



PRESERVATION MARYLAND

Property Research Guide

Introduction

This guide is intended to help with researching properties in Maryland. It details the key resources to consult and why, and the different ways you can access this information. This is not an exhaustive list of all the possible resources, but rather the most commonly used materials and sources. We strongly encourage you to explore other possible resources by seeking the advice of librarians, historic preservationists, and other experienced researchers.

First steps:

Before you begin historic research, you'll first want to check if your property has been landmarked or designated either at the local, State, or national level. To confirm local level landmarking you'll want to contact your local or county historic preservation commission should one exist. For State and national designations, you can use Maryland Historical Trust's [MEDUSA database](#) which shows the location of properties included in the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties, and listed on the Maryland or National Register of Historic Places, either individually or as part of an historic district. Even if your property has not been designated, there might be inventory forms or mentions in relevant survey documents which might provide some information about your property.

Next, you'll need to confirm the present-day municipal information about the property. You can do so by looking the address up in the [Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation's SDAT database](#). When researching a property, ***you always want to start in the present day and research backwards in time.*** Your property's entry in SDAT will provide you with several key points of information that will ensure you start with and continue researching the correct property. That information includes the current property owners and the deed book and page number for the most recently filed deed, the property identifier (the property's ward, section, block, and lot numbers), the legal description, lot dimensions, and/or approximate square feet or acreage of the property.

Deeds

Deeds trace ownership of a building over time, referred to as the chain of title. Each deed will provide the names of the grantor (person selling the property) and the grantee (person buying the property), along with the legal description of the property. It may also include additional restrictions or conditions of the sale and/or references to previous deeds involving the property. It's important to note that deeds rarely include specific information about a building such as its construction date or major characteristics. The purchase price is also something that is not consistently included in a deed, with many deeds saying the property was purchased for only a dollar. The Maryland State Archive has a useful "[Understanding Maryland Records](#)" guide which provides definitions for various legal terms you might encounter.

Especially for properties in the Greater-Baltimore area, it's important to be aware of ground rents/ground leases. This is a condition where the building and the ground it sits on may be owned by different people. The person who owns the building is subject to annual rent payments payable to the ground rent owner. This practice began in the colonial era as a means to keep home costs low. In the years since, many homeowners have purchased their ground rent and own both, but there are still many properties that have separate ownership. When doing deed research in Baltimore you need to be mindful that your results will likely include deeds for both the building and the ground rent.

Sources:

- MDLandRec.net provides free online access to Maryland’s land records from the present day to the earliest surviving land records. Access to this database is free but requires you to create an account. After selecting which county or independent city you wish to access, the main search page gives you access to deeds, mortgages, and other land records from 1972 to today. To access records older than that, you’ll need to select the “Active Indices” on the left-hand menu.
- For in-person researching of land records accessible online through MDLandRec.Net, you’ll need to visit the [Circuit Court](#) for the county or independent city you are researching.
- [Maryland State Archives](#) also holds various land records in their collection which are detailed in their “[Land Records](#)” finding aid. You can make appointments to access these documents in person or place an order for a copy.
- Maryland Center for History and Culture has selected land records available at the Main Reading Room of the H. Furlong Baldwin Library. MCHC maintains “[County Subject Guides](#)” detailing what resources they have for each county.
- For properties which were transferred as part of a will or other probate related action, that documentation may be within its casefile in the Orphans’ Court or the Register of Wills. Orphans’ Court handles judicial probate cases, or rather cases that need to go before a judge because there are questions regarding the validity of all or part of a will or estate. The Register of Wills manages administrative probate cases, or rather uncontested wills. Cases since 1965 can be looked up using the [Maryland Judiciary Case Search](#). For historic Orphan Court cases, [Maryland State Archives](#) holds some records in their collection, but the more of the are found at each county’s Circuit Court.

Building Permits

Maintained at the city, town, or county level, building permits and associated blueprints provide a wealth of information about the construction history of a property. Permitting requirements vary wildly from municipality to municipality and throughout history, so there is no guarantee that a building permit exists for every change made to a property. If a municipality has retained historic permitting records, they maybe be stored onsite with present day records, or have been moved to off-site records facilities or archives.

