

**THE OLDER HOUSE: *HOW TO
RESEARCH YOUR OLDER
BLOOMINGTON/NORMAL HOME***



*Mandel-Cohn House
Bloomington, Illinois
c. 1895*

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The Older House: How to Research Your Older Bloomington/Normal Home

The problems of dating a house are as varied as the number of houses in existence. Each house has its own history, and that history is simply a reflection of the people who occupied it before you. For that reason, finding out who lived in a house and when they lived there is the first step in dating a house.

CITY DIRECTORIES

Compilers of city directories have done much to make that job easier. Street indexes to Bloomington have been published since 1893. Normal streets were added to the street index in 1920. A complete set of these directories can be found at the McLean County Museum of History and at the Bloomington Public Library.

An entry will read:

Taylor (East) 701 Vrooman, Carl*

This not only lets you know who lived at the house, but the asterisk indicates that Mr. Vrooman claimed to own the house. To find out what Mr. Vrooman did for a living, one simply goes to the alphabetically listed name section in the front of the directory. Here it reads:

Vrooman, Carl (Julia) pres. McLean County Coal Co. h 701 E. Taylor

This entry informs us that he had a spouse named Julia, that he had a pretty good job and that this Carl Vrooman is definitely living at the house in question, 701 E. Taylor.

By going through the entire set of street indexes, a complete list of occupants of your house can be obtained. The key to using this is that you can often tie occupancy or lack of occupancy to house-building and/or major remodeling.

There are a few pitfalls in using this resource. House numbers and street names change, houses are moved, and typographical errors and omissions are not uncommon.

For those who live in pre-1920 Normal houses, or pre-1893 Bloomington houses, the job is much more difficult. The earliest person who occupied the house can still be traced through the name indexes. Since the city directories date back to 1855 (they weren't issued yearly until the 1960s), this search can quite often get you further back. What happens if the person you trace disappears or is listed at another address? In this case, you must turn away from the directories and start using other resources.

ABSTRACT OF TITLE

The first resource to attempt to locate is an Abstract of Title. This is a record created by a private company which searches deed records and proves a chain of title which establishes that a property being purchased is held free and clear by the seller. This system has been

pretty much replaced by title insurance. Quite often, a copy of Abstract of Title is held by an earlier purchaser. It is important to note that a deed record and the abstract of the deed record refers only to parcels of land, not to buildings. It tells you who owns the land on which your house sits. Transfers of property in the chain of title can indicate house-building and/or major remodeling.

RESEARCHING DEEDS

You can create your own chain of title by going to the McLean County Recorder of Deeds office in the County Building at 115 E. Washington (M104), Bloomington. There, you ask to see the Grantee/Grantors (Buyer/Seller) index which goes back to 1837. Each deed is indexed to the buyer and seller. This means every time the property was transferred that both parties are identifiable. Every seller was at one time a buyer. These transactions can be traced back to the original land purchases from the United States government. You must look back at the deed transferred by the person in question to make sure that the property in question is, indeed your property. This takes time.

To use this record, you must have the legal description of the property. To acquire this, look in a county plat book. These are available at the Museum library and at the Bloomington Public Library. Your lot will have a number, as will your block. Your area will have a name. A typical legal description is Lot 11, Block 8 of Evans 2nd Addition to the Town of Bloomington. A deed will only refer to the legal description, never to a street number.

PICTORIAL SOURCES

By the time you finish this work, you should have some idea of the age of your house. Your estimates can be verified in some interesting and quick ways. This is done by consulting a few pictorial sources. They are:

1895 Plat Book of McLean County. This volume shows rough outlines of structures on lots for all McLean County town plats, and is relatively accurate. It is available at the McLean County Museum of History Library.

1873 Birds Eye View of Bloomington. This large picture is a lithograph that shows most of Bloomington in a perspective drawing. It views Bloomington from the southeast in the foreground and the northwest in the background. Just about every house and store building in town is shown. It is not absolutely accurate in detail, but it is very useful. There is also a Birds Eye View for 1867 <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query> it is on-line at the American Memory Page Library of Congress. Both maps are also at the McLean County Museum of History library.

Sanborn Insurance maps. These are hard to find, but they show an outline of every structure (including porches), indicate construction materials (wood, brick, stone, iron, etc.), and show locations of windows and doors and the number of stories. These maps were made for fire insurance purposes.

An 1896 Sanborn map is at the McLean County Museum of History, as is an 1886 edition on microfilm. A 1953 map (with updates through 1963) is also available in a digital format. The library staff can access this map for you. The museum library also has a 1952 map updated through 1961. Illinois State University's Milner Library subscribes to a database of Sanborn

maps, dating from 1867-1970. Not all neighborhoods are covered by Sanborn maps, but an index map is at the front of each volume.

TAX ASSESSORS RECORDS

For those of you who are into exhaustive and complete knowledge of your property, more still can be done. Check with the City of Bloomington Township for online records:

<http://www.assessor-blm.com/propertydatabase.htm>

Town of Normal properties can be searched at:

<http://www.normaltownship.org/assessor/parcelsearch.php>

This is the record by which your taxes are assessed. The dates are not always accurate. McLean County Assessor's office handles the rest of the county.

NEWSPAPERS

By this time, you have your house firmly dated, you know everybody who ever lived there or owned the land, and you know why your tax bill reads the way it does. There are still things that can be done. By knowing who previously lived in the house, family members can be contacted for photographs. Information on where these people are can start with the phone book and end with newspaper obituaries. *The (Daily) Pantagraph* is indexed (although not completely) at the Bloomington Public Library, through 1990. Pantagraph obituaries after 1990 can be found via *ProQuest*, one of the Bloomington Public Library's subscription databases. While you're looking up obituaries, you might want to read the obituary of the first owner of the house. You may find that your house was built for a newly married couple or with an inheritance. Quite often, in the 1870s, 80s and 90s, articles were written about new building construction. During the last half of the 19th century, yearly summaries of building activities were published. These are usually found in December or January. Many of these articles are on file at the McLean County Museum of History Library.

Besides newspapers, there are seven published books with biographical sketches of McLean County residents. Ask your reference librarian about them.

Another method of house-dating is based on identifying architectural style and on construction technique and materials (wood type, nails, plumbing, and such). Because this requires much more information, this method is not discussed here. To get started, read, *Researching Your Illinois House* (Greg Koos, Illinois Preservation Brief Number 7, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency—available at the Bloomington Public Library and at the museum library). You can also visit this on-line resource:

<http://www.preservationdirectory.com/architecturalstyles.html>

In all, researching your house can be a time-consuming, but rewarding search. Learning about those who have, in a sense, shared your house might encourage us to ensure that our houses can be shared by future generations.