The History of Your Old House

A Program of the Durham County Library and Preservation Durham

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I. Introduction

In this program we will learn how to use public records, on-line resources, standard references, and library materials to compile and write the history of your old Durham house. Preservation Durham has a plaque program to identify Durham’s historic architecture. The purpose of the program is to draw public attention to our shared Durham architectural and historical heritage with bronze plaques on eligible buildings. The program insists on relatively high research standards and requires the organization of research findings in a standardized format outlined in the plaque application form. We will follow the format of the application form in our program today. A copy of the application form is attached and it can be accessed at Preservation Durham’s website. There will be more about Preservation Durham and the plaque program a little later in this paper.

For the purposes of our program today we will assume that your old house is located in the city of Durham and was built sometime after 1890 but before 1960. Durham was founded as a railway village in the years just preceding the Civil War. It was first incorporated in 1866 and when that incorporation was rendered invalid by the passage of the XIV Amendment to the United States Constitution, the town was incorporated again in 1869. At that time Durham was located in Orange County. Durham County was created in 1881 by joining together parts of Orange and Wake Counties. With the boom in the tobacco business in the late nineteenth century, Durham grew from a village into a real town. Wealthy residents built fine Victorian mansions and members of the Duke family and their associates built a few palatial homes. Developers and speculators built thousands of more yeoman homes along the few roads and streets spreading from downtown. Mill owners built vast mill villages to the east, west, and south. Much of Durham’s Victorian architecture survived into the middle of the twentieth century, but during the second half of that century, a large number of these buildings were demolished. What remains is under threat.

A second building boom occurred in Durham during the years just before and just after the First World War. Street car and early automobile subdivisions like Morehead Hill, Trinity Park, East Durham, and Old North Durham sprang up during the ‘teens, ‘twenties, and ‘thirties. The foursquares, bungalows, and period revival houses of this era make up the bulk of Durham’s historic buildings today. Because they survive in the context of their original neighborhoods, these houses provide Durham with a rich architectural heritage. In this program our discussion of research methodology will focus on these houses.

Following the format of Preservation Durham’s plaque application, we will start with learning how to use tax and deed records to create a chronological list of the owners of your old
house. We will also check on research others may have done in the form of historical inventories and nominations to the National Register of Historic Places. From there we will use city directories to create a list of all the persons who have occupied your old house. This information, with Sanborn insurance maps, will help us determine the age of the house. We will then try to learn more about the people themselves. Using directory information, census records, death records, local histories, and newspaper articles and obituaries, we will assemble biographies of the important owners and occupants of your house. Finally, we will use standard architectural reference guides to describe and classify the house.

The research can be fascinating. Each clue or bit of information drives the researcher to discover more. Legends can be sustained or debunked. There will be love stories and tragedies. The work can be frustrating, too. Records can lead to dead ends. Gaps in information may leave mysteries in the narrative of our old house. This program will introduce you to the records most likely to bear fruit and give you a glimpse of other records that might also help you on your quest.

II. About Preservation Durham

Formally known as “The Historic Preservation Society of Durham,” Preservation Durham is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1974 by Durham citizens dismayed at the large-scale destruction of Durham’s finest historic homes and buildings during the era of “urban renewal.” Over the years the organization has advocated for the preservation of Durham’s architectural legacy through programs, tours, research, learning, the creation of historic districts, and the promotion of adaptive reuse and sensitive rehabilitation of historic structures. Preservation Durham is a membership organization open to anyone who shares its members’ love of Durham’s history and the legacy of her historic buildings. The organization is funded primarily by membership dues and member contributions. A membership form is included among the handouts in this program.

III. Preservation Durham’s Historic Plaque Program

Preservation Durham established the Historic Plaque Program in 2001 to encourage the preservation of Durham’s historic resources and to educate the public about our community’s shared architectural and historic heritage.

A structure must be at least 70 years old and its history must be thoroughly documented before it will be considered for a plaque. Residential plaques measure 10” x 14” and list the historic name of the home and its date of construction for a cost of $350; commercial and institutional plaques, which include more information about the history of the site in a slightly larger format, cost $450. The price represents the cost of casting and installation. Preservation Durham makes no money from its plaque program. All plaques are cast in solid bronze and feature the original Historic Preservation Society of Durham logo. Plaques remain the property of Preservation Durham and will be removed if the historical integrity of the structure is damaged.

To date, plaques have been erected on nearly 175 historic Durham buildings, most of them on homes. For each plaque there is a body of knowledge created through the exacting
inquiring of folks just like you who have taken the trouble to research and record the history of an old Durham house or building.

IV. Historic Inventories, Landmarks, and Districts

The low hanging fruit of any old house research are the entries that may exist for your home in the *Durham Architectural and Historic Inventory* or one of the many nomination documents describing Durham’s National Register Historic Districts. It is also possible that your old house has already been declared a National Register historic landmark or Durham local historic landmark. These designations also require historical research that is accessible to the public.

The *Durham Architectural and Historic Inventory*, by Claudia Roberts, Diane Lea, and Robert Leary was sponsored by the City of Durham and Preservation Durham and published in 1982. This wonderful book is a sampling inventory of all Durham’s historic neighborhoods and includes photographs and brief write-ups of representative properties from each area. There are multiple copies of this book in the North Carolina Collection at the main branch of the Durham County Library. Be sure to check the chapter concerning the neighborhood or part of town where your house is located. Your house might be one of the properties selected for inclusion in the book. Each chapter also includes a brief history of the neighborhood where your house is located. This information will provide context for your research. A note of caution is necessary. As valuable as the inventory is, it sometimes contains mistakes. The undertaking of researching and describing so many properties was gigantic. The time allowed for each entry was small. Do not be surprised if your research reveals that you house is older than the date recorded in the inventory or that it was owned or built by someone other than the person listed in the book.

There are nineteen National Register Historic Districts and another fifty or so individually listed buildings or complexes of buildings in Durham. For each of these districts and properties there is an extensive and comprehensive inventory of buildings and structures indicating their ages and relative historic importance. The National Register of Historic Places is a program of the United States Department of the Interior. Its purpose is to identify and document places throughout the country which individually or in groups have historic merit. The program is administered by the U. S. Park Service and partner agencies at the state level. In North Carolina, the State Historic Preservation Office administers the National Register program as a partner of the Park Service. If your old house is in a National Register Historic District, the nomination documents on file with the State Historic Preservation Office will contain an entry for your property which will briefly describe its architectural significance and provide a date of construction and original owner. These entries are usually accurate, but as with the *Durham Architectural and Historical Inventory*, there can be mistakes. The nomination document will also contain a history of the district that will provide you with a broad understanding of your old house as it relates to its neighbors. If your house is individually listed on the National Register, the nomination document will include an extensive history of your house. To find the National Register listings for Durham districts and landmarks online, visit the home page of the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office website, [www.hpo.ncdcr.gov](http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov), and click on the little image of an historic house labeled “National Register.” Then click on “HTML” or “PDF”
whichever way you prefer to read the documents. This will give you a listing of all National Register listings in North Carolina. These records are also maintained in paper form in the North Carolina Collection in the Durham County Library.

