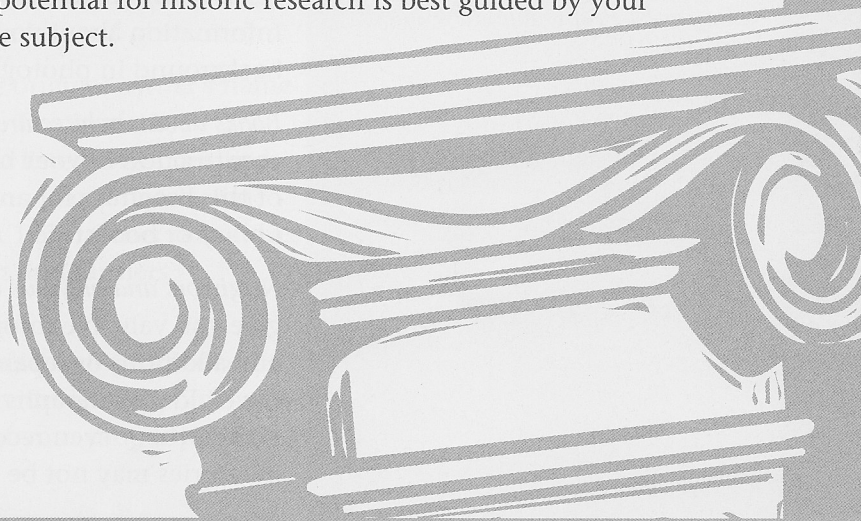


Researching the History of Your Tacoma Property

We live in a physical world of built structures that give form to our city and are tangible links to our shared past. Recently, several significant historic buildings in Tacoma such as the Union Station and the Pantages Theater have been renovated, ensuring that these vital physical links to the past will be preserved for future generations. While it may be easy to recognize the historic value of such important public buildings, what about more ordinary, privately-owned properties? Perhaps you own an older building in Tacoma and want to learn more about its history but are unsure how to go about doing such research. The purpose of this brochure is to introduce the novice "architectural historian" to some of the tools and procedures for learning more about his or her property.

There are many reasons to research the history of buildings, one of which may be to gather information in order to nominate the structure to the local or national historic register. However, even if that is not your goal, uncovering the history of your building, much like researching your family tree, can be a fascinating learning process. Perhaps you are planning to repair or remodel your building and want to know what it was like when it was originally built. Your research may provide information that could guide some of your design decisions. Also, by learning more about the architectural style of your building, you can compare it to other buildings of the same style and see how it contributes to the fabric of the neighborhood. Researching the backgrounds of former owners can give you insight into the customs and lifestyles of your predecessors in the City of Destiny. You might want to produce a written report of your research which can be passed on to your building's next owners, thus preserving the history along with the structure. And finally, if you have children you may want to consider involving them in this project. They will learn more about architecture and local history as well as valuable research skills which will aid them in other school projects.

Not only are there many reasons for conducting historic research, there are many kinds of properties that are worthy of such efforts. It may be your home, a commercial building or place of business, or even a landscape feature such as a garden or park. Every place has a story to tell, and the potential for historic research is best guided by your interest in the subject.





Conducting Research

The following list, while not exhaustive, will explain where to go and what resources are available when conducting your historic research. You can call ahead to most places to find out whether or not information exists on your property, thus saving you the trouble of a fruitless trip. Finding old plans and blueprints are particularly difficult as no City or County agency is required to keep them on file. Have any pertinent information on your property available when you call or when you visit each place, especially the property address, lot and block number from your title, parcel number from your tax records,

previous owners' names and name by which the building may have been known. Note any special rules regarding using or removing material, and use extreme care when handling archival material such as original photographs or manuscripts. Also, be mindful that although staff members are more than willing to provide you with assistance, they will not conduct your research for you.

Your Property

The most obvious place to begin is with the *structure* itself. Sometimes, taking photographs of your site or building can be a helpful way to focus on it more objectively by eliminating other "visual noise." Take notes about the materials of the building, unusual architectural features, or any references made to dates or names. Careful examination of the grounds may reveal signs of previous structures or activities, such as foundations or wells, pathways or roads. Can you identify the building style, or does it seem to be a blending of different periods? Are there old blueprints in storage? Is your building similar to others around it, or does it stand out, either in size, style or age? Your analysis may be able to determine the era in which the structure was built, whether it was part of a subdivision or early "addition" to Tacoma, and whether the building was originally designed for another use.

