Researching Your Chester County Home

A Step-By-Step Guide to Researching Your Property

Chester County Archives & Record Services
601 Westtown Road, Suite 080
West Chester, PA  19380

Project funded by a grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
Researching Your Chester County Home

Researching your home can be a very rewarding experience. Getting started, however, can seem overwhelming. It requires an understanding of the basic methods of historical research. Knowing where the resources can be found and how to interpret them in your research is a fundamental part of the process. The goal of this guide is to provide you with the tools necessary to begin your research and to help you overcome the hurdles that will be found along the way.

Think of house research as detective work. You have to sift through the many clues left behind and reconstruct a probable chain of events. It is unlikely that you will find a definitive answer to your question, “When was my house built?” But you will likely be able to build a body of evidence that supports a probable date of construction.

The Basics

The following is a list of key places in the order they should be visited. Be sure to take a notebook and pencil with you, as well as any documentation you have on your home (such as your current deed, tax parcel number, etc).

1. **Home and your local library** – Look at the style of your house, both inside and out. Take note of the architectural features and materials used in its construction. Next visit your local library and consult books on architectural history.

2. **Department of Assessment (DoA)** – Here you will start building a chain of title using your current address or tax parcel number. The information you obtain here should provide you with a current deed book and page reference.

3. **Recorder of Deeds (RoD)** – Once you have a deed book and page reference you will visit the Recorder of Deeds and continue your chain of title until you have the deeds documented back to the early 20th century.

4. **Chester County Archives (CCA)** – Picking up where you left off at the Recorder of Deeds you will finish your chain of title here. Using a variety of resources you should be able to document your home and the find information about the people who lived there.

5. **Chester County Historical Society (CCHS)** – A visit to the Society will help fill in the details regarding your property, home and the individuals associated with it.
Step One - Estimate a Date of Construction

As with most research, you will begin your project at home. A key element to dating your home is having a rough idea when the structure was built before you begin your research. Consult books from your local public library on architectural history. By examining the style, materials, and features in your home, the information obtained at the library can help you narrow down the possible date of construction. Even if you are only able to narrow the time frame to a half century such as “mid to late 19th century,” this information will make your research easier. Keep in mind that your house was probably altered and modernized by the families who lived there, so it is necessary to thoroughly examine your home’s features. Once you feel confident that you have your approximate date of construction you can take the next step and begin a chain of title.

Step Two - Building a Chain of Title

The chain of title is basically a list of all previous owners and the time period they owned your property. Knowing the names of the owners is the key which will unlock other useful resources. This list is essential to your research and cannot be skipped.

Department of Assessment

You can now start at home by using the ChescoViews system found on the Chester County Assessment Office home page: (http://www.chesco.org/199/Assessment ). Select “Research Assessment Data” to begin your search.

The property information obtained at the Assessment Office will provide you with a current deed book and page reference. Be skeptical of the construction date you find in the assessment information. The dates were generally provided by the owner of the property when the information was gathered in the 1960s and 1970s. Unless your home is of recent construction, the dates are often not correct.

Recorder of Deeds Office

You will find your current deed (or the deeds you found referenced at the Assessment Office) recorded at the Recorder of Deed’s Office. The Recorder’s office houses current deed books. While it is possible to trace your title back to the 18th century at the Recorder of Deeds Office, it is recommended that you proceed to the Chester County Archives when you reach the early 20th century. Problems will arise that can only be solved utilizing resources found at the Archives.

Deeds have fundamentally remained the same since the first deed was recorded in Chester County in the late 17th century. Understanding the basic structure of a deed
will help you to quickly extract the information you need to continue your journey back in time without getting lost in the legal language.

**Reading and Interpreting Deeds**

The first section of a deed contains the date, names and residences of the parties involved in the transaction. The seller of the property is referred to as the Grantor and the purchaser as the Grantee. Take note of the key phrases that begin each section, such as Between, Witnesseth, All that certain, Beginning At, Containing, Being the same.

Next the amount of the sale will be followed by the location and legal description of the property.

**Tip** - If there is a sizable increase in the purchase price between two consecutive transactions and the acreage and description of the property remains the same, this may indicate a major improvement was made to the property between the two transactions.

Here you will find the key word “messuage” which means dwelling-place. Unlike other portions of the deed which make reference to buildings or structures as part of the legal language, it is here that you can assume that a house (not necessarily yours) is on the property being sold. Further research is required to determine if it is your home.