Sources:

- Maryland State Archives holds limited [building permits](#) and plan records from select counties. You can access that list by searching for “[building permits](#)” in their collection of Government Records.
- Baltimore City’s Department of Housing & Community Development has an [online database](#) which includes all permits issued since 2005.

Maps

When researching a property, maps may help to further confirm when a property was built, dates of other major improvements, and changes to street names or numbering. They may also be used to help confirm ward, district, lot, or block numbers. Plat maps and some atlases may also include property owner names.

Sources:

- Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, created by The Sanborn Company, provide detailed maps of cities and towns intended to be used by insurance companies to assess their total liability. For researchers, Sanborns provide color coded maps identifying a building’s construction material and other major characteristics of a building. While the company started in 1860s, Sanborn maps in Maryland only go back to the 1880s. There are several ways to access Sanborn maps:
 - Several public and college libraries, most notably the [Enoch Pratt Free Library](#), provide access to Sanborn maps, but you must have a library card with that institution to access

- the database. This access is usually powered by ProQuest, which will only provide black and white copies of the maps.
- The Library of Congress has many full color copies of the Sanborn maps in Maryland. You can learn more about how to navigate them with this [guide](#). You can use the [Library of Congress' main search page](#) to keyword search for available Maryland Sanborn maps. You can use their [Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps Online Checklist](#) to search, too.
 - Many public libraries with local history rooms, and historical societies have one if not several hard copies of Sanborn maps that you can consult on site.
 - [Plats.net](#) is the State of Maryland's website where you can access all plats filed with the Land Office and the Circuit Courts of Maryland. Plats are maps that accompany land records showing the boundaries of properties described. Deeds that involve plat maps will reference the book and page they are recorded in.
 - [University of Maryland Libraries](#) has a large collection of maps depicting Maryland. Some maps are available online, with the rest of the collection available for viewing in the [Maryland Room](#) at Hornbake Library.
 - Various county/city atlases.
 - The Library of Congress has various municipal and county level maps in addition to select copies of Maryland Sanborn maps. You can use the [Library of Congress' main search page](#) to keyword search for available Maryland maps.
 - [Johns Hopkins Libraries](#) has a collection of maps and aerial photography for many areas across the state.
 - Maryland Center for History and Culture has selected land records available at the Main Reading Room of the H. Furlong Baldwin Library. MCHC maintains "[County Subject Guides](#)" detailing what resources they have for each county.
 - Many historical societies and/or local library history reading rooms will have various historic maps of their communities.
 - For Baltimore City & County, the [Maryland State Archives Atlases and Maps of Baltimore City and County](#).

Tax Assessments

Tax assessments calculate the value of a property which is then used to determine the property's rate of taxation. In showing the value of a property, historic tax assessment may help in identifying a building's construction date or when other major changes occurred by tracking the property value over time. Depending on the municipality and age of the document, assessment records may also include other biographical or property data that may help provide a better understanding of the property and its owners/occupants.

Sources:

- Recent tax assessments are available online at the [Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation's SDAT database](#).
- Historic tax assessment records may also be available for in-person searching through the [County Circuit Courts](#), or at the [Maryland State Archives](#).

City Directory

City directories, the predecessor to modern phone books, are helpful resources which allow you to look up individuals or businesses by name to see their address, and often their occupations. Early city directories will include an alphabetical listing of residents followed by a business directory in alphabetical order by industry. Later when the telephone was introduced, directories often included reverse address indexes. Keep in mind that historic city directories often did not include single women without

occupations, and many communities kept separate directories for Black-owned business, and/or special notations for Black individuals in the city directory. In addition to traditional city directories, some communities also had blue books or social directories that listed the “elite” society members, as well as the nationally produced The Negro Motorist Green Book, an annual guidebook for African American road trippers.

