A Resident’s Guide to Researching Historic Property

Toolkit for Curious Citizens of the Sunshine City, St. Petersburg
How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to help you better understand the origins and history of your home or place of business. Whether it is located within one of our districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places or St. Petersburg Register of Historic Places, is an individual landmark, or is simply a space that you love, uncovering the details of a building’s evolution between then and now can be a rewarding exercise and might even reveal some remarkable connections to the city’s social and developmental past.

The following three sections will help you appreciate your building’s history and context by Determining Construction Date, Learning about Previous Owners, and Discovering the History of Your Neighborhood. Beginning on page 6, sources available from the City of St. Petersburg, Pinellas County, and other organizations will be explained. The Log on the back cover of this booklet will help you keep track of the information you collect. Every building tells a piece of the Sunshine City’s rich and complex story, and we thank you for contributing to a greater understanding of our built environment.

Determining Construction Date ................................................................. 1
Learning about Previous Occupants ....................................................... 3
City of St. Petersburg Resources .............................................................. 5
Pinellas County Records .......................................................................... 7
Local & State Archives ........................................................................... 8
Other Useful Sources ................................................................................ 8

This document was prepared by the City of St. Petersburg’s Urban Design and Historic Preservation Division. If you have any comments or questions, please contact us at: 727.892.5451, or hispres@stpete.org.
Determining Construction Date

Identifying the year that your home was built is often the first step in understanding its past. There are several ways to pinpoint and verify this date. Records can sometimes be ambiguous or provide conflicting information, so cross-referencing multiple sources will result in the most accurate information. For the purposes of this booklet, the c. 1905 Blocker House, located at 145 Fourth Avenue Northeast, is used as an example.

**Neighborhood characteristics** such as street patterns, the relationship of buildings to one another, and the mixture of building styles and types can both help tie your building to a historical period and highlight certain historical contexts that surrounded its construction. Some St. Petersburg neighborhoods such as Roser Park, for example, were carefully planned and marketed to potential Northern transplants, whereas sections of downtown developed more organically and featured a mixture of commercial, single family houses, and small apartment buildings exhibiting varying styles. Buildings in planned neighborhoods were generally constructed within a shorter time span.

Landscape elements such as street-facing driveways were confined to wealthy homes during the 1920s. As the twentieth century progressed and more Americans came to own cars, developers catered less to the pedestrian and more to the automobile. Midcentury neighborhoods tend to have larger building setbacks, wider parcels, and driveways that can be accessed from the street, instead of the more traditional alley garages that characterize earlier developments.

1895 Plat Map showing the vicinity of the Blocker House, 145 Fourth Avenue Northeast as a neatly-gridded section of the early downtown neighborhood with small blocks and narrow parcels. Note that the Avenue numbering has since changed. In this case, Williams Park, at lower left, serves as a good reference point to confirm the block’s location.
Plat Maps depict the division of land into parcels for development. They can reveal original street names and layouts, as well as the dates and names of developers involved with neighborhoods’ establishment. The City maintains records of street names that have changed over the years, and Staff can help you with questions about the original address of your property.

The Sanborn Map Company created incredibly precise and detailed scaled maps of over 12,000 communities in the United States between 1867 and the late twentieth century. Created for the purpose of underwriting fire insurance, the maps depict building footprints and landscape features, construction materials, and use. Though published only sporadically and covering only relatively densely-populated neighborhoods, when several are available they can often give insight into changes made to buildings and neighborhoods over time.

The City of St. Petersburg’s Property Cards for each property within the city were updated from 1922 through 1987. These cards recorded permits for construction, often identifying the architect, as well as for additions, alterations, electrical and plumbing work, and demolitions. Information on how to access them can be found in the City Resources section.

Details such as the Architectural Style and Materials of your building can help you narrow down the construction date to a range of years, which can aid in ruling out potentially erroneous dates in City or County records. Resources helpful in connecting features of your home to a period of history can be found in the Other Useful Sources section.

Development trends in St. Petersburg have always been big news, and Newspaper Archives can sometimes provide information on the issuance of permits, plans for new neighborhoods, and perhaps even the architect of your home. 1920s and 1930s editions often reference
visitors and winter residents, which can be helpful in narrowing a construction date range.

Historical photographs are another way to determine that a building had been constructed by a certain date or earlier, and can also give you clues about dates of alterations or additions. Some good sources for such photos are listed in the Local & State Photo Archives section.

The Pinellas County Property Appraiser’s Office Website hosts a fully searchable database that includes each parcel’s legal description, the original plat book and page describing the land’s subdivision, recent sales, and construction date. This date can be somewhat unreliable for buildings dating to 1925 or earlier, so be sure to cross reference!

