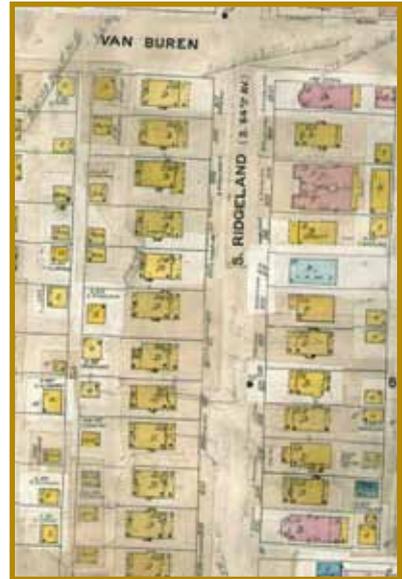


Researching Your Oak Park Home

A Citizen's Guide





Finding the roots of your Oak Park home and the land it sits on is real detective work. Research can be as involved as you want it to be. When you decide to look into your property's history, here's what you may find:

- Who has owned the property through the years.
- Who has lived in the house and information about their families and businesses.
- What the property was worth from time to time.
- Who constructed the house — the owner, the architect, the builder.
- You may even find photographs of the exterior and interior of your house.

How to go about tracing your home's history

Step 1: Village of Oak Park Records

The Building & Property Standards Department at Oak Park Village Hall, 123 Madison St. (at Lombard Avenue), has records of all construction since 1902, the year the Village incorporated as a municipality. Department staff will help you find the records based on the address. The building permit for your home will include the name of the original owner or developer, the contractor, the architect (after 1919), the construction dates, materials used in construction and the cost and size of the structure. A permit for a foundation means your house was moved onto its present lot from another site. Permits also may be found for later alterations or additions.

If a building permit for your home cannot be found, your house may have been constructed before the Village of Oak Park was incorporated in 1902. If that's the case, skip to Step 3, and then return to Step 2.

Be sure to copy all information you find. The information will help to develop your home's pattern of ownership. The files of the Historic Preservation Commission also may contain useful information. Ask to speak with the Commission's staff person, who is located at Village Hall or call 708.358.5417.

Step 2: Oak Park Public Library Resources

The Oak Park Public Library, 834 Lake St., also may be a source of information about past owners of your house. Using the information gathered from Village records, refer to the Oak Park Directories (1883 -



present) to find the original owner of your property and others who lived in the house. The directories, which are on microfilm and available on the third floor of the library, were published in June or July, so you may have to look in the volume for the year following the date on your 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, ask the Information Services librarian to consult the Local Newspaper Index for information about the people who lived at your address. Obituaries can be helpful in your search because they provide leads to living relatives who may have photographs or blueprints of your house.

If your search doesn't yield much, ask the Information Services librarian for the Reverse Index Binder, which 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. In addition, various newspapers are on microfiche dating from 1883 to the

present. Information Services can help you identify which newspapers are available for which time periods. Ask the Information Services librarian to check under residences in the local newspaper index. Your house could be among the houses that have had articles written about them. Ask for the *Steiner Index* too. The notes of architectural historian Frances Steiner, who searched local newspapers for references to architects and buildings between 1896 and 1916, are in the Library's collection.

Finally, check the Library's Historic Preservation Commission File. The file's nucleus is data collected for the *Hasbrouck-Sprague Survey of Historic Architecture in Oak Park*, which is on file at the Library as well. The file also includes numerous building plans and elevations.

Step 3: Historical Society Resources

The Historical Society of Oak Park & River Forest has books, clippings, maps,



newspapers, indexes, city directories, telephone books, pictorial histories and census records on microfilm and biographical materials that may help trace ownership of local buildings. The Society also maintains a large collection of photographs as well as street-by-street files of permit notices, property sales advertisements and other information. Sanborn Fire Insurance maps housed at the Historical Society provide information about construction materials and dates, which may prove useful in your search as well.