Sources:

- University of Maryland Libraries has a [larger number of city directories](#) from all over the state available to review at the [Maryland Room](#) in Hornbake Library. They also have a finding guide for how to access [Baltimore City directories online](#).
- Baltimore City Archives has a [listing of the city directories](#) in their collection and links to those available online.
- [Maryland State Archives](#) also has some city directories for Annapolis and Baltimore available online.
- Many historical societies and/or local library history reading rooms will have various historic maps of their communities.

Census

Since 1790, a Federal Census has been taken every ten years and includes helpful biographical information about a community’s residents. Because of the 72-year restriction on access to the Census, the most recent year available is 1950. Keep in mind that entries are not necessarily in address order, additionally older censuses and those in more rural areas often don’t include a reference to the address at all. When searching online, you’ll just need to know the individual’s name and other biographical information to find them. But when searching on microfilm or other hard-copy materials, you’ll need to first confirm what census ward/enumeration district the property is located in (a map is usually included in the beginning of a census) and then search in that referenced section.

Sources:

- [National Archives](#) has a Census website which not only offers links to access censuses but also guides on how to navigate each year.
- [Maryland State Archives](#) has each census in their collection in book or microfilm formats.
- Maryland Center for History and Culture has census records available on microfilm, and maintains a [Research Guide](#) with tips on using those records.
- Most public and college libraries offer access to Ancestry.com and HeritageQuest.com with a library card. Often the library edition of Ancestry.com is only accessible while on the library’s Wi-Fi, while HeritageQuest.com is usually accessible from any remote location.
- [FamilySearch.org](#) provides free online access to censuses but does require you to create an account.

Newspapers/Publications

Newspapers and other publications provide a wealth of information about your property and its previous residents. It’s important to keep in mind that the language and the type of information included in newspapers have changed over time. Therefore, depending on your search topic, you may need to try a variety search terms and approaches to make sure you capture all the relevant information. For example, for a significant period of time, women were rarely mentioned by their own first names but rather by their husband’s name, for example a Jane Ann Doe married to John David Doe would most likely be mentioned in a newspaper as Mrs. John D. Doe and not Mrs. Jane A. Doe.

Sources:

- [Library of Congress’s](#) Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers searchable database includes some newspapers from Maryland.

- [Maryland State Archives](#) maintains a listing of available online digitized Maryland newspapers.
- [Maryland State Library Resource Center](#) maintains a listing of available online digitized Maryland newspapers.
- Maryland Center for History and Culture maintains a [Research Guide](#) listing all the newspapers and journals they have on microfilm. Their “[County Subject Guides](#)” also provide information on what newspaper records they have for each county.
- Most public and college libraries offer access to ProQuest’s “Historical Newspapers” and “Historical Newspapers: Black Newspaper Collection” databases with your library card.
- Public and college libraries, and historical societies often have microfilmed newspapers as well as various scrapbook or hanging file collections that may include newspaper clippings.
- [Newspapers.com](#) is a paid subscription database that gives you access to thousands of newspapers across the country. Some public and college libraries also provide access to Newspapers.com.
- Genealogical websites like Ancestry.com, HeritageQuest.com and FamilySearch.org may also have historic newspapers.
- [Archive.org](#) and [Google Books](#) provides free access to a variety of digitized print materials.

Images

Whether a snapshot of your property, a street scene, or birds-eye-view of your community, photographs can provide a level of documentation not possible through other research sources. Larger institutions typically only include photographs of significant public buildings, those designed by well-known architects or built for notable individuals. Therefore, it’s important to explore your local archives (e.g., local history rooms at public libraries, historical society) that may include the property you’re researching.

Sources:

- [Library of Congress](#) has a large collection of photographs and other visual material, including those part of the Historic American Building Survey (HABS), Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) and Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS).
- Maryland Historical Trust’s [MEDUSA database](#) is where you can access copies of a property’s Maryland Inventory of Historic Property, and/or National Register of Historic Places nomination. Both of which would include photos of the property from when that document was prepared and/or historic images.
- Maryland State Library has a collection of [Historical Photographs of Maryland](#).
- Maryland Center for History and Culture has a collection of [Photographs](#), some of which have been made available through their digital collections as well.
- Many public libraries and historical societies also maintain photograph collections of various private and municipal photographs donated to their collections.