

PROPERTY RESEARCH GUIDE

This guide is intended for local residents interested in tracing the history of their home. If you would like to learn when your house was built, who has lived there, or what changes previous owners made to the property, the resources identified below can get you started. While the focus here is on items available in Newport Public Library's Special Collections Room (also known as the Newport Room), relevant architectural history resources from other local facilities are also noted.

Steps

The basic process for investigating the history of your home is outlined below. Details about the resources specified, including web links and call numbers, are included in the main text of the guide.

1. Identify and review any existing research on your property.

Start by checking the National Register of Historic Places, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission's surveys of Newport, and the architectural history resources at the Newport Historical Society.

2. If no previous studies have been done, determine on your own when construction took place.

An approximate date is fine. Use a guidebook such as McAlester's *A field guide to American houses* or Poppeliers and Chambers' *What style is it? A guide to American architecture* to identify the general style of your home. Note interior and exterior details; compare the structure to other properties on your street and in your neighborhood. Any details you observe can help date the property. Also consider talking to previous owners or to neighbors that have lived in the area for many years.

3. Build a "chain of title."

Use local government offices to identify the previous owners of your property. You may be able to obtain some records online. Check the city's online buyer/seller index of real estate transactions as well as the public record "chain of title" database for Newport.

4. Broaden your search to include a variety of additional resources.

Incorporate colonial records, old newspapers and city directories, census data, and online tools such as Ancestry.com into your research. Doing so can help flesh out the story of your home.

Resources Available at Newport Public Library

Historic Preservation Reports

Published in the 1970s and 80s, these reports by the state's Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission provide unique information about historic buildings and neighborhoods in Newport. Hardcopies of the reports on the Kay-Catherine-Old Beach, Southern Thames, and West Broadway neighborhoods are available in the Newport Room; all three documents, as well as additional reports, are also accessible on the Commission's webpage: <http://www.preservation.ri.gov/survey/publications.php>



Newport City Directories

Often overlooked, historical directories are a great resource for historians and genealogists. Some of the information they provide:

- A person's address and occupation
- Reverse address lookups and the location of specific streets
- The officers of a corporation and the partners in a firm

They are particularly useful for tracking changes in occupancy over time and for identifying periods when a local government undertook a formal address renumbering program. Though we do not carry a full run of Newport directories, many editions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are available. Check the catalog to determine if a specific year is held on-site: <http://catalog.oslri.net/record=b1022425~S1>. Also check the Rhode Island Historical Society's catalog; though its items do not circulate, the Society has a nearly complete collection of city and town directories:

<http://rihs.minisisinc.com/rihs/scripts/mwimain.dll/2648/1/6/21372?RECORD&UNION=Y>

Consider using the genealogy website www.ancestry.com in conjunction with local directories. Ancestry provides access to a massive amount of historical data – census, tax, and military records; newspapers; maps, atlases, and gazetteers – and can help you learn more about the previous residents of your home. Newport Public Library provides free access to this resource on its in-house computers; local patrons can also access it remotely using their library card barcode number.

Maps

Fire insurance maps convey a wealth of information about an area's residential and commercial properties, from the specific location and dimensions of structures and plots to the names of property owners and the type of material used in a building's frame. Producers of the oversize insurance maps carried by Newport Public include the G.M. Hopkins Company, L.J. Richards & Co, and the Sanborn Map Company. The Library of Congress maintains a webpage explaining the system of keys and colors used in the Sanborn map series, a popular resource among researchers:

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection/>

Newport Public Library's historical city atlases:

- *City atlas of Newport, Rhode Island: from official records private plans and actual surveys ; based upon plans deposited in the department of surveys* / G.M. Hopkins (1876, 1883) – held at reference
- *Atlas of the city of Newport and towns of Middletown and Portsmouth, Rhode Island* / L.J. Richards (1907) – held at reference
- *Atlas of Newport, Jamestown, Middletown & Portsmouth, Rhode Island, from actual survey and city records* / surveyed and published by the Sanborn Map Company (1921) – held at reference
 - The Rhode Island Historical Society carries many Sanborn maps on microfilm at its Providence library; check the RIHS website for specific dates:
<http://www.rihs.org/sanborn-fire-insurance-maps/>
- Also see the city atlases available online via *The Newport Map Project*, a joint product of The Preservation Society of Newport County, Redwood Library & Athenaeum, and Salve Regina University; the *Project* provides access to 16 digitized maps from the period 1758-1954:
<http://newportmapproject.weebly.com/historic-maps.html>

