Why research the history of a building?

- National Register of Historic Places nominations
- Renaissance Zone tax credits
- Rehabilitation
- Promoting the history and heritage of the region
- Developing tourism
- Simple curiosity

These all good reasons to begin researching building history. No matter what the driving reason, there are a number of resources that can help a researcher understand more about a property and its history. Some of the primary research centers in southwest North Dakota include:

- Dickinson Public Library
- Stoxen Library at Dickinson State University
- Dickinson Museum Center
- State Historical Society of North Dakota at Bismarck.

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Office of Equal Opportunity
National Park Service
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20240
Getting Started

There are a number of resources that can help piece together the larger picture of a building’s history, much like detective work. Local government resources generally can provide most of the information to establish the legal description for a property.

The COUNTY COURTHOUSE might have records pertaining to deeds, mortgages, wills, probate records, tax sales, and court litigation. The courthouse will also have an abstract that provides a legal description of the property, and who has owned it through time.

Original building permits, legal descriptions, and tax records can also be found at CITY HALL. A building permit can sometimes provide information about the builder, the owner, the architect or contractor, materials used, a sketch of the floor plan, and the original cost. The City Assessor’s Office will also have a legal description of a property, and construction dates for any buildings on the property. Other tax records available might also contain legal descriptions of a building, and might indicate changes to a property.

After the legal description of the property has been established, a researcher can more easily trace other records.

Other Resources

Archival and special collections at historical societies, museums, archives, libraries, and local universities and colleges are all potential sources of additional information about a building.

MAPS AND ATLASES: SANBORN INSURANCE MAPS provide detailed information for buildings and properties for a number of cities throughout the United States. FIRE UNDERWRITERS INSPECTION BUREAU MAPS provide information about businesses for smaller communities, but usually do not include houses. COUNTY PLAT MAPS or ATLAS show land ownership for large tracts of land, and are especially useful for researching rural areas. The UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL SURVEY TOPOGRAPHICAL MAPS also indicate the location and number of structures in rural areas, and show terrain contours and major geographical features in relation to property and buildings.

PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTIONS: Universities, libraries, historical societies, and museums often have photographic collections available to researchers. Former property owners and neighbors might also have photographs of a building.

PREVIOUS STUDIES: Local and state archives might also have information about architectural surveys for a community, and nomination forms for the National Register of Historic Places. If a building is in a designated historic district, surveys and nomination forms for that district might include information on individual buildings as well.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS: PUBLISHED HISTORIES, featuring local communities, neighborhoods, businesses, and families, may contain information on buildings. CITY DIRECTORIES contain information about owners and occupants of homes and businesses, list the primary business for a building, and can be used to trace the location of people and businesses over the years. Old NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES might also contain information relevant to a building’s history.

OTHER INFORMATION: Ask NEIGHBORS about previous owners, changes to the property, and neighborhood history. Check STATE AND FEDERAL CENSUS RECORDS for information about former property owners. Research information about local ARCHITECTS AND ARCHITECTURAL FIRMS, as well as records that contain information about significant people or events associated with a property. SCHOOL, CHURCH, and CEMETERY RECORDS might also provide information about individuals and families connected to a building. Look for more than just buildings. Other significant features of a property are often overlooked such as out buildings, fences, landscape features, and public art. These features can also help tell a building’s story.