It is also possible that your house is listed as a Durham local historic landmark. This is a local program that is not connected to the National Register. Landmark properties receive advantageous tax treatment under North Carolina law. For our purposes, the program is important because to obtain local landmark status, the owner must document the history of the structure and state its significance. The files on local landmarks are kept in the offices of the Durham City-County Planning Department at City Hall, downtown.

V. Who Owned Your Old House? - Tax and Deed Records

Using deeds and plats recorded in the office of the Durham County Register of Deeds will provide you with the most accurate history of the ownership of your old house. Using these records can also be the most difficult part of your search. The records are legal documents whose meanings and usages have changed over time. The system of indexing them so that they can be found later is complicated and multi-leveled. Attorneys and paralegals are experts in searching these records and even they are often stumped. In this program we can only hope to introduce you to the system and hope that you do not run into problems you cannot solve. Fortunately, the purpose of the historian's search is only to identify who owned a house and when – not to prove that ownership as a legal question. We will stick to deed records and not get into the business of mortgages and secured loans. To begin your search, you will start with the tax listing.

A. Tax Records

To obtain the tax listing for your old house, visit the webpage of the Durham County Tax Administration office, http://dconc.gov/government/departments-f-z/tax-administration, and click on the sidebar button "Real Property Record Search." At the top of that page is a search bubble. In it type the address of your house or the name of the owner. Follow the directions on the page for correctly entering this information. This will bring up the tax listing for your old house. There is a lot of information here. Use the photo to confirm you have the right house. Jot down the following information:

Parcel Reference Number
Pin Number
Subdivision Description
Deed Book and Page
Plat Book and Page
Name of Owner if it isn’t you.

In the “Overview” section there will be a date of construction. This information is notoriously inaccurate for older houses. The most common error tends to indicate that the house on the property is not as old as it really is. The reason for the inaccuracy is that when tax records were originally compiled, age information was not collected. When age later became an important component of valuation, tax offices filled in missing data with guesses.
B. Plat and Deed Records

Now you will begin your search of deed records using the search programs of the Durham County Register of Deeds. The Register’s webpage is found at http://dconc.gov/government/departments-f-z/register-of-deeds. On the left-hand side of the home page you will find “Online Public Records Search.” Click that button to reveal your search options. It is important to note that you will be going further back in time than attorneys do when they search titles in preparation for real estate transaction closings. There are two search programs: one for deeds filed before 1978 entitled “Search Old Index Book,” and another for deeds filed after 1978 entitled “Search Real Estate Index.” There is also a “Search Map/Plat Index” button. You will use that, too. It is not divided into two parts by date, but it has its tricks. The reason there are multiple systems is that when the Register’s office put this vast body of documentary information online, they could not afford to do it all at once so it was done in bits by time. Each time new records were added, the program was changed. There are instructions for each system. These are helpful, but no substitute for three years in law school! You will have to have the right sort of Java program on your computer. You can load this quickly at no cost. Follow the prompts.

Your search will go backwards in time starting with the deed you got from the tax listing. Deeds are filed by book and page. The newer the deed, the higher the book and page (usually). Deeds are filed in sequence by date of filing. Whoever has the most recent deed has the best claim of ownership. When you get back in the 1910s and 20s, however, sequence cannot always be determined by book and page numbers. The filing date listed on the deed by the register’s office controls.

Deeds and Indexes - A quick note about terminology: Ownership of real estate is conveyed from one owner to another by means of a legal document called a “deed.” A deed may convey the whole ownership or some part of ownership. The text of the deed is important. Deeds are filed at the Register Office to publically declare proof of ownership. To be able to find the deed later, each deed is indexed by the name of the “grantor,” the person who sold or conveyed the property, and also by the name of the “grantee,” the person who bought or received the property. You will be using online records and search programs, but at the office itself there are books of deeds with each deed put in the book after the deed filed before it. When a book gets to be about 700 pages long, they start a new book. The indexes are separate books. These are organized by name and time and can be quite complicated to use until you get used to them. Fortunately, the programs we will use cut through at least a portion of that complication. There are separate books for grantors and grantees. You will understand better as we work through an example or two.

Plats - Plats are maps prepared by surveyors to show the boundaries of parcels of land. Filing a plat secures the boundaries and allows people drawing up deeds to describe the property being conveyed by referring to the plat already on record. Subdivision plats show larger parcels divided into lots. Plats help the historian by identifying the original developer and the date the lots were laid out. If the house we are researching sits on a lot that was created in a subdivision plat filed in 1904, then we can be reasonably sure that the house is not older than 1904. Of course, there are always exceptions. Property subdivided in a 1904 plat might be subdivided
again in a 1922 map. There might have been a house on the property all along (the “original farm house”). A good surveyor will show extant houses on his plat. They are required to do it now. In the 1920s, not so much.

Searching Plats

Let’s begin by clicking on the “Search Map/Plat Index” button. This will bring up a screen with blanks. The blanks you care about are for the book and page numbers. Type in the plat map book and page reference you got from the tax records into the appropriate blanks and hit “search.” This will either bring up a page with a link to a map called “instrument #,” or it will result in a box that displays information indicating that a map exists, but provides no link to view it. This latter result happens because at some point, the plat books were redesignated by dividing them and adding an “A” or a “B” to the book number. If you get the box screen instead of a link to an instrument number, try your search again, but this time add an “A” after the book number. If that doesn’t provide a map you can view, try it again with a “B.”

Another confusing thing is that condominium maps have the same numbering system as old plats. Ignore condo maps. We won’t be looking up historic condos.

Assuming you have found the correct map, open the map by clicking on the instrument number. This will bring up a map which, if you are lucky, will be instantly recognizable. The map may not be recognizable, but do not worry about it. You don’t have to have a plat to perform your research effectively, but having one makes things easier. As mentioned above, a subdivision plat helps date the house in many instances and it can make following property descriptions in deeds easier.