While it was common practice to include the word “messuage” when a dwelling-place existed on the property, you should understand that mistakes do occur in the drawing up and transcribing of deeds. The absence or inclusion of this word isn’t a 100% guarantee that there is or is not a dwelling-place on the property. More recent deeds may use the phrase “all that tract of land with buildings and improvements thereon” instead of the older term “messuage.”

The next section contains the lot or tract size and a reference to how the person now selling the property (the Grantor) received it, commonly referred to as the recital.
Finally you will find the recording information. (In early 18th century deeds this information may be found at the beginning instead of at the end of the deed.)

Looking for the key phrases mentioned above will help your eyes quickly locate the pertinent information you need to construct your chain of title. While it is not necessary to make copies of the deeds you find, it is helpful to fully extract the names, dates, price, legal description, acreage and recital for each deed. Always note the full deed book, volume and page reference.

Now that you understand the basic structure of a deed you can use the recital information to work your way back. In many cases, a deed will provide you with a reference to the prior deed (i.e. the recital). You should follow this clue back, making sure that the word “messuage” appears in every deed. Once you find a deed without the word (generally you will find “lot or piece of land” instead) this may indicate that a house was built after this property transfer. At this point it will be time to utilize other resources to find out when your home was constructed.

| A property where no dwelling house exists. | A property with a dwelling house. |

**Problem Solving**

Unfortunately most properties aren’t that easy to trace back. Breaks in title occur for a number of reasons and the farther back in time you go the higher the probability that an unrecorded deed, a sheriff’s sale, or a break due to inheritance will stop you in your tracks. Depending on your specific problem there are ways to get around most of these situations.

Below is a list of common problems that you may encounter. If you have no trouble getting back, proceed to Step Three - Gathering Evidence. If you aren't so lucky, select the question that best represents your situation.

**Does the recital give you a grantor and grantee but leaves out the deed book and page reference?**

Your first attempt to get back on track is to look in the Grantee and/or the Grantor index to find either of the parties involved in the recital. If the recital uses the phrase “intended to be recorded” look for the deed to be recorded after the deed you found the recital in. Even with “good intentions” the deed may not be recorded. If you locate a reference and the property description within the corresponding deed matches, use the deed reference in the recital to continue your chain of title. If you cannot locate the transaction in the index you most likely have an unrecorded deed. In that case you will have to search for the seller named in the recital in the Grantee index.
Does the recital give a list of multiple transactions without specific references to some or all of those transactions?

When you find a recital that lists multiple transactions this typically indicates that the deeds to the property have gone unrecorded for multiple transfers. This is called clearing title; it explains how the current owner has the right to sell the property. If the oldest transaction does not provide you with a reference, you need to check the Grantee index for the seller listed in the oldest transaction in the recital. If you cannot locate the transaction in the index you most likely have an unrecorded deed. Be sure to extract all the names and dates from every transaction listed.

Does the deed not have a recital at all?

In this case you want to check the Grantee index for the name of seller listed on the last recorded deed. Be sure to start looking in the year of the last transaction and work your way back. Bear in mind that a deed may have been recorded many years after the date of the transaction. The date of the actual deed, or instrument, is the important date.

Does the recital refer to a patent?

You should consider the patent as the first official deed to your property. It was the final document in the process to claim unseated property, first from William Penn and later from his sons and the Commonwealth. The original records involved in the patent process (including warrants and surveys) are found at the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg. These records may contain additional information and researchers are encouraged to contact them for further assistance.

Does the recital refer to a will or an estate sale?

When a property descends through a will or an estate sale, the recital will not provide you with information on how the decedent acquired the property. Your first step will be to check the Grantee index for the decedent’s name.

Does the recital refer to a Sheriff’s sale?

When a property is sold by order of the Court of Common Pleas for debt or the County Treasurer for non-payment of taxes, the county sheriff becomes the Grantor of the property. The name of the original owner is not always mentioned in the recorded deed. If this is the case you should consult the Sheriff’s Deed Books for the information. The original owner is the person whose land has been taken or the defendant named in the debt case. Once you have obtained the name of the original owner you need to check the Grantee index.

Be sure to check the Township – Land Record Clippings at that the Chester County Historical Society. You may find a full description of the buildings published with the announcement of the sale.