Other cartographic resources:

- *Map of the city of Newport, with the principal points of interest and summer residents with names of owners* / Sampson and Murdoch Company (1890) - Newport G3773.N4S3 1890 Cabinet
- *Report of the Committee on Streets and Highways to the City Council of Newport, R.I. on plan of sewerage for the city of Newport, September, 1880* / Davis & Pitman (1880) – Newport TD525.N7C67
- *Report and estimates for the completion of the sewerage system of the City of Newport, R.I. made by direction of the City Council* / Henry A. Bentley (1885) – Newport TD525.N7B45

In-Print Rhode Island Newspapers

Obituaries, stories on area land developments, advertisements for businesses and social groups, and notices about local real estate transactions are recorded in local newspapers. Pinpoint relevant dates and look to these resources for information about your home.

Newport Daily News:

- Microfilm (1846 to the present)
- Online via Newspapers.com (1846-1977; sporadic coverage)

Providence Journal:

- Microfilm (1973 – 2015)
- Online via Newsbank (1983 – present)

Historical Rhode Island Newspapers

Colonial-era and early American newspapers are also a good source of information about local residents and real estate transactions; papers available to patrons through Newport Public Library's online Newsbank subscription include:

Newport Herald (1787-1791)

Newport Mercury (1758-1776, 1780-1846; some editions from 1829-1935 are also available in microfilm or bound volume format)

Providence Gazette (1762-1825)

Books

A few titles that may help you research your Newport home are listed below; each is available onsite at Newport Public Library. NPL and its partner libraries throughout the state carry many more works on architectural history and genealogy than the ones included here; use the suggested list of Library of Congress Subject Headings in the following section to identify additional resources.

The architectural heritage of Newport, Rhode Island: 1640-1915 / by Antoinette F. Downing and Vincent J. Scully, Jr Newport NA735.N54D6 1967

A field guide to American houses / by Virginia and Lee McAlester NA7205.M35 1984

A Victorian housebuilder's guide : "Woodward's national architect" of 1869 / George E. Woodward and Edward G. Thompson NA7205.W66 1988

American homes: the landmark illustrated encyclopedia of domestic architecture / Lester Walker; preface by Charles Moore. NA7205.W34 2014

American houses: a field guide to the architecture of the home / Gerald Foster NA7205.F67 2004

American house styles: a concise guide / John Milnes Baker NA7205.B33 1933

Between the Golden Age and the Gilded Age: a history of the Southern Thames Street Neighborhood / Catherine W. Zipf, Chris Blanchette, Megan Cox, Diane Patrella, Ty Pennypacker, Dan Titus Newport NA735.N54Z56x 2004

Frederick Law Olmsted : designing America / ; a film by Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey ; written by Ken Chowder ; a co-production of WNED-TV Buffalo/Toronto and Florentine Films/Hott Productions Inc. DVD SB470.O5F74 2014

House histories: a guide to tracing the genealogy of your home / Sally Light NA7205.L43x 1989

House of worship: an identification guide to the history and styles of American religious architecture / Jeffrey Howe NA5205.H69 2003

The houses we live in: an identification guide to the history and style of American domestic architecture/ general editor, Jeffery Howe [NA7205.H695 2002](#)

Lost Newport: vanished cottages of the resort era / Paul F. Miller [Newport NA7575.M55 2008](#)

McKim, Mead & White: the masterworks / Samuel G. White, Elizabeth White ; photographs by Jonathan Wallen [Newport NA737.M4W5 2003x](#)

The Newport house locator / James D. Randall [Newport NA735.N54R35x](#)

Newport houses / photographs by Roberto Schezen ; text by Jane Mulvaugh and MarkA. Weber; introduction by Robert A.M. Stern [Newport NA7238.N67S34 1989](#)