Searching Deeds

So now, back at the menu, click on “Search Real Estate Index.” This will bring up a search screen with many blanks. Again, the blanks you want are the ones labelled “book” and “page.” Into these blanks enter the book and page number we obtained from the tax listing. Hit “search.” This will bring up a screen with another instrument number link and also an “image” link. Clicking on either of these will produce an image of the actual deed record. You may have to click through screens that ask you if you wish to “run” and “allow” the application.

On the left-hand side of the screen there will be a document detail box setting out the parties and the pertinent dates. This info is usually accurate, but it is better to get the information form the deed itself. There are “+” and “-“ buttons to adjust the size of the document image so you can read it. Note too that there is a sliding bar at the bottom left to allow you to move to the next page of the instrument.

What to Look for on the Deed Itself

Names and Dates - For our purposes, we want the names of the parties - the grantors and the grantees - spelled just as they are on the deed. We want the book and page numbers. We want the date the deed is dated in its text – either at the top or where it is signed by the grantors –
and we want the date it was recorded. These dates are often the same or very close. If they are
the difference will have no consequence to our search. If there is a big discrepancy, it may help
explain a mystery if we run into one later. Anyway, we don’t want to have to retrace steps if we
can avoid it so make a note of it now.

Descriptions - Look at the deed description. Every deed must have a description of the
property so precise that it describes the property without ambiguities. Deed descriptions are
often by “metes and bounds.” These describe the boundary of the property as a surveyor might
by starting at a physical point on the ground and then proceeding by compass references and
distances around the edge of the property until one arrives back at the beginning. If you can
picture in your mind a compass with arrows pointing north, east, south, and west, you can follow
the description’s journey around the boundaries in your head. Fortunately for us, most city lots
are rectangles. The beginning point can be a spot on the sidewalk or curb of a named street.
That helps. Note, however, that street names often change. In 1925, Durham expanded its city
limits dramatically to take in the “villages” of East and West Durham. Because there were many
duplicate street names and streets with multiple names, the city council at the time changed the
names of a great many streets. Deed descriptions can also be by reference to a lot identified on a
plat. When this is the case, it will be easier for us to check the description to make sure we are
looking at the same piece of property as we move from deed to deed backward in time. A
description can also be a reference to a previously recorded deed that has a detailed description.
This is very handy for our purpose because it identifies another mile post on our journey.

Parties – Just whose name must be on a deed is governed by some pretty complicated
law. It will be useful to know that a single person can buy a piece of land, but if he or she is
married at the time land is sold or given away, both husband and wife must sign the deed. If a
deed indicates that the grantees are married, then they take the property “by the entirety.” This
means that both husband and wife own all the property. If one dies, the other does not “inherit”
because he or she always owned it all. You may encounter deeds that have no other purpose
than to create entireties rights or, in the circumstance of divorce, to break entireties. Attorneys
use “et ux.” to mean “and wife.” “Et vir” means and husband. There can be lots of different
types of parties – attorneys-in-fact, trustees, executors, and heirs. The law surrounding each of
these classifications is beyond our scope. The meaning and intent must be gleaned from the
whole instrument.

Consideration – Deeds must include a recitation of consideration – a statement that the
grantor or grantors received something in return for conveying the property. In most instances,
this recitation is a formality with a fictitious amount included - “one hundred dollars in hand paid
the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged.” This does not mean that the buyer paid just $100
for the property. In some deeds, however, an accurate figure is included. This figure is
interesting because if it is very low, it indicates there was no house on the lot when the deed
changed hands. Care is required interpreting consideration information. In Durham during the
the 1910s, you could buy a nice house and lot for $4,000. A simple house and lot could sell for
as little as $2,000.

Conditions – Deeds often include conditions, covenants, and restrictions. A common
restriction is that the property can never be sold to or occupied by a “negro” or “colored person.”

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These restrictions once applied were permanent and were repeated from deed to deed. In the 1960s, provisions concerning race were struck down as a violation of the legally protected civil rights of African-Americans.

Make notes of you deed search like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deed Bk/Pg</th>
<th>Date Recorded</th>
<th>Grantee(s)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Previous Deed Reference – To help fix a deed more firmly in the legal chain of title and as a matter of courtesy to future searchers, many good real estate attorneys include in the deeds they prepare a reference to the deed whereby the grantor obtained title to the property. This sort of reference moves our search along on greased tracks. When there is such a reference, we use it to take our search one step back. When there is no reference to the previous deed, we must use the proper index to locate the next deed.

Using the Grantor and Grantee Indexes

When the deed before you does not identify the deed by which the grantor obtained the property, you will have to look him up in the proper index. This can be tricky. The proper index in this case will be the grantee index, because the grantor on the last deed in your search was the grantee when the property was conveyed to him. To use the grantee index for a deed recorded after 1978, click on the “Search Real Estate Index” button back on the main menu. It will pull up the same screen you used to search by book and page numbers. This time, however, you will use the fields higher up on the page. Click on the “Separate Name Search” circle and then type the name of the grantor on the last deed in the grantee blank, last name first. If you are lucky, this will produce all of the deeds that your party, now a grantee, has received since 1978. Search through these until you find your property. Since you know that your party conveyed the property away on the date of the last deed, work backward through the list of deeds from that date. This electronic index also has a pretty handy description section over on the right-hand side. This search should locate the next deed in the chain and with it you will repeat the process you used to examine the last deed and pick up the trail again.

If the exact name does not lead you to the deed you want, you may have to broaden the search by using only your party’s last name. If the last deed has two grantors, try the last and first name of the second grantor in the grantee name box. Eventually, this searching will lead you to the deed you want if it is on record. But what if you find nothing?

Picking Up a Lost Trail – If you find nothing in your search in the grantee index, it could mean that you are not using the right name or that the grantor on the last deed inherited the property. Transfers through will or intestate succession when a property owner dies are recorded in the Estates Office in the office of the Durham County Clerk of Superior Court in the new courthouse downtown. They do not show up in the deed records. Old estate files have been to
the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh. We will not cover searching estate files in this program. Good attorneys preparing deeds from executors or from heirs following an owner's death will make a reference to the estate file and the deceased owner's deed to help searchers complete the chain of title. These references when they occur can tell the researcher a lot about the people associated with an old house. Unfortunately, such references are not required and do not always appear.

Whatever the reason for the block in the trail, you can use the grantor index to get around it. Here's how: first, identify the name of someone who you are reasonably sure owned the property at some point in the past. To do this, use the information you can collect from other sources, like city directories. There is a whole section on using city directories below, so we won't rehearse that here. Once you have identified an earlier owner-occupant, you can use the grantor index in the deed records to work forward through time until you identify the deed to the owner whose name we could not find in the grantee index.

