

Researching your house in Knoxville, TN

Many people who buy an older home have interest in the history of that house. The McClung Collection is an obvious place to start researching that history. While we do have sources that can be of help in historic house research, there are very few houses whose history has been documented directly. Doing a house history can be a time-consuming and frustrating project.

First, perhaps, it should be noted what types of information is seldom (if ever) available. Those include house plans, specific dates of construction, architect, builder, or photographs. Of course, there are cases where some of that information may be available, but for most houses it is not.

Also, it should be noted, most of the sources that can be used for research are not available in the surrounding county, only in the city of Knoxville itself. And, remember, the city of Knoxville has grown over time.

So, how can we help?

Since there are few records of the houses themselves, the first step is to determine who lived in the house. This determination can be made with the use of City Directories. Our Knoxville City Directory collection goes back to 1901 on the shelves (in book form) and as far back as 1869 on microfilm. The city directories list who lived in the house, not necessarily who owned it.

Begin looking in the section by address. Remember, though, that addresses can change over time. Those changes are noted in the city directories if the street names change, but renumbering may be a little trickier to determine. Note cross streets and other residents to make sure you're staying on track. You may be able to determine an approximate construction date based on when the address appears in the directory.

In addition to the street listing, there's a section that lists residents alphabetically by surname. Don't forget to check in that section for the residents of the house. This can broaden your knowledge of the people involved by giving you occupations and marital status of the residents.

Once you have gotten all of the information from the city directories, you can begin to broaden your search. Armed with the personal information gleaned from the city directory, you should be able to find more information about the people who lived in your house. A good place to start is obituaries.

In 1991, McClung began keeping an index of obituaries for the Knoxville newspapers. This database includes name, age, and when the obituary ran in the paper. Before 1991, obituaries were clipped and filed by surname. By going through the files and newspapers, you can begin to flesh out the lives of the residents of your house.

The US census is another excellent place to look. The census is taken every 10 years, and different questions are asked each year. The most recent census to be released to the public is the 1940 census.

Compare each census year with your resident list and follow those residents. The census asks questions of a specific date, and people move around, so this can be a little tricky, too.

Were any of the people who lived in your house famous in any way? If they were, there might be a picture of your house (it may only be in the background) on the McClung Digital Collection or in one of the books of Knoxville history.

If a major event of some sort took place at your house, you may also find a picture in the newspaper sometime around that event, but you will need to know the approximate date to find the newspaper coverage.

To get an idea of the footprint and general construction of your house and the lot itself, check the Sanborn Fire maps. You may also be able to narrow down the date of construction using these maps. These maps are available for Knoxville from 1884 - 1924 and cover the central parts of the city.

Now that you have information about the house and its occupants, you can expand outward from the lot to find the history of the neighborhood or section of town. Check the library catalog to see whether a history of your neighborhood is held by the library. Remember, McClung materials do not circulate, but there may be a circulating copy available for check out within the KCPL system.

Next, check the subject files at the McClung Collection. These are clippings from newspapers and periodicals that are organized by subject in a bank of filing cabinets. Staff can help you to find the correct subject headings for your search. These could include neighborhoods, streets, or architecture.

The history of the area surrounding your house can give you an idea of a time frame for your house. In addition, you can check books for architectural styles. If you have a Barber house (or think you do), be sure to check the Barber floor plan books and the Barber files. Also, we have more general architectural style books that may help you with a timeframe.

These are the main tools that are available at the McClung Collection.

After you have done at least a city directory search, you may want to attempt a deed and/or tax list search at the Knox County Archives. Begin with the names from the city directory, but remember that the city directory names residents, not necessarily owners. These searches can be time consuming, but they may be valuable.

Researching your house can be a very time-consuming and frustrating task. However, the history you uncover may make the process well worth the effort.