. 1908.

----- Atlas of the City of Providence, Rhode Island. 1917.

Hopkins, G.M. Plat Book of the City of Providence, Rhode Island. 1918.

Sanborn Map Company. Insurance Maps of Providence. 1921, 1926, 1937. (Variously updated in different copies)

3. Create a chain of title for your property.

- a. At Tax Assessor's Office (City Hall, second floor), **obtain plat and lot number** from the assessor's records.
 - Check the plat card for property transactions and owners of the property in question. Record the owners of the property in reverse chronological order, beginning with the current owner. Record the date of transaction and the reference to the deed book and page. References to deed book and page were not commonly recorded on the plat cards before the mid-20th century, but reference in the deed books of recent transactions can be helpful in providing references back to much earlier transactions. Chain of title of owners recorded in the plat carts usually does not extend very far back into the nineteenth century, 1880s or 1890s most often, but occasionally as far back as the late 1850s.
- b. Trace the title through the deed books.
 - Deed books numbered 278 and above are located in the Land Records Office (fifth floor, south side of building); deed books lower in number than 278 are in the City Archives (up the stairs on the east end of the building and in the middle of the east side of the building). It is best to begin with the most recent transfer and to read each transfer.
 - Read each deed to determine what is included in the transfer (land only, land and buildings, sometimes referred to as "improvements") as well as the dimensions of the property being transferred. Keep in mind that the lot may not always have been in its current size or configuration. Generally the earliest recorded transaction that includes land only provides you with a *terminus post quem* for the building in question.
 - Usually, each transfer makes a reference to the recorded location of the deed from the previous owner to the seller; if that reference is not given, the deed will always provide a reference to the name of the owner of the property from whom the seller purchased it. Use Grantor (seller) and Grantee (buyer) indexes to obtain reference to the deed books. Twentieth-century indexes are in the Land Records Office; pre-twentieth century indexes, in the Archives.

4. Explore additional documents to learn more about your property and its past owners.

Once you have a more precise time frame for the building's construction, you should check other sources for a more precise date. These are located in the City Archives.

Tax Records

Providence tax records extend back to the time of its incorporation as a city, 1832.

- The early records, however, list only the individual's name, the total value of the property being taxed, and the tax. There is no distinction made for each piece of property owned.
- Beginning in the 1850s and continuing through the late nineteenth century, the Tax Ledgers refer to each piece of property by plat and lot. The ledgers are in several series, A-F, arranged more or less chronologically. The ledgers are well indexed.
- For the twentieth century, taxes are recorded in books for each year and arranged alphabetically by owner with specific reference to each parcel owned.

Directories

Providence has directories beginning in 1824, with alphabetical listings by last name.

Beginning in 1892, the House Directory records each building and its owner and occupants arranged alphabetically by street and in ascending numerical order.

- Keep in mind that house numbers change from time to time, and renumbering was never done at one time on a citywide basis. The directories include a reference to streets and their numbers and give the numbers on either side of every intersection, so you may interpolate the number given in the directory with the street references to make sure that you have the right location.

Intention-to-Build Permits

Between 1873 and the mid-1920s, the City had an optional registration of new construction.

- These permits record owner, location of construction, type of building to be constructed, estimated cost, builder, and architect. Builders and architects (if one was employed) are not always identified, but the basic information usually provides a very specific date for construction