Another important thing to note is the *proximity of your site* to a significant landmark building, such as a church or civic structure. If so, researching the significant building may yield historic background information about your building. Your building may also show up as background in photographs of the landmark building.

Books about architecture will help you learn more about the style and construction of your building. Check the bibliography on the last page of this brochure for architectural guides, which are available at your local library or bookstore.

Neighbors and previous owners familiar with your structure may be able to give you valuable information about past owners, when it was built, and any additions or repairs that have been made to it, and they also may have old photographs they would be willing to share. Be prepared to take notes or even record oral histories on tape, but bear in mind that memories may not be 100% accurate.

Although it is now a drug store, this attractive brick building on South 38th and Thompson streets was originally part of a state-wide grocery chain run by Totem Food Stores, which marketed one-stop shopping to appeal to the modern housewife. This building, constructed in 1939 as Totem Food's seventh grocery store in the Tacoma area, utilized innovations such as numbered aisles, food placed at convenient heights to eliminate bending and reaching, fluorescent lighting and parking lots. The building's Norman style was also designed to fit into a residential neighborhood. Totem Foods was later bought by Safeway in 1942.

Sources: Tacoma Cultural Resources Survey (1981); Tacoma House and Building Index; Northwest People File; newspaper articles.

The Tacoma Public Library

The Northwest Room in the main branch of the Tacoma Public Library has a wealth of research material. The following list sketches a brief synopsis of the most commonly used resources found there; the library staff is most helpful.

Newspaper accounts of construction news on homes and businesses can be found in the *Tacoma House and Building Index*. Accessed via the computer or bound volumes, the index references Tacoma newspaper articles from 1883 through 1941 by address. It will also list the architect, contractor, building style (if known), and whether building plans are known to exist. The library's photograph collection is also indexed through this source. (However, the library also has photos of unidentified buildings, so check these as well.) Newspapers are kept on microfilm in the Northwest Room; if you wish to read any referenced articles listed for your address and are unsure how to access them, ask one of the librarians for assistance.

Your property may appear in the *Tacoma Cultural Resource Survey*, also shelved in the Northwest Room. Conducted by the City of Tacoma's Historic Preservation Office in 1981, the survey documents hundreds of properties in the city that could be historic. A separate survey of the Hilltop neighborhood was begun in 1993 and is also available in the library. Listing buildings by address, the surveys document information on the architecture and construction of the building, as well as historical information pertaining to the building, street and/or neighborhood. Copies of the Cultural Resource Surveys can also be found in the Historic Preservation Office of the City of Tacoma.

The Northwest Room has a collection of *maps*, including Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, Metsker's 1926 Tacoma Atlas, and Pierce County plat maps. Studying maps can yield information such as when your building first appeared, any changes that occurred over the years, whether the building was part of a subdivision and its proximity to trolley lines. The Sanborn maps, which outline structures block by block for most of the city, exist for 1885, 1888, 1892, 1896, 1912 and 1950. For old structures which went by a different address, it is useful to note the number of the block on which it was built; this will help you locate the building on subsequent maps.

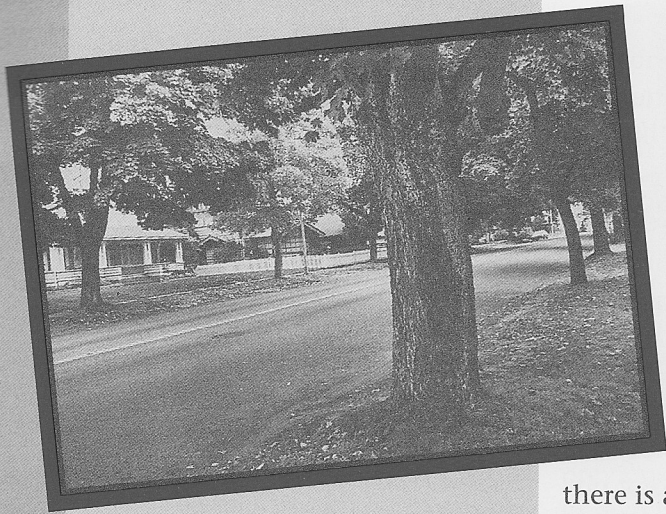
If you are researching a house, try looking up the original owner's name in *Polk's City Directories*, which date back to 1885. The owner's occupation and any servants of the home are also listed. The classified section of the city directories can yield information about hotels and businesses. Cross referencing by address began in 1928. Other directories available at the library include Society Blue Books and farmers directories.