Do you have multiple tracts, each with its own recital?
First you need to discover which tract is yours. Most lots or tracts of land do not stay the same size over the course of time. Your tract at one point either gained or lost acreage. If you find yourself with a deed that cites multiple tracts (clue: they may be referred to as Lot #1, Lot #2 etc) this means that the property now being sold was formed fully or partly from all the tracts listed. If you are certain your house was built prior to the date of the deed and if only one lot description contains the word messuage, it should be easy to determine which recital to follow back. If you are not certain the best option is to plot out each tract and match it with the plots from your previous deeds noting where your house currently stands in relation to the tract’s dimensions as you work your way back.

**Incomplete Recitals and Unrecorded Deeds**

Using deed book indexes may help you discover the deed book reference that was missing from a recital. They are divided into two indexes, one for the buyer (Grantee) and one for the seller (Grantor).

Your recital should, at the very least, provide you with the name of the buyer and seller and the date of the transaction so that you can check the Grantor/Grantee indexes. If it does not, you will be looking for the seller in your last recorded deed in the Grantee index. Since you know the date of the last recorded deed, you should only be looking for transactions that occurred prior to that date. You may find several transactions so you should write down the full deed book and page of each reference and get ready to read the full legal descriptions.

The quickest way to eliminate the wrong deed is to look at the property’s location. If you are looking for East Caln Township and it says Tredyffrin move on to your next reference. If you are in the correct township or borough, next look at the acreage, if it matches exactly, start reading the legal description. Check to see if the names of the bounding neighbors are the same or the property bounds a stream or road that was mentioned in your last recorded deed. If you are unable to find anything that closely matches but have some deeds in the “possible” category, it is be time to plot out the last recorded deed and see if it fits into any of the “possible” deeds you found.

**Tip** - If any of the following appear after the name in the index, you can safely ignore these deeds since they imply the property involved is not owned by the indexed individual: Exrs – Executor, Trus – Trustee, - Admr – Administrator, Assn – Assignee, Shrrf - Sheriff- all are acting on behalf of someone else’s estate.

If you are not a professional surveyor, reading the property description can initially seem like reading a foreign language. With a little time and effort, picking up essential information like bounding neighbors and natural and manmade features (streams, trees, roads, etc) will come easily. Property descriptions have a tendency to remain the same as long as the property is not divided or added to between sales. Therefore the descriptions may reflect neighbors who haven’t lived on the neighboring properties for 50 years or more. Please see the section on how to plot out a deed description found at the end of this guide. Once you have determined
that the deed matches or is clearly a part of the property in the last recorded deed, you are back on track and can continue with the chain of title.

**Hint** - Is the seller married? If so check the Grantee index for his wife’s name. It was fairly common in the mid to late 19th century for married women to purchase property in their own name. However when the property was sold, her husband will appear first in the deed leaving the impression that he initially purchased the property.

### Unrecorded Deeds

While the law required all deeds to be recorded, in practice many early deeds were not. The farther back in time you go the higher the probability is that you will encounter this problem. Travel expense, distance from the county seat, recording fees all were reasons that people didn’t take the time to record their deeds.

If you can’t find any deed that appears to match, you have a few other avenues to try depending on the time period in which your chain of title stops.

**Resources you should consult for:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1682-1790</th>
<th>1790-1870</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Mortgage Records</td>
<td>● Mortgage Records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Deed Abstracts</td>
<td>● Wills &amp; Administrations &amp; Orphans’ Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Wills &amp; Administrations &amp; Orphans’ Court</td>
<td>● Tax Records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Deed and Related Land Records Collection</td>
<td>● Deed and Related Land Records Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Reid-Gordon Title Search Collection</td>
<td>● Reid-Gordon Title Search Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Reconstructed Early Township Property Maps</td>
<td>● Reconstructed Early Township Property Maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Churchman Papers</td>
<td>● National Register of Historic Places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● National Register of Historic Places</td>
<td>● National Register of Historic Places</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mortgage Records (CCA, ROD)**

While many early deeds were not recorded, most mortgages were. The lender had a vested interest in recording a copy of the mortgage, especially if the borrower had the potential to default. Much like a deed, a mortgage will provide a legal description of the property and in most cases a recital. If the deed doesn’t appear to be recorded, start by looking for a mortgage. Mortgages are indexed by Mortgagee...
(lender) and Mortgagor (borrower). For purposes of property research you can ignore the Mortgagee index.

**Deed Abstracts (CCA, CCHS)**

A set of fully indexed deed abstracts is available from 1682-1765. Since many deeds are not recorded during this time period you may chance upon a reference to your missing transaction in the recital of another deed. This generally occurs when a deed is “clearing title” for multiple unrecorded transactions.