Using the grantor index is difficult because it requires you to check all of the "out" conveyances from one person during a period of time. The index for deeds recorded after 1978 is easier to use, because of the helpful property notes in the right-hand margin. The earlier index is much harder to use because the property descriptions are not as helpful.

To use the grantor index for deeds after 1978, click on the "Separate Name Search" circle and write the name you are looking for in the grantor box, last name-first name. As with the grantee index, this will display a list of deeds and other filed instruments that represent conveyances to other people -- "out" conveyances. Check the likely deeds by clicking on the "instrument #" link until you find what you are looking for. If the property is the correct property, but the grantee is not the one you were looking for, record your findings on your list and repeat the process using the grantee's name as the next grantor name in the index search. Note that with the grantor index you are moving forward through time. Eventually you will find the deed to the owner we were looking for. If you do not, then that is a reasonably clear indication that the property has passed through an owner's estate. You can confirm this using cemetery and death records (more on these later).

Having used the grantor index to fill in the gap in our list of owners, you can revert to the easier-to-use grantee index again and continue your search for owners backwards through time.

The Old Index Book Search - Eventually you will spill out of the newer digital search system (for deeds after 1978) and have to use the older one indicated by the label "Search Old Index Book." This search system is less handy and replicates the old system of searching titles in the physical books. It also has its secrets and quirks.

Begin by clicking on the "Search Old Index Book" button. This will bring up a screen with a box for deed book and page searches and a box for index searches. If you know the deed book and page you are looking for, the search will continue as before using the old book search system. Enter the book and page in the boxes, but before you click on "search," you must identify the "Book Type." Click on that button and you will be offered a list of choices. In most basic historical searches, the choice you want is "Official Public Records." Having made that
selection, you can now hit “Search.” In most cases, this will bring up a screen showing the deed you asked for. You may have to click through a “run” and “allow” sequence of screens to get the program to run. When the deed requested shows up, check the parties and the book and page numbers to make sure that it is correct. It is not unusual for deeds requested on the system to be off by a few pages (or even several hundred pages). If it is off by a few pages, use the arrows on the slide bar at the bottom left-hand corner to go backwards or forwards a few pages to find the right deed. If the deed is way off, use the slide bar to get in the vicinity of the right deed. Note that when the system produces a deed that is way off, the slide bar may make a loop and you will find the correct deed in the other direction your instincts tell you to look.

Deed forms change and you will notice the further back you go that the information you are looking for on each instrument may be in a different location in the document. Eventually, when you are back far enough, you will not find a copy of the actual deed, but an abstract of the deeds prepared by the copyists at the register’s office. These abstracts may even be handwritten and difficult to read.

Even in the old days, good attorneys provided a reference to the prior deed in the chain. As before, this will move things right along. Inevitably, however, you will come across an instrument with no book and page reference to previous deed. When this happens, you have to use the grantee index. Under this Old Index system, the search is harder and a lot like it was in the before computers and digitized records when the only way to search was by using the heavy books in the register’s office.

Begin by returning to “Search Old Index Books.” Type in the name you want, last name first name, into the box labelled “Grantee.” Before you hit “search,” you must indicate an “Index Date Range.” This refers to the period of time during which you believe the deed you are looking for was recorded in the register’s office. If you can’t guess the date the deed might have been filed, you will have to check each segment of the range moving backwards until you find what you are looking for. Click on the range down-arrow and you will get a list of choices. Choose the right one and hit “Search.” Note that when searching the grantee index from 1881 until 1961, there appear to be overlapping choices. In reality there are just three that seem to work. The first is “Index to Grantees A.” The next is “Index to Grantees B-R.” Finally, there is “Index to Grantees S-Z.” Strangely, there are two “Index to Grantees B-R.” Use the one at the bottom of the list. This one works. No one seems to know why the system works this way. This search system produces a lot of boxes that warn of esoteric program problems. Just click through them. When you want to start a new search, click the “back” arrow to get back to the beginning place. The “new search” and “Home” buttons sometimes produce unhappy results.

Another strange thing happens when you hit search. A screen will appear that says “Grantor or Grantee is required when entering a value for index date range.” Of course, you have entered a grantee so why this appears no one knows. Just click on “ok” and then hit “search” or “enter” again. This time the program will work. Go figure. What will show is a listing of the possible index pages containing entries with your party’s name. You just have to click on one of the pages and see where you are date-wise. You can back out of the system and try a different page realizing that the lower the page number, the farther back in time you go on any particular index page. The other thing you should know is that because of the name and date
system of indexing, a "page" can actually be several pages or sheets long. They all have the
same page number at the top! Use the page box at the top to see if there are subsequent sheets.
When you finally find the index page you are looking for, carefully read through the grantee
column looking for the name of your party.

The index page that appears is a copy of the old index book. You will see that the books
are organized by names that are close together in the alphabet. The "Petersons" are mixed in
with the "Peters." The index entries are entered chronologically so you work backward from the
date of your last deed. If your party purchased a lot of real estate (and there were people in
Durham who did just that) you will find a lot of deeds. On a bit of scratch paper write down all
the deed references for a block of time. Then, one-by-one, working backward, look them up
using the book and page system. Remember to select "official public records". When you find
the deed you are looking for, stop. If you don't find anything in that group, try the next block of
entries earlier in time. As with the post-1978 system, patient searching will reveal the deed. If it
does not, an estate may be indicated.

And as with the post-1978 system, the way around this roadblock is the grantor index.
The process is the same, but uses the "old index" search system. You will ultimately wind up on
an index page where the entries are organized by name and date as with the grantee index only
now the first name is grantor.

A chronic problem for historians searching the old index books arises when the records
show that the property they are following has fallen into the hands of a major real estate wheeler-dealer. In Durham during the 1920s and 30s there were lots of them. The only thing to do is
take your search in digestible blocks of time and slog through the myriad deed entries. Another
problem arises when the property is the subject of a foreclosure. There were a lot of foreclosures
during the Great Depression (late 1929 through about 1938) and unfortunately, the house you are
looking up probably existed then. The chance of finding a foreclosure is high. There are lots of
strange deeds and transactions connected with Depression-era foreclosures. There are tricks to
dealing with them, but essentially, it boils down to deed-by-deed searching using the name of the
trustee-grantor on the foreclosure deed. Only a handful of Durham attorneys acted as foreclosure
trustees so the search can be grueling. The Depression-era foreclosure problem became so
terrible that banks sometimes failed in the middle of the process and everything stalled. The
State of North Carolina set up a couple of agencies and semi-official companies to keep
properties moving through the foreclosure process. Treat these like any other party.