Learning about Previous Occupants

Getting to know the stories of the individuals who have dwelt in, worked in, and shaped the city’s buildings creates connections between the past and present that are often delightfully unexpected. Take your research beyond previous occupants’ names and dates to document occupations, travels, and interests; you might find you have something in common!

Talking to neighbors and former residents might yield a surprising amount of information. Names and dates of ownership, anecdotes about previous occupants, and even historic photos have been revealed through something as casual as a friendly conversation.

Polk’s City Directories were published annually beginning in 1912 and can be used to confirm the existence and residents of historic properties. It

The Blocker House at 145 Fourth Ave. NE, Constructed in 1905 and photographed shortly thereafter

Entry for the Blocker House in 1920 Polk’s City Directory. City Directories can identify neighboring families, boarders, and occupants’ professions as well as owners’ names.
should be noted, however, that these directories can sometimes be misleading because of address changes or the demolition or relocation of earlier buildings at an address. These directories can be accessed at the St. Petersburg Main Library (3745 Ninth Ave. N.) or the St. Petersburg Museum of History (335 Second Ave. N.E.).

If a former resident or especially knowledgeable neighbor is willing to help you with your research in a more extensive and formal manner, consider sitting down to record an oral history. By coming prepared with a few targeted questions about your home and its occupants, but also letting the conversation meander, you might be surprised about the depth of information you can collect.

Once you have identified a previous owner and pinpointed the year that he or she died, a Death Certificate can be ordered from the Florida Department of Health for a small fee. The cause of death will be withheld for deaths that have occurred within the last 50 years.

Newspapers can contain references to everything from birthday parties to career achievements. A name search through the Evening Independent and St. Petersburg Times sections of the Google News Archives might reveal new details or help frame other pieces of evidence. Obituaries, which can be found by searching newspaper archives by name or date, may provide biographical information such as the names of family members and business partners, employment history, and places of residence.

Historic deeds are filed by name but can give fantastic insight into the length of time that a family owned a property, cost, and buildings that were located on the property.

St. Petersburg Times
January 2, 1914
City of St. Petersburg Resources

The City of St. Petersburg maintains an interactive **Historic Preservation Map** that allows users to search for the historic landmark status of a property, view district boundaries, and see the locations of all Nationally and Locally designated buildings and districts, our African American Heritage Trails, and historic features such as brick streets, hex block sidewalks, and iconic signage. The map can be accessed through the “Historic Research Library” section of www.stpete.org/history.

As a Certified Local Government, St. Petersburg maintains copies of **Florida Master Site File (FMSF) forms** for properties located within its boundaries. The FMSF is the State of Florida’s official inventory of historical and cultural resources, including archaeological sites as well as historical buildings, structures, cemeteries, bridges, districts, and landscape features. It is an active inventory of resources over 50 years old, without regard to historical significance. FMSF forms have been completed for over 7,500 resources in St. Petersburg.

Historical buildings, structures, and sites with FMSF forms are shown in a layer on St. Petersburg’s Historic Preservation Map. If you would like a copy of an FMSF form, contact us at 727.892.5451 or hispres@stpete.org with the address or FMSF number.

**Historical Property Cards** contain information about zoning approvals and construction permits from the City’s origins to 1988. They often reveal owners, the name of contractors and even architects, and the dates of construction, alteration, and changes of use. To search for a property card by address, visit the **Building and Permitting** page at https://www.stpete.org/construction_services_and_permitting/property_cards.php, and click **View Historical Property Cards (Older than 1988)**. Plans from 1956 and later referenced in the Property Cards may be available from the Construction Services Department for a fee.

Use caution when determining construction dates from historical property cards, especially for buildings built prior to 1920 and when the card is noted to be a copy at the upper left, as with the card pictured here. Despite some inaccuracies, Property Cards are overall a fantastic portrayal of a building’s evolution throughout the years.
Historic Plats of a building’s neighborhoods can also be found in the Building and Permitting section of the City of St. Petersburg’s website. Simply click Browse and expand the Engineering folder inside the View Historical Property Cards section. The Book and Page number that your property’s plat is on will be noted in the Pinellas County Property Appraiser’s Records. Since St. Petersburg’s early development took place when Pinellas County was a portion of Hillsborough County, the first seven books are numbered H1 through H7. When Pinellas County formed in 1912, the new county began its own records with book 1.

Since 1977, the City of St. Petersburg has been surveying older neighborhoods to identify and document historic and architecturally significant properties. These Neighborhood Surveys, as well as the Cultural and Historic Resource Surveys conducted by other organizations, can be found online at www.stpete.org/history.