**Wills, Administrations & Orphans’ Court (CCA, ROW)**

When a property descended through inheritance it is rare, especially in the 18th & 19th centuries, that a deed was recorded. If a will left the estate to an heir, the will itself is considered the legal instrument of transfer. The subsequent deed will refer back to the will, providing you with a will book and page reference. In rare cases the will itself may refer to the individual from whom the property was purchased. Most likely you will have to search the Grantee index for the name of the decedent. If you have no luck here try tracing the decedent back in the tax records.

A real stumbling block will occur if the decedent also acquired the property through inheritance. You should suspect this possibility if you are unable to locate a reference to the decedent’s purchase of the property in the Grantee index. You can either use the tax method or check abstracts of wills which are available from 1714-1844. If you have no luck there, you should try tracing the decedent back in the taxes. Once you discover how the decedent acquired the property, it is time to revisit the deed book indexes.

It is also possible that the decedent died without a will (referred to as dying intestate). In this case you should check the Orphans’ Court Decedents Estate files. These files can provide a wealth of information on the family and detailed proceedings regarding the decedent’s real estate. If the property was divided, a survey or plan of the property may be included in the file. However, it is unlikely to provide a recital or even a clue as to how the decedent acquired the property. At this point you should try tracing the decedent in the taxes.

Many families chose not to go through the estate process so there may not be any records regarding the settlement of the decedent’s estate. In such cases a release may be recorded in Miscellaneous Deeds. A release basically gave the property outright to one or more heirs.

If the property descended through multiple generations that did not leave wills, or go through the estate process, or even record a release you may have reached an insurmountable obstacle. At this point you should follow the procedures under tax records and follow the steps described there.

**Genealogy can help you map out the family relationships of the decedent. Knowing who was in line to inherit may assist you in tracing the property back even farther. This is especially useful when you have a piece of property pass unrecorded through multiple generations of one family.**

**Tax Records (CCA)**
Tax records may help you break your current road block. If the unrecorded deed occurred in the late 18th century through the early 20th century you can trace the taxes of the seller mentioned in the recital of the last recorded deed. As an example say Gilpin Parry sold his property to Samuel Buffington in 1834 according to the recital in your last recorded deed. All you know is that Gilpin Parry owned the property prior to 1834. You should start looking in the taxes in 1835 which is the first full year that Samuel Buffington will be taxed for the property. When looking at Samuel Buffington’s entry note his acreage, it should be close to the amount cited in the deed. Now you are going to start working back. In 1834 you should look for Gilpin Parry. His name should appear crossed out and Samuel Buffington’s name placed over it. In some cases, in the year of a land transfer, the name of the new owner will be placed at the very end of the landholders for that tax year.

At this point you will work back year by year until Gilpin Parry’s name no longer appears or his acreage substantially changes. When Parry’s name no longer appears, scan all the land holders in that township or borough until you find his name written over the previous owner, just as you saw Samuel Buffington’s name written over Gilpin Parry’s in 1834. It is now time to search the Grantee index for the new name you found in the taxes.

**Property Atlases (CCA, CCHS)**

If your break in title occurs in the late 19th or early 20th century, various property atlases exist that can help you identify who owned a certain tract of land in a specific year. Most of these atlases only cover portions of the county so this method may not work for some townships. As an example, if the break in your chain of title occurs in 1885 you should consult the 1883 Breou’s property atlas and locate your property on the township map. If the name is someone other than the seller in the last recorded deed you should now look in the Grantee index for the name you discovered on the atlas.

**Reid-Gordon Title Search Collection (CCHS)**
These are the working files from a leading Chester County title abstract company created in the early to mid 20th century. It is possible that the company has already completed your chain of title. If there isn’t a title available for your property, it still would be worthwhile to check to see if a title was completed for a bounding neighbor’s property.

**Churchman Surveys (CCA, CCHS)**

The Churchman’s Papers are an early surveyor’s notebook and working papers. They contain notations on land patents and notes on various deeds and personal relationships. If your property is located in southern or western Chester County, this collection of early surveys and warrants may be useful in identifying the name of an early owner of your property.

**National Register of Historical Places (CCPC)**

If your home is already on the National Register or is part of an historical district in your township or borough, you should contact the Heritage Preservation Coordinator at the Chester County Planning Commission. The Department maintains files on accepted nominations and the research done to place them on the Register may be available.