Eventually, you will wind up at a deed granted at a time when you are reasonably sure
there was no house on the property. Often this is a deed from the developer of the subdivision
(whose name appears on the plat you found) to the original lot purchaser. It might also be the
deed to the person whose name is first associated with the house in the city directories. Knowing
when to stop is based on evidence you have uncovered and a certain guided intuition. It would
be great if we had building permit data going way back, but we don't. The whole business of
permits is newer than the houses we are looking up.

The next step is determining who lived in your old house.
VI. Who Lived in Your Old House? - City Directories, Census Records, Cemetery Records, Death Records, Newspapers, Histories, and Other Sources

A. City Directories

Durham city directories published between the 1890s through the 1980s contain a wealth of information about who lived in Durham, where they lived, their spouses, and their occupations. Although the directories continue to be published today, after the late 1980s, the depth of information they contain and its reliability suffers. The North Carolina Room of the main branch of the Durham County Library has a complete set of the directory books.

City directories were originally published to help citizens find each other. These are not telephone books published by the telephone company, although telephone numbers came to be added to the information compiled in the books. These directories were sold mostly to area businesses to aid them in identifying and contacting their potential customers. In the early days, they were compiled annually (sometimes biennially) by canvassers going door-to-door. Each volume represents a huge amount of work. The directories contain alphabetical listings of all Durham residents. Beginning in 1919, the directories also began to include reverse or address-first listings of every home and business organized by street and address number. This information is a treasure trove for the old house researcher. The year a particular street address first appears in the city directory is often a very solid clue indicating when the house at the address was built. There are limitations, however. Sometimes the publishers of the directories excluded suburbs from their canvasses. Sometimes canvassers missed properties altogether. Street name changes can cause researchers to miss listings. Canvassing took a long time. Information in each year's directory was as much as a year old and consequently stale by the time the book was published. Canvassers frequently got names wrong. "Alfred" was listed as "Albert." "Willard" became "William." Juniors and seniors of the same name got hopelessly confused. Also, Durham was growing so fast before 1930 that it often took the post office a number of years to assign house numbers to houses on the town's outer edges. It is not unusual to see a house listed as "Lynch, near Roxboro." Even when numbers were assigned, sometimes the post office changed them as new homes and lots were created along the street. This problem can be maddening in the neighborhoods we now call Old North Durham and Tuscaloosa-Lakewood.

In Durham, the important thing to know is that in the directories for the 1910s and early 1920s, the alphabetical listings include people living outside the city limits, but the reverse or address-first portion of the directories include only houses located within or just outside the city limits. Before 1925, Durham's actual city limits were described by a small, diamond-shaped area around downtown. The city limits did not even include all of what is now Duke's east campus or the northern part of Trinity Park. To the east and to the west were large mill-oriented villages with thousands of homes and even their own business areas like Ninth Street and Driver Avenue. In every direction outside the real city limits new street car and automobile subdivisions were springing up – Morehead Hill and Watts Hospital are two examples. None of the areas are included in the reverse directory sections of early city directories. Then, in 1925, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill expanding Durham's corporate limits to take in the mill villages and newer suburbs. The effect of this expansion of the municipal boundaries
was to dramatically increase the number of homes and business included in the reverse directory section of the 1925 directory and the volumes that followed. A researcher not aware of the 1925 shift in the city limits might conclude that a house on Club Boulevard or Vickers Avenue actually built in 1914 was built in 1925, because that is the first year its address shows up in the directories.

Directories published before 1964, are available on line from a couple of sources. The best of these is “Durham (NC) -- Directories - Internet Archive.” The URL for the site is http://archive.org/search.php?query=subject:%22Durham%20(N.C.)%20-%20Directories%22. This site covers directories from 1892 to 1963. It loads quickly and displays the books with easy-to-use page-turn and search features, the drawback is that the directories are not listed in chronological order. There are also a couple of books missing. Note that the directories do not become a series until 1903-1904. Before that there are a couple of odd directories – Turner’s in 1889 and 1890, Ramsey’s in 1892, and Mangum’s in 1897. In 1911, there are two separate directories, Hill’s Durham Directory and Seeman’s. Seeman’s is fascinating because it divides its listings up geographically and by race – a rare window into attitude and mores of the time.

After 1963, there is no complete, searchable source for Durham city directories on-line. It is necessary to visit the actual books in the North Carolina room of the main branch of the Durham Public Library downtown.

To make a comprehensive list of occupants for your old house it is necessary to visit every directory for each year your house has been in existence and make a record of what you discover. If the occupancy of your old house is stable, you might check every other or even every third directory until you discover a change you need to pinpoint with a more careful search. If your house was consistently occupied by annual tenants, it is permissible to check the directory every five years to just get a feel for the kind of folks who lived in the house.

With directories, the best approach is to move forward through time. Pick a year you believe predates the construction of your old house. Move forward through the directories year-by-year until you find a street listing for your old house in the reverse directory section of the book. Note that the reverse directory section first appears in the directories in the 1919-20 volume of Hill’s. Here’s a tip: when you click on a given year, the website will display the opening pages of the volume. In the top right portion of the screen you will see expansion and search icons. Click on the expansion icon and this will bring up arrows and a slide bar to help you move quickly through the pages of the book. Over time the organization of the books changes, but generally the alphabetical portion listing citizens and business is in the front of each book and the reverse or street-first listings are in the back. You will find separate listings of businesses by type. Each book contains lots of fascinating advertisements and even a historical and statistical section at the front. It is difficult not to get distracted.

The reverse or street-first section is organized alphabetical by street and then within each street by block and house number. When you find your old house here, it will have the name of one occupant if the house is being occupied as a single family home. This occupant is the person the canvasser determined to be the head of the household. If two names appear, it may indicate that the house is being occupied by two separate households. The listing may even include an
"A" and a "B" address if the house was formally cut into two units with separate mailing addresses. It also may not indicate such a distinction. The directories can be quirky when it comes to this sort of detail. Jot down what you find here in your notes.

After you have found your old house in the earliest directory listing its street address, the next step is to look up the occupant's name in the alphabetical listings in the same volume. This will yield a great deal more information. For example: in the 1919-20 city directory, the street-first section indicates that O. E. Gay occupies the house at 1004 Gloria Avenue. When we look Mr. Gay up in the alphabetical section, we discover that Oliver E. Gay operated a garage at 410-414 West Main Street. The listing then says "h 1004 Gloria Avenue" confirming that he lives on Gloria.