Newport preserv'd : architecture of the 18th century / Desmond Guinness, Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr. [Newport NA7238.N67G8](#)

Newport through its architecture: a history of styles from postmedieval to postmodern / James L. Yarnall [Newport NA735.N54Y37 2005](#)

Newport, Rhode Island colonial burial grounds / John Eylers Sterling, Barbara J. Austin, Letty R. Champion ; edited by Cherry Fletcher Bamberg [Newport F89.N5S835 2009](#)

Newport shingle style / Cheryl Hackett; photography by Kindra Clineff [Newport NA7238.N67H33 2010](#)

Newport villas: the revival styles, 1885-1935 / Michael C. Kathrens ; floorplans by Richard C. Marchand [Newport NA7238.N67K38 2009](#)

Old-house dictionary: an illustrated guide to American domestic architecture (1600-1940) / written and illustrated by Steven J. Phillips [NA7205.P48 1995](#)

Peter Harrison: first American architect / by Carl Bridenbaugh [Newport NA737.H3B7 1949](#)

The records of the Olmsted Associates, Series B, Cont. 305 : shelf no. 20,112.6 [Newport Microfilm Cabinet](#)

The restoration manual: an illustrated guide to the preservation and restoration of old buildings / Orin M. Bullock [NA705.B77 1966](#)

Richard Upjohn: architect and churchman / by Everard M. Upjohn [Newport NA737 U6U6.](#)

Stanford White, architect / Samuel G. White, Elizabeth White; photographs by Jonathan Wallen [NA737.W5W55 2008](#)

Triumvirate: McKim, Mead & White : art, architecture, scandal, and class in America's Gilded Age. [Newport NA737.M4B76 2010](#)

Vitruvius Americanus: colonial Newport in the Palladian tradition; published by Redwood Library and Athenaeum, on the occasion of an exhibition for the Newport Symposium [Newport Z5942.5 C55V57 1996](#)

The Vanderbilts and the gilded age: architectural aspirations, 1879-1901 / John Foreman and Robbe Pierce Stimson; introduction by Louis Auchincloss [Newport NA7207.F67 1991](#)

Catalog Search Terms (Relevant Library of Congress Subject Headings)

Architecture and society -- Rhode Island -- Newport
Architecture, Colonial -- Rhode Island -- Newport -- Conservation and restoration
Architecture, Domestic -- Rhode Island -- Newport -- Conservation and restoration
Architecture, Domestic -- Shingle style -- Rhode Island -- Newport
Architecture, Domestic -- United States -- Themes, motives
Architecture, Victorian
Architecture -- Conservation and restoration
Architecture -- Rhode Island -- Newport
Dwellings -- Rhode Island -- Newport -- Conservation and restoration
Historic buildings -- New England
Historic buildings -- Rhode Island -- Newport
Mansions -- Rhode Island -- Newport
McKim, Mead & White
Newport (R.I.) -- Buildings, structures, etc.
Newport (R.I.) -- History
Olmsted, Frederick Law, 1822-1903.
Rhode Island -- Genealogy
Vacation homes -- Rhode Island -- Newport
Vernacular architecture -- New England
Vernacular architecture -- United States -- Encyclopedias

Other Local Resources

As you work to uncover the history of your Newport home, your research will likely take you to other institutions in the area. Be ready to visit neighboring public libraries, as well as local historical and preservation societies and government offices. Some of the materials and facilities you may use:

City of Newport – Government Offices

- **Maps and Plans**
Identify the boundaries of the city’s zones and historic districts, view an index of plat and lot numbers by street, or find the dimensions of a specific lot and the numbers of its neighboring lots. You will need your plat and lot numbers to retrieve your property’s title card in person (the online “chain of title” database listed in the next entry is searchable by street number *or* by plat and lot number).
<http://www.cityofnewport.com/departments/planning-development/maps-and-plans>
- **Public Record “Chain of Title” Search**
Use this site to convert a property’s street address into plat and lot numbers, view a list of owners, or identify deed book and page numbers for real estate transfers. You will need to establish this “chain” – the record of legally documented transactions for your property – in order to conduct comprehensive deed research. Note: the link provided here does not cover all transactions recorded by the city; older transfers (before 1889) as well as recent ones (1992 to present) may only be accessible as print records held at City Hall (contact the Assessing & Land Evidence Division: 845-5363).
<https://www.usdpw.com/NewportRI/TRecordList.aspx>