The Historical Society is located on the second floor of the John Farson House (Pleasant Home) at 217 Home Ave. (at Pleasant Street). Call 708.848.6755 or e-mail oprhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net to schedule a research appointment. Tips and a list of research resources can be found via the Local Research tab at www.oprhistory.org.

Step 4: Cook County Records

If you are unable to find ownership information in Oak Park, the next step is to search the chain of title at the Tract Department of the Cook County Recorder of Deeds, Cook County Building, Room 120, 118 N. Clark Street, Chicago. The Tract Department maintains indexes of transactions pertaining to property in Cook County dating back to the Chicago Fire. The Tract Books record information on property transactions dating from 1871 to October 1, 1985. After that date, property information is maintained on computer. To search for owner history in the Recorder's Office, you will need the legal description and the Permanent Index Number (PIN) of your property. You can find the legal description of your home in previ-



ously recorded documents pertaining to your property, such as a title insurance policy, a property survey, a Torrens certificate, a mortgage document or deed. If you can't find a document containing the legal description of your home, go to the Oak Park Township Office, 105 S. Oak Park Ave., where a clerk can provide a legal description for your home when you provide your address. You also can obtain the legal description of your parcel from the Cook County Clerk's Office, Room 434 in the County Building, for a fee.

The PIN number is affixed to most real estate-related documents. If you do not have the PIN number for your property, go to Room 434 in the Cook County Building, where a clerk will furnish the PIN numbers of up to three street addresses that you provide. You can also obtain your PIN number through an online search of your address at the Cook County Assessor's Office website www.cookcountyassessor.com.

Searching property history is best done in reverse chronological order, from the most recent to the oldest transactions. Using the PIN number and the identifiers contained in the legal description of your property, you can trace the ownership of your property back through time, starting with the most recent transactions.

First, search the Recorder's computer system for information on your property going back to October 1, 1985. Using the terminals downstairs in the Tract Department, you can search the Recorder's computer system through a variety of search modes. Usually, searches are conducted by entering the PIN number of a property, or by entering the names of persons transferring property in the grantor-grantee index. Plan to take careful notes, because copies of documents can be expensive.

Once you have traced your property back to October 1, 1985, turn to the Tract

Books to search for earlier owner history. Search the Tract Book Index in order to find the volume number of the correct Tract Book for your property. The Tract Book Indexes are located in the Tract Department. A series of hyphenated numbers that indicate the section, township and range of parcels, in that order, are printed at the top of the pages of the Tract Book Index. For example, "5-39-13," means section 5, township 39, range 13. These identifiers are contained in the legal description of your property. Flip through the Tract Book Index to the page(s) where your section, township and range numbers appear in the heading, then look down the page(s) until you find the name of your subdivision as indicated in your legal description. In the far left column you will see the volume number of the correct Tract Book to consult for information pertaining to your property, for example "108-A."

The Tract Books are on counters in the Tract Department. They are arranged in numeric order by volume number, with the section, township and range numbers printed on their spines. Once you have located the correct Tract Book volume, go to the index at the front of the book to find the name of your subdivision, listed in alphabetical order. Under the subdivision name, look for your block number, as indicated in your legal description. There you will find reference to the page number where information about your block first appears in the Tract Book. Turning to the page referenced for your block, the section, township and range numbers of your parcel should appear. Now locate the page that contains your lot number. The range of lot numbers appearing on a page is indi-

cated to the right of the block number in the heading. Hand-written 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 are recorded in the pages of the Tract Books.

To locate a transaction pertaining to your property on a page, you must first find references to your lot number among the lots designated in the parcel descriptions in the far right column. The handwritten entries are sometimes difficult to decipher, and the Tract Books available to the public are poor, barely legible copies of the original Tract Books, which are kept in storage. If you have trouble with this part of the search, do not hesitate to ask for help at the front desk.