Because there is no street-first directory before 1919, we cannot safely conclude that the house at Gloria Avenue was built in 1918 or 1919. The directories are still useful, however. The next earlier directory is the 1917 volume. We can't look the house up by its address, but we can look for Mr. Gay. When we do that we find that he is living at 1004 Gloria Avenue and that in 1917, he is listed as an insurance agent. He's shown at Gloria Avenue in the 1915-16 volume, too, but in this year there are no street numbers for Gloria. Using this system we can add to the age information for our old house until we find a directory volume with no listing. When this happens it may mean that the house was not in existence or it may mean that someone else lived there. Either way, we have more information to match with information we have obtained from other sources that will help us nail down a construction date.

Another way to search for your old house in directories before 1919 or in the situation that arises when you believe your house was built in the suburbs before the 1925 expansion of the city limits is to use the search feature of the directories website. This will produce bookmarks for all the pages where the entered name or word appears. This can sometimes yield instant results. Other times it will produce more leads than you can follow up.

Having found the earliest date our old house appears in the directories, the next thing to do is march forward through time looking at the street-first and alphabetical listings and jotting down what we find. Note that the directories are full of codes and symbols that yield information. From the late 1920s through the 1960s at least, the listings denote homeownership with an "o." In early directories, an * by a name indicates that the person is African-American. In later books, a "c" means the same thing. Eventually, the publisher quit denoting race altogether. In the 1920s, the directories begin to indicate that the head of the house is married by including his wife's name in parenthesis, (Minnie R.). The early directories always assume that the head of the household is the husband of a married couple. The abbreviation "wid." means a widow. There is often a glossary of symbols and abbreviations in the books. The abbreviations used for occupations can sometimes be difficult to decipher as the jobs people did in those days may seem obscure or esoteric to us today.

When you have found your occupant in the alphabetical listings, look up and down the page to see if family members with the same name are listed and jot down what you learn about them.
Make your notes like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Name(s)</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oliver E. Gay</td>
<td>Operator garage 410-414 West Main Street</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your city directory notes will provide you with a great deal of information about who lived in your house, what they did, and who their families were. With this information you can determine who had the biggest impact on the life of the house. When you match the occupant history you have compiled from the directories to the history of ownership you obtained from your deed search, you will know even more about the house and the people. Who was a landlord? Who was a tenant? Who lived in the house the longest?

B. Census Records

The next source you should check is the United States Census. This huge body of data is compiled only decennially, but the depth of information it proves can offer a fascinating window into the lives of the people who lived in your old house. Census records are available only through 1940. Records from the 1890 census were damaged by fire and little remains. Census records from 1950 have not yet been made public. Since most Durham old houses were built between 1890 and 1940, the available census records can be very helpful.

We will access U. S. Census records using Ancestry.com. This popular on-line genealogy research service pulls together an amazing wealth of records from myriad sources. Its census searching mechanism is reliable and easy to use. The Durham County Library has a subscription to Ancestry that library patrons can use while they are in the library building. As you become more adept at old house research, you may wish to purchase your own subscription to Ancestry.com or one of the competing services.

Once you have opened the Ancestry.com homepage, click on “search.” This will produce a menu of choices. From these, click on “All collections.” Up to this point, our search has focused on the real estate side of our inquiry. In Ancestry, we will focus on the people we have discovered. We will concentrate on the people who have the strongest connection to our old house. Usually this will include the original owners. It should also include the people, owners or tenants, who live in the house the longest. We will look at them as individuals and as families.

The “All collections” button will produce a form asking for us to identify the person whose history we wish to search. The form explains itself. Enter the person’s first and last name and the place where you know he or she lived – this is “Durham, Durham, North Carolina.” If you discovered the name of his or her spouse from deed or directory records, enter that name too. Then hit “search.”

This may produce a little information or a lot. Ancestry ranks the results by what its algorithms identify as most relevant to least relevant. Often census records pop up near the top.
If they don’t, hit the census button over on the left-hand side. This should produce census results for the early twentieth century. Click on the year pertinent to your search.

This will produce an abstract of the census listing for your person. It will also produce a prompt to allow you to look at the actual census sheet prepared by hand by the census taker so long ago. The abstract prepared by ancestry is usually pretty good, but it sometimes garbles the handwritten entries of the census takers. Always look at the real document. The information from address to name, to age, education, property value, origins, to occupation are laid out across the columns. Similar data will appear for everyone living in the house – parents, children, grandparents, servants, roomers and boarders.

If your search did not produce results that are useful, try again and refine your search. Be aware that ancestry may have your person listed under a common misspelling of his or her name. Try searching under the name of a spouse or child.

C. Death Records, Cemetery Records, and Obituaries

For house history purposes, obituaries often provide the best source of biographical information about the people who lived in your old house. The Durham County Library has an extensive collection of Durham newspapers on microfilm, but these are not well indexed. To find an obituary is necessary to know when a person died. This information can be found in the North Carolina and Social Security death registers accessible through Ancestry.com. To find them as part of your search, click on the “Birth, Marriage, and Death” button on the left-hand menu. In addition to the registers which are lists of deaths, you may also get access to a North Carolina death certificate. The death certificate contains a wealth of information about your subject at the time of his or her death including the date, cause, and place of death and who his or her next of kin was. The death registers on Ancestry reach up until very nearly the present day. Death certificates are available only up until the 1980s. Other ancestry sources include the link to the “Find a Grave” website. This is a website with content provided entirely by volunteers. The information posted on “Find a Grave” can be extremely useful or frustratingly inaccurate.

It might be possible to obtain an obituary for your subject on ancestry, but for person’s whose obituaries arrear in Durham papers, the likelihood is very small. In most cases you will have to visit the main branch of the Durham County Library and look up the obituary on the newspaper microfilm records. The staff is very helpful and will show you how the films are organized and show you how to use the reading machines.

Today we take newspaper obituaries for granted, but newspapers did not always provide death notices or obituaries. Durham has the records for two major papers publishing during the time that is most likely pertinent to your old house. They are the Durham Morning Herald and the Durham Sun. The Herald was the morning paper and the Sun was the afternoon paper for most of the twentieth century. For years they were separately owned and operated. In the mid-twentieth century, the ownership merged, but the papers remained separate and fiercely competitive. The Herald was a traditional daily covering the broadest range of news stories form here at home and around the world. The Sun focused on local news. The Sun did not publish on
Sunday. For many years its Saturday edition was printed on pink paper! In the late 1980s, the
two papers merged to become the *Durham Herald Sun*.