**Deed and Related Land Records Collection (CCHS)**

Original deeds (the copy that the purchaser kept) have been donated to the Chester County Historical Society over the years. This collection also contains unrecorded deeds and is worth a check if you have a break in your chain of title.

**Reconstructed Early Township Property Maps (CCA, CCHS)**

During the late 19th through the 20th century local historians have used original patents, surveys, deeds and other resources to reconstruct the tract location of the original owners of property in a township at a specific point in time. Check with the staff at the Chester County Archives and the Chester County Historical Society to see which townships are available.

**When all else fails**

Unfortunately there are tracts of land that will not have a clear chain of title. Some will be lost completely after a certain point. When all of your options fail, try tracing the chain of title for a neighboring property. Be sure to plot out your tract so you know which boundary to compare. The presumption here is that at some point the name of the owner of your tract will appear as a bounding neighbor in the time period you lost your chain of title. While not a full proof method, this option is your final hope to get your chain of title back on track.
Step Three – Determining the Age of Your Home

So now you have the names of all the previous owners to your property and have gotten back to either the last mention of a messuage in the deeds or to the time period you believe the house was built. While there are many types of records that can help you determine the age of your home, tax records are the first resource you should consult.

Hopefully you made your way back to a deed that no longer indicates a messuage was on the property. In this case you should have a span of years from the deed without a messuage to a deed with one. Start your search in tax records beginning in the year the deed without a messuage was recorded. Taxes are arranged by township or borough. Locate the township tax list and the name of the owner. When the individual is located you should note the amount of the tax, the value and amount of his real estate (acreage) and the value of his buildings and work your way forward.

Depending on the time period, tax records will contain varying amounts of information. You will be looking for major fluctuations in the assessed value of your property. In certain taxes the buildings are separated from the acreage which is extremely helpful. (In the 19th century buildings appear separately on the tax form from 1801-1843.) At other times everything is lumped together making it harder to distinguish the type of improvement made on the property (clearing trees for farmland vs. constructing a new barn). In rare cases but not unheard of, you will find description of individual buildings on the property, such as a stone barn, frame dwelling, etc. (These are generally found in the late 18th and early 19th century tax lists). The 1798 Federal Direct Tax will even provide you with building dimensions. For an example of this process see the Kennett Township House History Case Study.

Have you ever been on a house tour where the guide explained that builders didn’t put in many windows since glass was taxed? This erroneous explanation stems from the 1798 Federal Direct Tax also known as the Glass Tax. The tax was only levied one year but it is a boon to house researchers. Unfortunately the tax lists do not survive for all townships.

Tip - Follow the tax rate, acreage and improvements of a neighbor’s property. An economic downturn or a reassessment can be easily caught by comparing the assessed value of the neighbor’s property.

1715-1764 Taxes

During this time period tax records only contain rates (list of names with amount of tax owed, not the assessed value of the property). Since you do not receive a description of what is being taxed it will be impossible to make any assumptions. If you do know the exact date of constructions (such as from a date stone) the tax records from this time period may help support this information.
Common Problems You May Encounter Using Tax Records

I can’t find the owner’s (the Grantee’s) name listed at all

This could occur for a number of reasons. The most likely explanation is that your owner was not occupying the property. Pennsylvania law required the occupier to pay the tax. So if the owner leased his property, the name of the lessee will appear in the tax lists. In the 19th century finding the lessee is possible, depending on the township. Most tax lists provide a space (generally on the left margin) for the name of the owner. Scan the entire township for the name of your Grantee listed as the owner in the margin. Since there may be several lessees of the property over time you may have to scan the township for multiple years.

The owner appears to be taxed for multiple buildings and lots, which one is mine?

If this is the case, try starting with the next purchaser and work your way back. Hopefully the next owner only owned your tract of land. Note the assessed value of his buildings and property and work your way back instead of forward. This information should help you identify which tract is yours.

The acreage isn’t the same, why?

