



Researching Your Historic Oak Park House

Finding the history of your house and the land on which it sits can be both entertaining and rewarding. It can help you understand your building's part in Oak Park's history and may inform future preservation or restoration efforts. Using the resources on this page should help you find information including:

- Who built the house (owner, architect, builder)
- Who has owned the property through the years
- Who has lived in the house and information about their families and businesses
- What the property has been worth
- In some cases, historic photographs of your house

How to Trace the History of Your House

Online Resources

Oak Park is known internationally for its historic architecture and is home to Unity Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as well as three National Register Historic Districts, 11 resources listed individually on the National Register, and over 70 locally recognized Historic Landmarks. There are a number of online resources you can use to find out more about your building before stepping out your door. You may find that some of the research has already been done. Recommended places to start:

Village of Oak Park Historic Resources: www.ruskinarc.com/oakpark The Village of Oak Park maintains a historic resources database. You may be able to locate some basic information about your building here, such as the construction date, architect, and original owner. The Village also maintains a map of Oak Park Historic Landmarks with basic property information at www.oak-park.us/historiclandmarks.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps: www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection/ The Sanborn Map Company created maps of Oak Park in 1895, 1908, 1947, and 1950 for fire insurance purposes. These provide valuable details about the buildings in Oak Park in those years. You may view them online at through the Library of Congress.

Cook County online: The Cook County Property Tax Portal and Cook County Recorder's website both contain information about current and former property owners that may be helpful in your research. See *Cook County Recorder of Deeds* information below for more details.

Oak Park Village Hall

Oak Park Village Hall, at 123 Madison St., has records of all construction since 1902, the year the Village incorporated as a municipality. Before you start your search, head to Oak Park's Historic Preservation website to see if your property is part of the historic resources

map. This may give you some helpful information to start your research. Village staff will help you find records at Village Hall based on the address. Information you may find at Village Hall:

- Original building permits. These generally include the name of the original owner or developer, contractor, architect (after 1919), construction dates, materials used in construction, and the cost and size of the building.
- Permits for accessory structures, such as garages.
- Foundation permits. This means your house was moved onto its present lot from another site.
- Permits for additions and alterations.
- Changes in address. Many houses in Oak Park have changed addresses historically. Establishing this will help your later research.
- Village communication. Notices and inspections may provide information about past uses of the building.

If an original building permit is not found, your house may have been constructed before 1902, when the Village of Oak Park was incorporated. If that's the case, it may be helpful to visit the Historical Society prior to visiting the Oak Park Public Library.

If you plan to conduct research at Village Hall and want copies of any records found, it is recommended that you bring a flash drive. The permit records at Village Hall will help to develop the building's pattern of ownership. There may also be helpful materials in the Historic Preservation Commission files. To check these records, ask to speak to the Commission's staff liaison by visiting Village Hall or calling the Development Customer Services Department at 708.358.5420.

Oak Park Public Library

The Oak Park Public Library, 834 Lake St, may also be a source of information about past owners of your house. Information you will find at the Oak Park Library:

- **Directories** – These may include the original owner of the property as well as others who lived in the house.
- **Historic newspapers** – These may provide information about people who have lived at your address.
- **Historic books** – These contain historic photographs of Oak Park that may include your house.

- **Historic Preservation Commission file** – This file contains the Hasbrouck-Sprague Survey of Historic Architecture in Oak Park as well as plans and elevations of a number of local buildings.

The Oak Park Directories (1883-present) are available on microfilm. They were published in June or July, so you may have to look in the volume for the year following the date on the original building permit. If the owner is not listed at your address, your house may have been built on speculation, and sold or rented upon completion.

Once you have gleaned a name at your address from the directories, there are several newspaper indexes that can aid your search. Ask a librarian for assistance with the indexes. The local newspaper index will may information about the people who lived at your address. Names should be checked as well as the address; your house may be among the houses that have had articles written about them. The Steiner Index, compiled by architectural historian Frances Steiner, contains local newspapers references to architects and buildings between 1896 and 1916. The reverse index binder lists occupants by address.

The library also has various books dating from 1893 to 1915 with photos of buildings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Finally, check the Library's Historic Preservation Commission File. The file primarily consists of data collected for the Hasbrouck-Sprague Survey of Historic Architecture in Oak Park. It also includes numerous building plans and elevations.

Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

The Historical Society has numerous resources that are helpful in researching historic buildings. Resources you will find at the Historical Society of Oak Park & River Forest include:

- Directories, telephone books and census records. These resources can help you find the names of residents who have previously lived at your address.
- Historic photographs. The Historical Society has a large collection of historic photographs including photographs of many of Oak Park's streets and buildings. You may find a historic photo of your house that will help you understand how it has been changed over time.
- Street-by-street files. The Historical Society maintains street-by-street files of permit notices, property sales advertisements, and other information.

The Historical Society also has a variety of other resources including books, clippings, maps, newspapers, indexes, pictorial histories, and biographical materials. All of these may help trace ownership of local buildings. The Historical Society also has original versions of the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. These provide information about building locations, construction materials and construction materials, which may add to the story of your building.

Additional information including research tips and a list of resources can be found online at oprfmuseum.org. It is recommended that you call or email in advance of visiting to set up a research appointment. The Historical Society is located at 129 Lake St and may be reached at 708.848.6755 or oprhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net.

Cook County Recorder of Deeds

The Cook County Recorder keeps the chain of title for properties and is able to provide ownership information. This is particularly helpful if you are unable to find ownership information in Oak Park. Information you will find at the Cook County Recorder of Deeds:

- Online Property Records. An online chain of title 1985-present may be found online via the Cook County Recorder's website.
- Tract Books. Tract books record all property documents from 1871 to 1985. These provide property owner names as well as document numbers for looking up individual documents.
- Paper and Microfilm Property Records. The Recorder keeps a variety of property records including deeds, mortgage documents, property surveys, Torrens certificates, and title insurance policies.

While the Cook County Recorder does not keep construction dates, the information found here may be invaluable in constructing the history of the property. You will find selling costs, costs of revenue stamps (which can be used to compute selling prices). For example, a Notary Public's name may lead you to a local bank, attorney or real estate firm.

Before You Go to the County

Cook County Property Tax Portal: www.cookcountypropertyinfo.com

It is recommended that you begin your search on the Cook County Property Tax Portal. An address search will provide a property overview. Make a note of the property PIN number, as you will need it later to search both online and paper records. This page also includes the current property owner a recent summary of documents, deeds, and liens.

Cook County Recorder's website: cookrecorder.com/search-our-records.

A list of deeds 1985-present can be found at the Cook County Recorder's website. Most important will be to note the owner in 1985 and to copy the legal description of the property location, which will be available on the PDF versions of any of the old deeds. To view the PDFs, click the document number of the item you wish to view. The legal description will be necessary for additional deed research and will include information similar to the following: "West ½ of Section 17, Township 39, Range 13, Lot 'B' and the north ½ of Lot 'C' of the Lombard Ave Addition to Austin."

The legal description also may be obtained from the Oak Park Township, 105 S. Oak Park Ave, or, for a fee, from the Cook County Clerk's Office, Room 434 in the County Building.

Visiting Cook County Recorder of Deeds

To obtain owners' names and deeds prior to 1985, you will need to visit the Cook County Recorder of Deeds Tract Department, located in the Cook County Building Room 120, at 118 N. Clark Street in downtown Chicago. Make sure to bring your property PIN, legal description, and owners' names 1985-present for reference. The Tract Department maintains indexes of transactions pertaining to property in Cook County dating back to the Chicago Fire. That means you should be able to locate ownership information for your property from 1871 to October 1, 1985.

You may view individual documents, such as deeds, on microfilm. Copies of tract book pages and individual documents may be obtained with a FOIA request. This request may be handled in person at the Recorder of Deeds office for a fee.

Decoding the Tract Books

What to expect in the tract books:

- Section, Township, and Range. The tract books are organized by Section, Township, and Range. For example, "5-39-13," means Section 5, Township 39, Range 13.
- Subdivision. The books are further divided by subdivision (e.g. "Scoville & Niles Addition to Oak Park"), block number, and lot number. This is part of your legal description.
- Transactions. The tract books will show handwritten entries of real estate transactions listed by date of filing, names of grantors and grantees involved in each transaction, and an abbreviation for the type of instrument (e.g. W.D. is a Warranty Deed).
- Document numbers. You may request to view individual documents based on the document numbers in the far left column. These documents are available at the Microfilm Department in Room 120 of the Recorder's Office. A clerk will be available to assist you.

Back in Oak Park

With the additional names, dates, and other data you have obtained, you may want to return to the Oak Park Public Library or Historical Society for additional research. Consider searching local periodicals, census records, directories and other resources using new information about owner names to find out additional information about these owners and you property.

Record and Share Your Results

After you have tracked down the history of your property, you are encouraged to record and share what you've learned. Consider telling your neighbors and visitors about your research. You may have found valuable information that you can pass on.