Up until the late 1920s, the papers did not attempt to make a comprehensive report of
Durham deaths. The deaths of important or prominent citizens were reported as news.
Eventually, however, an organized section of obituaries began to appear. Even this listing did
not originally attempt to cover the death of every citizen and the prejudices of the times are
reflected in the choices made. Later, the papers' approach to obituaries became more
comprehensive and from about 1940 through 1990, the chance of finding an obituary in one
paper or the other is very good. These notices were written by staff reporters who followed a
template that included basic biographical information. For much of this period men had working
lives and prominent roles in public affairs. Because of this their obituaries often have more
information than the notices written for women. Sometime in the 1990s, the paper's policy
changed and obituaries became a paid service. Families who did not want or could not afford an
obituary did not buy them. When obituarys do appear, they are written not by news staff, but by
family members and these sometimes do not contain information about the deceased which is
helpful to an old house inquiry.

In the early days, obituaries or articles about deaths invariably appear in the paper not
later than one or two days after the death event. Because it was published in the afternoon, the
Sun was sometimes able to run a death notice the same day the person died!

What about newspaper articles that are not obituaries or death notices? The answer here
must be disappointing. It is possible that something might pop up on Ancestry.com, but not
likely. For Durham's dailies, there is no accessible comprehensive index of articles. The library
does possess an index of the papers compiled by Duke University, but it only concerns articles
about the University and the people associated with it. If your subject is a Duke professor, you
should check it.

If your search on Ancestry.com does not yield satisfactory death information, another
source is the Durham County Cemetery Census. This is a truly remarkable online resource. It is
the result of a field survey of 295 cemeteries in Durham County made in 1995 and 1996. You
It is self-explanatory, but be sure to read and follow the search rules. During the separate-but-equal world of the early twentieth
century, most white people in Durham were buried in Maplewood Cemetery. Most African-
Americans were buried in the Geer Cemetery until about 1945 and then later in Beechwood
Cemetery. The records for Maplewood and Beechwood are excellent. There is little to go on for
the Geer Cemetery. There are other big cemeteries too. Woodlawn Memorial Park, a private
cemetery on Liberty Street, was popular with East Durham residents. The cemetery census
records will usually provide you with a reliable death date. If your subject died after 1995-96,
you can visit the Durham City Cemetery office at Maplewood Cemetery during office hours and
ask them to check their records. They can even give you a map showing you where to find the
grave.
D. Durham County Histories

If an owner or resident of your old house was a prominent citizen or was famous or notorious for some reason, he or she might be mentioned in one of Durham’s very useful histories. There are several sources you can check, but the most important by far is Jean Bradley Anderson’s elegant *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina, second edition* (Duke University Press, 2011). Everyone interested in Durham’s history should have a copy of this book. The library has copies at every branch. The book has a thorough index including references to individuals, businesses, and organizations mentioned in the text. Your search should include a quick check of the index of *Durham County* if the information you have obtained from other sources indicates that that an owner or occupant of your old house may have been historically significant.

Another book that sometimes yields interesting results is *Durham and Her People* by Robert Dula and A. C. Simpson. It was published in 1950 “under the auspices of the Citizens’ Press, Durham, North Carolina.” The book is more of a civic promotional work than a scholarly history, but it does contain a who’s who of prominent citizens and business owners. Its 1950 date of significance is perfect for a study of the people who might have occupied the old houses likely to be the subject of your search. You can find the book in the North Carolina Collection at the main branch of the Durham County Library.

There are hundreds of other more specific sources in the library’s North Carolina Collection, all beautifully cataloged. The collection staff will help you if your inquiries make you want to learn more. The Rubenstein Library at Duke also has an amazing collection that can be helpful for information about some houses and people. For example, the Rubenstein has the records of the old Erwin Cotton Mills including records of the hundreds of mill houses the firm owned.

VII. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

Between 1867 and 2007, the Sanborn Company published detailed maps of properties and buildings in towns and cities throughout the United States to assist the insurance companies, agents, and claims adjusters assess fire insurance risks and liabilities. The maps were sold to insurance industry officials by subscription and were updated on a regular basis with paste-overs. When changes in the landscape became so pervasive that the maps could not be updated with paste-overs, new maps were issued. The maps, with their elaborately coded information, are an incredible resource for architectural historians.

There are several sets of maps for Durham. For our purposes, the maps issued in 1898, 1902, 1907, 1913, and 1936 are the most useful. Earlier maps are not helpful because they cover a small area in which few original buildings survive. The maps show Durham lot by lot with reasonably accurate footprint drawings of the building that were on the properties at the time. Coded information indicates whether the buildings were one or more stories tall and whether they were clad with brick or wood. The maps also indicate street name changes. One drawback of the maps is that with rapidly growing towns like Durham, the map sets have a tendency to stop just short of the new residential suburb where your old house is located. Of course, the map
issued closest to the time your house was built gives you the most useful information, but sometimes the first map your house shows up on may be three to ten years too late. All the same, every old house search must include a look at the Sanborn maps. The Durham maps up to 1913 can be found on-line at the North Carolina Maps webpage of the University of North Carolina Library system. There is a Sanborn Maps tab on the site’s home page. The address is: www2.lib.unc.edu/dc/ncmaps/sanborn.html.

The maps on the UNC Library site are shown as they were when they were issued new. They do not have any of the paste-overs the Sanborn Company issued on a regular basis. The paste-overs are little slips of paper with changes to streets and buildings shown on them. They were mailed to the subscribers so they could paste them over the maps in the books to update them. In the North Carolina room in the main branch of the Durham County library are nearly complete sets of original Sanborn Maps of Durham from 1913 and 1936. These were not acquired by the library new as specimens, but were actually used by someone in the insurance business who later donated them to the library when they had become obsolete. The maps are fascinating because they have the paste overs and supplemental pages absent from the on-line versions. These fragile books are irreplaceable resources for researchers. Be sure to wear gloves when you handle them and keep pens and pencils well away.

VIII. Open Durham

Open Durham is a webpage-cum-blog created some years ago by Gary Kueber, a Durham developer, architectural historian, and ardent preservationist. On it he posts photographs, essays, historical notes, and sometimes sharp criticisms about the past and present condition of Durham’s architectural heritage. The amount of information is vast, but it is readily searchable. Users of the site also post their own comments and reminiscences. While these are sometimes wildly inaccurate, they are just as often extremely helpful. Huge numbers of properties are surveyed on Open Durham. While the site should not be the sole source you rely upon for the history of your old house, you should nevertheless consult it for useful leads. Open Durham is now operated by Preservation Durham. You can find it at www.opendurham.org.