Continue your property search in reverse chronological order from where you left off at the computer terminal by flipping through the Tract Book until you get to the

The image shows a page from a directory for OAK PARK. At the top, there are advertisements for 'ICE' (1000 LAKE STREET), 'COAL' (Telephone 345), and 'DRACHSLER'S' (A Family Drug Store, 500 LaSalle St., Tel. 7). The main directory section is titled 'OAK PARK' and lists various businesses and their addresses. For example, 'Harper, James, Harper & Bufendorf, mason contractors' is at 117 Chicago av, and 'Hatch, W. H., optician' is at 115 N Oak Park av. At the bottom, there is an advertisement for 'The Avenue Dry Goods Store' (EMILY U. WEISBERG, Prop., phone 2752) and 'DRACHSLER'S' (A Family Drug Store, 500 LaSalle St., Tel. 7).

Pianos and Organs Repossessed. FRANK D. IBACH. 173 LAKE ST. TEL. 0014.



last transaction recorded for your property before October 1, 1985. To do this, look at the bottom of the page where you found your lot, where it says “forward to page (number).” Keep flipping forward, marking each page that contains your block and lot number, until you get to the last transaction listed for your property in the Tract Book. Now you can search backwards in time through the Tract Book in reverse chronological order, through the pages that you have book marked. Find the names of the grantors and grantees as you work backwards to establish a chain of title.

At this point, it is highly recommended that you photocopy the Tract Book pages you marked. Photocopying the relevant Tract Book pages will give you an accurate record of transactions involving your parcel that you can decipher later at your convenience. Otherwise, you will have to rely on the accuracy of your notes. You can use the photocopies to later identify and decide which documents to order. To photocopy, you will need to fill out a Freedom of Information (FOI) Request available in the Recorder’s Legal Department on the first floor. Hand the FOI request

to a clerk in the Tract Department, and your book with marked pages. The pages will be taken out of the Tract Book and copied for a per-page fee while you wait.

Copy all of the information that relates to your property to develop its chain of title. Document numbers, dates, grantors, grantees and descriptions are all important to your search. Abbreviations will include W.D. (“Warranty Deed”), T.D. (“Trust Deed”), Q.D. (“Quit Claim Deed”), D.T. (“Deed in Trust”), M.D. (“Master Deed”), Tx.D. (“Tax Deed”) and L. (“Lien”). A helpful abbreviation sheet is available at the front desk.

Documents relating to your property are referred to by document numbers appearing in the far left page columns of the Tract Books. To review these documents, copy the document number and proceed to the Microfilm Department in Room 120 of the Recorder’s Office. A clerk will locate the microfiche for your property and assist you in the use of the microfiche reader. The documents are located in the files by their document numbers. Again, take notes on what you find if you want to avoid the cost of ordering documents.

Construction dates cannot be pinpointed, but selling costs, costs of revenue stamps (which can be used to compute selling prices) and all other data should be recorded. For example, a Notary Public’s name may lead you to a local bank, attorney or real estate firm.

Step 5: Back to Oak Park for More Research

The names, dates and other data that you find can now be taken back to the Oak

Park Public Library or Historical Society where you can search for more information on your property and/or the people who lived there. You can begin to search local periodicals, census records, directories and other resources looking for information about the past owners of your house. To find references to your property, look at issues published six months before and six months after the original building permit date.

Step 6: Recognition of Your Home's History

After you have tracked down the history of your property, consider letting your neighbors and visitors know about it.

One way is to nominate your home to become an Oak Park Historic Landmark. The free process involves making a case for your home's historic significance. Successful applicants receive a bronze plaque. Call 708.358.5417 for a brochure or visit www.oak-park.us — just click on the Departments tab and choose Historic Preservation.

You also may purchase a historic home plaque through the Historical Society of Oak Park & River Forest. This program gives local residents the chance to join others who have participated in the documentation of their home's history. Call 708.848.6755 or visit www.oprfhistory.org for more details.



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*All photos and illustrations courtesy of
The Historical Society of Oak Park & River Forest*

www.oprfhistory.org

Cover: John I. Jones House, 209 S. Grove Ave., 1895

Page 1: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1930

Page 3: Research materials

Page 4: 1903 Oak Park Directory

Pages 6 & 7: Edwin T. Johnson House,
327 Home Ave., 1896

Page 9: 1903 Oak Park Directory

Page 10: J.K. Russell House, 120 S. Maple Ave., 1886



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