- **Property Records Office**
Search the city's grantor/grantee (seller/buyer) index to view land records recorded since 1910. Deed book volume and page number references for older transactions are accessible in a card catalog at City Hall; contact the Newport Historical Society for colonial era records.
<http://www.cityofnewport.com/departments/finance/assessing-division/property-records>
- **City Clerk**
Find information here about accessing probate and vital records on file in the city. Both can be helpful when seeking to fill gaps in the title chain for a property.
<http://www.cityofnewport.com/departments/city-clerk/probate-court>
- **Historic District Commission**
View HDC meeting agendas and minutes, historic district maps and inventories, and other resources.
<http://www.cityofnewport.com/departments/zoning-inspections/historic-district-commission>

Newport Historical Society

Browse the institution's online finding aids, inventory of materials, and catalog (including an extensive collection of digitized photos) for relevant resources, or arrange a consultation with NHS staff.

<http://www.newporthistory.org/>

Newport Restoration Foundation

See in particular the Foundation's guide, "How to Research Your Home in Newport, RI", accessible on the "Learning & Programs" page of its website.

<http://www.newportrestoration.org/>

Providence Preservation Society Library – Gowdey Database

Consult this database if your property has a connection to families and/or architects associated with historic Providence; you may find some information of use.

<http://gowdey.ppsri.org/>

Providence Public Library's Rhode Island Collection

Check the books, images, and cartographic resources in the collection for information about Newport (a sample of relevant items are listed below).

<http://www.provlib.org/ricoll>

- *Pocket map of Rhode Island and the cities of Providence and Newport* / D.G. Beers & Co. (1870) – Providence Public Library [RIColl 912.745 B415p](#)
- *Carr's guide map of the city of Newport, R.I. and road map for the island of Rhode Island : with an index to public buildings and places* / George H. Carr (1885) – Providence Public Library [RIColl 912.7457 C312g](#)
- *Map of Newport & vicinity or Rhode Island* / A.J. Ward (1800s) – Providence Public Library [RIColl 912.7457 W256m](#)
- Digitized images of Rhode Island:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/ppl_ri_images/albums/72157622205329114
- Historic American Building Survey – RI records:
http://www.provlib.org/sites/default/files/VM%20002%20HABS%20RI%20Finding%20Aid_0.pdf

The Preservation Society of Newport County – Research & Scholarship

Check the Society’s research reports and scholarly papers for items of interest or browse its reading lists on Newport history and architecture.

<http://www.newportmansions.org/learn/research-scholarship>

Redwood Library & Athenaeum

View the “Guide to architectural resources at the Redwood Library,” accessible under the “Reading and Research” tab.

<http://www.redwoodlibrary.org/>

R.I. Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission – RI National Register Search

Learn more about properties on the National Register of Historic Places. Search for a specific property by address or search for multiple properties by keyword (i.e., Greek Revival).

<http://www.ri.gov/preservation/search/>

Rhode Island Historical Society

Search the Society’s photo archive, look for specific editions of city and town directories, or browse the catalog for other architectural and genealogical resources.

<http://www.rihs.org/>

Useful Websites

Researching Your House History at Providence City Hall

<http://www.providenceri.com/archives/finding-aids/researching-your-house-history>

How to Research Your House

http://www.newportrestoration.org/resources/details/49-how_to_research_your

Preservation Resources

<http://www.preservation.ri.gov/resources/library.php>

Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/>

Guide to Researching the History of a House

<http://www.ipl.org/div/pf/entry/76687>

How to Research the History of Your House

<http://www.thisoldhouse.com/toh/article/0,,1560818,00.html>

National Archives

<http://www.archives.gov/index.html>

National Register of Historic Places Program

<http://www.nps.gov/nr/about.htm>

Other research guides (enter terms such as “historic preservation” or “historic building research”)

<http://libguides.com/community.php>