IX. Dating Your Old House

From the information gleaned from deed records, plats, directories, and Sanborn maps you must determine the year of construction for your old house. Begin with the year the address of the house first appeared in the directory if you are reasonably confident that your search has turned up the first appearance. Remember that the street-first portions of the directories sometimes are not available for parts of town we know existed. Because we know that the information in the directory was as much as year old by the time it was published in the directory, we usually go back one year. For example, if the address for the house first appears in the 1927 directory, we can be reasonably safe in assuming the house was completed in 1926 unless other information indicates that applying this convention will produce incorrect results.

Look at your list of owners. Does this date “fit” with the information there? If the owner of the house in 1926 bought the property that year or at the end of 1925, then that information tends to support the idea that he or she bought the lot and had the house built. If the owner is also the
person whose name appears in the 1927 directory, then you can be confident in your 1926 construction date. What if the pieces do not fit together so neatly? They often don’t. Most houses in Durham during the 1910s and 1920s were built as speculative ventures by builders and real estate investors. Only in middle and upper middle class subdivisions do you find bespoke-built homes. It is not unusual to see Durham lots turn over several times in relatively quick succession after they are first platted. This indicates that speculators are buying and selling the lot hoping to make a profit on a rising market.

Another factor to consider is evidence of the date of construction on the house itself. One trick that sometimes settles the question is the date on the iron door to the coal chute. The companies that made and sold these doors often dated them with cast numbers or applied metal plates.

Finally, the date suggested by the documentary evidence must agree with the style, materials, and construction techniques of the house itself. Architectural styles have their periods and a practiced eye will know that a certain style house was only built at a certain time. Learning the styles and architectural clues used to date old Durham houses is beyond the scope of this program, but we will discuss below in Section X one important source every old house historian should have at his or fingertips.

What if you think the evidence points to a date that is not the same as the date assigned to the property by other sources such as the National Register historic district nomination for the neighborhood? A dating discrepancy might cause you to delve further into the evidence, but you should understand that your search of this one house has probably been more thorough than the work the National Register researcher could devote to it. Because they have to look up so many properties, the researchers for National Register districts often rely on city directories alone. Sometimes they will search the directories only for years ending in “0” and “5.” When they do this, they usually explain their methodology in their reports. Your best guess regarding the construction date of your old house may be based on better information so don’t be alarmed if you arrive at different date. You are probably right!

Finally, if you have checked all the available sources and still cannot narrow the construction date down to a particular year, there is no dishonor in saying that the house was built “circa” or “around” a certain year.

X. The Architecture of Your Old House

Your history of your old house would be incomplete without a description of the building’s architectural features and a statement of its architectural style. The best resource for identifying the architecture of houses in America is A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia McAlsester (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). This original edition of this book was published in 1984 and caused a sensation among architects, historians, and preservationists. Many other books have been written about American architectural styles, but what sets McAlsester’s work apart is its comprehensive approach and its focus on the houses that ordinary people live in. In the thirty years since it first appeared, American Houses has been adopted as the vocabulary of American residential architecture. The original edition was filled with examples from Durham.
While many of these have disappeared from the later edition, Durham's homes still appear. The book is available in every book store. Buy a copy and read it. You will become a dangerous intellectual.

Use *American Houses* to identify the style of your old house and in your notes draw attention to the features of the house that typify its style. Describe the massing, rooflines, windows, and doors. Note the "National" section in the "Folk Houses" chapter for an understanding of Durham's worker housing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The chapters on revival styles, eclectic houses, and modern styles are all pertinent to Durham's stock of historic homes.

XI. **Inspect Your Old House and Take Photos**

Inspect your old house carefully. Every old house you inspect adds to your knowledge and appreciation of historic architecture. Look generally and specifically. Draw the floor plan in your notes. Look at the materials and make a note of them. How high are the ceilings? What is the window pattern? Are the doors and door hardware original? Is that an addition on the back?

Take photographs. Learn to fill the frame. Try to record every side of the exterior. Use the best light to capture detail. Remember that bright sunlight will produce harsh contrasts and confusing shadow lines. On the interior, take pictures of original features, doors, woodwork, stair rails and newels, and fireplaces. Your photographs will keep your memory fresh when you write the description of your old house.

XII. **Writing the History of Your Old House**

You must pull all of your findings together into a written statement of the history of your old house. The best way to organize your findings is follow the outline suggested in Preservation Durham's plaque application form. After producing the required lists owners and occupants, write a narrative of your findings in two parts. One part should be a chronological history of the house and the people who lived there. In this part you should state the construction date of the house and explain how you derived it. You should also include such neighborhood context information as you think is necessary to understand the history of the building and its occupants. The other part should be a description of the house, its architecture, and its salient features including mention of its surviving original materials and hardware. In this section you should mention any changes that have been made to the house over time. It does not matter which section goes first in your narrative. Usually, it is good to start with your statement of the construction date so the chronological treatment of the house and its people might go first. If, however, a description of the house aids in understanding the people who lived there, lead with the description.

Here are some rules to follow:

1) Be accurate. If you are uncertain about a detail, describe your uncertainty in your text and explain the reason for it. Maybe one day someone will use your work as a springboard to solve the riddle. New information is becoming available all the time. If you make an educated guess, say so and explain your reasoning.
2) Cite your authorities. You can do this generally for some information like the list of occupants you compile from city directories. You may include your cites in the body of your text as you go or use footnotes. Your citation forms should follow standard forms, but the main thing is to identify your sources sufficiently that the reader can go behind you and find your sources.

3) Avoid attaching copies of materials which are part of permanently stored and accessible records. There is no reason to attach copies deeds and maps unless there is something so special about the documents that their inclusion is necessary to understand your narrative.

4) Do attach copies of documents that are entirely unique and not generally available. If you obtain a letter hidden inside the wall of your old house that gives a special insight to why Millie shot and killed her husband Bill, include a copy. Good prints of your photographs and historical photographs not in local library collections should be included.

5) Keep to the subject. Your research will produce a thousand interesting but distracting threads. During your research you may pick them up and follow them is you wish, but in your written history, stick to your old house and its people.

6) Avoid the passive voice. The whole purpose of historical research is to ascribe agency to events. Avoid run-on sentences.

7) Protect your work from the whims and vagaries of the cyber world. Make a hard copy of your old house history.