Acreage will fluctuate for a number of reasons. If the property is off only by a few acres you shouldn’t be concerned as tax records are not an exact science. However if you discover that the acreage significantly increases or decreases several things may be going on. If the acreage decreases, portions of the property were either sold or leased to neighboring farmers. The other possibility is that the tax assessor is providing the owner with a discount (for a bad harvest, support of aged or infirm relatives, flooding, etc) by reducing the number of acres he will be taxed. If the acreage increases, the landholder may have purchased new land or leased land from a neighbor. This will complicate your ability to make any assumptions regarding the structures on the property. If buildings are separated in the assessment for this time period you should ignore the real estate. If they are not, taxes will not provide you with the evidence you need and you should consult other resources.
Additional Resources for Documenting Your Home

The chain of title and tax records should help you construct the outline for the history of your home; they are only one step in the process. Armed with the names and dates of the owners of your property you can now delve into other resources in your attempt to add more character and detail to the story of your home. While there may be only a small chance of locating records in some of these sources, a good detective will check all possibilities.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Maps (CCHS, CCA)

If you live in a borough, fire insurance maps offer a wealth of information. They indicate building footprints (outlines), their heights and materials, any changes made to lot or buildings from the previous map, and lot size. By comparing maps for different years, you can narrow down the time period when improvements were made to your lot.

Mechanics Liens (CCA)

If a mechanic or tradesman placed a lien on your house/property they were required to submit evidence of the expenses incurred building the structure. The “evidence” is generally a list of materials used in construction. You may even find the actual date the building was constructed.

Wills & Administrations (CCA, ROW)

Wills
There are rare instances in which a will mentions the construction of a new home. You may also find clues to the uses and layout of the rooms of the house, especially when provisions are made for the widow in the 18th and early 19th century.

Inventories
Ever wonder how your home was furnished in years past? Inventories will list the personal goods and chattel of the deceased. In rare instances they may even provide you with a detailed room by room inventory.

Accounts
If the property owner died in the middle of a construction project, his account may reflect debts owed to the builders, tradesmen and suppliers of the project.
Assigned Estates (CCA)

Overextended individuals on the verge of bankruptcy may voluntarily assign their estate over to legal representatives for the repayment of their creditors. As part of the process detailed inventories were created for all their goods and chattels that are liable for sale.

Newspaper Clippings – Land Sales (CCHS)

The Chester County Historical Society has a valuable resource for property sales. If your property was subject to a public sale (Sheriff’s Sales, Orphans’ Court Sales, etc) you may find the published advertisement in this collection. The advertisements generally provide you with a full description of all standing structures on the property.

Sheriff’s Real Estate Sales Dockets (CCA)

If your property was part of a sheriff’s sale in the late 19th or early 20th century, the Real Estate Sales Docket will provide you with the published advertisement for the property.

Lunatics & Habitual Drunkards Records (CCA)

If a family member had one of your property owners declared incompetent due to “lunacy” or habitual drunkenness, a committee was established to oversee his/her estate. The accounts contained in these files may list expenses that occurred for maintenance and or new construction on the property.

Original Road Papers (CCA)

When residents of a particular area desired a new road to be laid out, they petitioned the Court of Quarter Sessions. If the court accepted the petition, a group of surveyors would lay out the course of the road. The surveyor’s draft, many of which survive for the 19th century, may indicate the boundaries of all the property owners as well as the locations of any structures near the proposed road. Unfortunately accessing this information can be tricky since the only index that is available requires you to know the beginning point and end point of the original road, such as “A road from John Smith’s mill to the intersection of the Wilmington Road.”
Photograph Collections (CCHS)

The Chester County Historical Society houses over 80,000 historical photographs that document all aspects of Chester County history. Several collections contain photographs of street scenes and houses.

Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) (CCHS)

A national survey that includes Chester County homes considered to be of historical or cultural significance.

Chester County Historic Site Survey (CCHS)

A survey of Chester County historical and cultural sites. This collection contains photographs of sites documented in the survey.

The researcher should be aware that the terms "historic," "historic resource," or "historic structure" may have specific legal meanings and implications. While the information in the Historic Sites Survey is valuable, it should not be used for verification of historic designation or legal status. Please contact the Heritage Preservation Coordinator in the Chester County Planning Commission for the current status of a property.

Tavern License Papers (CCA)

Was your house once a local inn, tavern or eating place? Early tavern petitions generally do not provide detailed information regarding the actual building beyond stating that it is a "large and commodious house." However, in the late 19th and early 20th century a description of the building is almost always provided.

Plan Books (ROD)

Plan Books contain official plan copies of land subdivisions or developments. These can include everything from the typical residential subdivision to a commercial enterprise such as a shopping center to railroad or pipeline right of ways.

Real Estate Multiple Listing Cards (CCHS)

This collection of cards provide the same information you would find in current real estate listings, from the number of rooms in the dwelling house to the square footage of living space. The cards, available at the Chester County Historical Society, were collected from the 1950s to 1987.
Ephemera Collection (CCHS)

This CCHS collection contains miscellaneous ephemera relating to Chester County townships and boroughs. Such items as auction broadsides (many illustrated), house tours, historical brochures, general advertisements, pamphlets and event programs may be found.