City Staff of the Urban Planning & Historic Preservation Division is constantly collecting research on the city’s many resources. Contact Historic Preservationists Laura Duvekot (laura.duvekot@stpete.org or 727.892.5451) or Dr. Larry Frey (larry.frey@stpete.org or 727.892.5470) to discuss your research goals!
A searchable database of Property Appraiser's records can be accessed at www.pcpao.org. Select your search criterion (Search by Name, Search by Address, or Search by Map) from the menu at left.

Note that the Year Built noted in the above example is inconsistent with other information obtained through historic photographs, Polk’s City Directories, and Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. Because of the loss of early paper records, this date is sometimes inaccurate, especially in the case of buildings constructed before 1925. Be sure to cross reference this date if it seems suspiciously early or late.

The Effective Age is not a measure of chronological age, and should not be mistaken for the actual age of a structure. It is a value determined by the Property Appraiser and based upon a calculation involving market value and depreciation. A building that has been well maintained will typically have an effective age that is less than its actual, or chronological, age.

Pinellas County Deeds are kept at the County’s Official Records Department, 315 Court Street, Clearwater, FL 33756. Recent deeds (filed 1970 and later) can be accessed at www.mypinellasclerk.org, but those filed prior to 1970 can be viewed on microfilm. Contact orcopy@co.pinellas.fl.us or 727.464.7000 for more information.
Pinellas County Tax Rolls dating from 1912 to 2004 are also available on microfilm from the Official Records Department; those dating from 2005 through the present can be found online.

Local & State Photo Archives

The Burgert Brothers Photograph Collection (digitalcollections.hcplc.org/cdm/) is part of the Hillsborough County Public Library’s Digital Archive and contains hundreds of historic photographs.

The St. Petersburg Museum of History Photograph Collection (https://www.flickr.com/photos/spmoh-archives/with/14513495325/) allows access to a portion of the museum’s extensive archives.

Florida Memory (www.floridamemory.com) serves as the State Archives of Florida. Their collections include a searchable image database of nearly 200,000 photographs and over 300,000 digitized documents from selected historical and genealogical collections.

Other Useful Sources

Primary sources are records that were created at the time under study. They include historic photographs, newspapers, the Property Cards discussed earlier, and any records that were kept as your building was built, occupied, and altered.

Historical editions of The St. Petersburg Times and The Evening Independent have been digitized and can be searched at www.news.google.com/newspapers.

If you know the name of an early occupant of your home and the year that they died, you might want to order a death certificate. Order death certificates at http://www.floridahealth.gov/certificates/certificates/death/index.html.

Sanborn Maps are available from several sources. The St. Petersburg Museum of History maintains a collection, as does the City of St. Petersburg. Sanborn Maps from 1904 through 1923 can also be accessed online through the University of Florida’s Digital Collections, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00074228/00004/allvolumes?search=sanborn.
You can create your own primary source by conducting an oral history with previous occupants. The **Oral History Association** ([www.oralhistory.org](http://www.oralhistory.org)) provides excellent tips for setting up and conducting an interview.

**Secondary sources** are created after an event has taken place, by a person who did not participate. The books that we generally think of as history books are secondary sources, as are, for example, the Staff Reports, FMSF forms, and other historic documentation that we put together on our historic resources. Contact the City’s Historic Preservation Division or the St. Petersburg Library System ([www.splibraries.org](http://www.splibraries.org)) for recommendations of secondary sources that may be useful in your research. Some of those that we find ourselves turning to the most include:

Property Information Log

Address: ________________________________

Historic Address:
Many buildings have had several addresses over the years. Former addresses are sometimes shown on early Sanborn Maps, Property Cards, or St. Petersburg’s Street Change Ordinance of January 9, 1928, which renamed and renumbered many streets to create consistency throughout the city.

House Name: ________________________________
Houses are often named after the first occupants or historically significant owners.

Date of Construction: ________________________________
When a building took several years to construct, its completion date or the date it was first occupied are generally used. When the exact year is not known, the prefix “circa,” or “c.” (from the Latin word for “about”) is often added.

Architect: ________________________________
The architect’s name will not be available for all houses, but St. Petersburg has certainly had its share of noteworthy architects.

Contractor/Builder: ________________________________
This information may be helpful in understanding the materials used to build your home, the reason it was built, or

Legal Description: ________________________________
This will help start your research by providing subdivision information.

Parcel Identification Number (PIN): ________________________________
    Neighborhood/Subdivision: ________________________________