Step Four – Researching the Former Owners

Many of the resources listed above will help you reconstruct the lives of the previous owners of your property. However there are other resources not fully described elsewhere in this guide that will fill in even more detail.

Census Records (CCA, CCHS)

Perhaps the best place to start is by using census records. The Federal Census is taken every 10 years and beginning in 1850 lists all persons living in the household. Information will vary from time period to time period but you will receive a snapshot of the household makeup. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania also conducted a census every seven years beginning in 1793 and ending in 1870. Unlike the pre-1850 Federal Census, the Pennsylvania Septennial Census recorded the occupations of all taxable inhabitants.

Newspaper Clippings – Family Files (CCHS)

Ever wonder if a wedding was held in your house? Are you curious to know if anyone passed away there? The Chester County Historical Society’s newspaper collection houses a wealth of information on individuals including obituaries, wedding announcements, army enlistments, etc. all arranged by family name.

Published Sources (CCHS)

Published and unpublished family genealogies, biographies, county and township histories may also provide a wealth of detail regarding the inhabitants of your home and the community in which they lived. The Chester County Historical Society’s actively collects and makes available published and unpublished sources relating to Chester County history.
Diaries, Accounts and Letters (CCHS)

If you are lucky you may even discover that the inhabitants of your house left behind diaries and letters written during their residence in your home. A large collection of personal papers and manuscripts can be found at the Chester County Historical Society.
Frequently asked questions

Why aren’t there building permits?

The guide’s focus is to provide guidance and resources for researching homes built in the 18th century through the early 20th century. Since building permits were not required by most townships or boroughs prior to the mid-20th century, the inclusion of building permits would not be useful. Building permits are maintained by your township or borough government. You should contact your borough or township office directly for more information.

Why can’t I work back directly from an early property atlas?

Unless you are comfortable with reading and plotting out legal descriptions, this is not the best path for a novice researcher to take. When you are unfamiliar with historical property research it will be easy for you to make a mistake that will cost you hours of research time. People often owned more than one tract of land in the same township, and it may be difficult to determine which deed is the one for your property. Starting with your current deed and working back will give you the information necessary to retrace your steps if you go off course.

Why can’t I use my address to look up every record that exists concerning my property?

Unfortunately, the answer is “it’s not possible.” Each record was created for a separate purpose, by a separate office/agency/creator. The records are scattered in various locations and were created decades, if not centuries ago, well before the computer age, and addresses were not typically included in records.

Can my tax parcel number help me access earlier deed records?

Tax parcel numbers are an invention of the mid-20th century and are not referenced in earlier land records.

How can I find out if my house is on an original Penn Land Grant?

If you live in Chester County your house is on an original “Penn Land Grant.” William Penn was granted all that is now Pennsylvania from the King of England. If you are interested in finding out if William Penn specifically granted the land you are now living on (as opposed to his sons, the later colonial proprietors or the Commonwealth), you need to research the chain of title for your property as described in this guide.
Glossary & Abbreviations

**Acre** – A quantity of land containing 160 square perches of land.

**Admr** – Administrator or administratrix of an estate. Generally indicates that the decedent died intestate.

**Appurtenances** – That which belongs to something else; as a right of way pertains to a tract of land, or a barn to a house.

**Assgn** – Assignee; one to whom, under an insolvent or bankrupt law, the whole estate of a debtor is transferred to be administered for the benefit of creditors.

**Chain** – A measure used by surveyors, being twenty-two yards in length, (4 Perches)

**Chain of Title** – A term applied metaphorically to the series of conveyances affecting a particular parcel of land, arranged consecutively, from the original source of title down to the present owner.

**Chattels** – Things which in law are deemed personal property.

**Conveyance** – A transfer of legal title by deed, lien, mortgage, or assignment.

**d’d – dec’d** – Deceased

**Deed** – An instrument conveying real property.

**Deed Poll** – A deed signed and sealed by one person. (A Sheriff’s deed)

**Demesne** – Domain, held in one’s own right; not allotted to tenants.

**Dower** – The real estate to which a widow had claim during her lifetime. This was equal to one-third of the value of the lands owned by her husband (at any time during the marriage) to which she had not released her right. After 1733 the dower right pertained only to land held by her husband at the time of his death.

**Easement** – A right in the owner of one parcel of land, by reason of such ownership, to use the land of another for a special purpose.

**Enfeoff** – To invest with an estate.

**Estate of** - The interest which any one has in lands, or any other subject property. In most cases when the word estate is used in regard to real property (in taxes, property atlases, etc) the term generally signifies that the owner is deceased but the property is still held in his/her name.

**Et. al.** – “and others”

**Et. Ux.** – “and wife”
**Exrs** – Executor or Executrix of an estate. Generally indicates that the decedent died with a will.

**Fee simple** – An absolute inheritance, without condition or restriction.

**Freeman** - In tax records, a single man over the age of 21 who does not own property.

**Grantee** – Purchaser/Buyer

**Grantor** – Seller

**Hereditaments** – Anything capable of being inherited – real or personal.

**Inquisition** – An investigation made by a sheriff and the jury impaneled by him.

**Indenture** – A deed signed by two or more parties then torn in a jagged or indented line (hence the word “indenture”), so that the two parts could be matched.

**Inmate** - In tax records, a married or widowed individual (generally male), over the age of 21 who does not own property.

**Intestate** – To die without a leaving a will.

**Lease and release** – A feudal form of conveyance.

**Lien** – A hold or claim which one person has upon the property of another as a security from debt or charge.

**Link** - A unit of length used in land surveys, named for the links of the chain formerly used by surveyors. There are 100 links in one 1 chain. (7.92 Inches)

**Messuage** – Dwelling house.

**Mortgagee** – Lender.

**Mortgagor** – Borrower.

**Patent** – The first deed for a property, given from the Proprietor/Commonwealth to the first owner.

**Perch** – A measure of land containing five yards and a half, or sixteen feet and a half in length; otherwise called a “rod” or “pole.” (16.5 Feet)

**Public Vendue** – Public sale or auction.

**Quit claim deed** – A deed clearing the title of old encumbrances.

**Relict** – Widow or widower.

**Rod** – A measure of land containing five yards and a half, or sixteen feet and a half in length; otherwise called a ”perch” or ”pole.” (16.5 Feet)
**Rood** – The fourth part of an acre in square measure. (40 Square Perches)

**Seisin** – The right to immediate possession.

**Survey** – A sketch of a tract of land.

**Tenement** – In its original sense, everything that can be held, provided it is of a permanent nature, applicable not only to lands and other solid objects but to offices, franchises, peerage, etc.

**Trus** – Trustee; one whom an estate, interest, or power is vested, under an express agreement to administer it for the benefit or to the use of another.

**Ux. al.** – “wife and others”

**Warrant** – An order to survey a tract of land.

**Yeoman** – A commoner; the rank below a gentleman. Generally indicative of a farmer by occupation.
Plotting a Deed

To begin plotting a deed you will need a protractor or a surveyor's compass, a ruler and a pad of graph paper. There are also various software programs that can automatically plot a deed by entering in the metes and bounds. A free basic website program is also available at:

http://www.tractplotter.com/

The section of the deed that contains the pertinent information is found in the section which starts with the word "Beginning."

Once you have indentified all the necessary information you should make a list similar to the one below.

Stone
N4 ¾°W 115.5 Perches (William Moore & Gersham Chamberlain)
Post
N86°E 58.8 Perches (Joseph Moore)
Post
S4 ¾°E 156 Perches (Enoch Stewart)
Post
N59 ¾°W 72 Perches (James B. Stewart)

Remember that a whole degree is 60 minutes, therefore a fraction such as 3/4 will be .45 and not .75. This is important if you are using computer software to generate your plot.
Now you need to select a scale. For this example we will convert the perches to inches, where 1 inch = 20 perches. To obtain the length for each reference we will divide the perches by 20.

On the graph paper mark your beginning point, in this case a “stone.” Make sure to place the mark so that you have room to draw the entire tract. Next, place the center of your protractor on a line running North/South through your beginning point (stone). Since our first direction is West the protractor should be placed so the curved side is facing the left side of your graph paper. Now follow the protractor from the top (North) and make a mark at 4 ¾°. Next, take your ruler and place it so both marks (stone and degree) line up. Starting at the stone draw a line that runs 5.8 inches (115.5/20, rounded up) through the degree mark. Make another heavy mark at the end of this line which will represent the next beginning point, the first "post."

Now repeat the first steps, though this time your direction is East so the curved side of the protractor should be facing the right side of your graph paper. Continue until you have plotted all 4 references. Your plot should look similar to the one shown below.