U.S. Census schedules for Washington State are available for each decade from 1860 to 1920 (except for 1890) and can provide demographic information about former owners or occupants of your property. Houses are listed by neighborhood voting precincts.



Settlement of Fern Hill in Tacoma's south end began in the 1860s at the junction of immigrant trails which crossed the Cascade Mountains and Military Road, which connected Olympia and Seattle. South 84th Street became a main route from this community to Puyallup, while a later trolley line on Yakima Avenue connected it to the city of Tacoma. This two-story wood frame building, one of the oldest buildings still standing in the neighborhood, was chartered as The Oddfellows Lodge in Fern Hill on March 30, 1891. The building's false front is typical of vernacular commercial structures, common in small towns and settlements of the 19th century. The Oddfellows continued to meet in this building through the end of 1972; in 1973 it was sold for \$13,000 to a couple who turned the building into their private residence.

Sources: Fern Hill: The Village Where Memories Linger; Tacoma Cultural Resources Survey (1981); newspaper articles; architectural style guides.



North 30th Street west of Proctor is a fine example of middle class housing which was constructed after the turn of the century in the North End of Tacoma. The extension of trolley lines to Point Defiance, which here ran up Proctor Street, prompted the development of this new housing "addition" to the city. Many of the bungalows along this street were constructed by the same builder around 1910, probably from plan books which were popular at the time. The houses are little changed, and the charm of the street is further enhanced by the allee of mature maple trees, some as old as the houses.

Sources: Tacoma House and Building Index; newspaper articles; house plan books; maps showing trolley lines.

Another source of information about people is the *Northwest People File*, which indexes newspaper articles and other references to prominent citizens of Tacoma. Your building's contractor, architect, or former owner may be listed.

Washington State Historical Society

The Washington State Historical Society Museum in Tacoma houses a large collection of *historical manuscripts and photographs* available to the researcher who wants to learn more about individuals or buildings in the city. Call the Research Library in the museum at 253-798-5914 Tuesday through Thursday and let the staff know you are researching a building in the city. They will check to see if

there is any information on file; if there is, you can then make an appointment to visit. Once you arrive, the available information will be pulled by the staff for your review. Photocopies or photographic reprints can be provided at a small cost.

The Museum is also beginning a collection of *preservation-related information* and may have books that can help answer questions about how to preserve and maintain your property. Some of the original source books in the collection include plan books for residential and commercial structures dating from the 1880s through the 1930s, as well as information on period construction details and interior decoration.

City and County Offices

The Tacoma Building and Land Use Services Division can sometimes provide information on *remodeling or inspections* of your property. Early building permits for the city no longer exist, but *construction plans* may be available for commercial structures. You can find out if any information on your property is available by calling the Building and Land Use Services Division (253-591-5030). To visit in person, go to the Permit Counter on the third floor of the Tacoma Municipal Building. If you want to borrow plans from the Permit Counter, you may be required to leave a refundable \$500 deposit.

The Pierce County Auditor's Office at the Pierce County Annex may be able to provide you with relevant *deeds, mortgages and other real estate information* at the self-help counter in room 200. You will need your property's parcel number, listed on your property tax form, in order to access this information. The records available refer more to the property, rather than the building itself although there may be floor or site plans or sketches, or copies of renovation drawings for buildings. There is a nominal charge for photocopies.

The Pierce County Clerk is the source for *wills and probate records* which can provide information about the original or previous owners of your building. Go to the Clerk's office in Room 110 of the County-City Building in downtown Tacoma with the previous owner's name

and approximate date of death. Allow two working days for records prior to 1983 to be pulled from the archives.

The **Historic Preservation Office** of the City of Tacoma's Tacoma Economic Development Department (Room 1036 of the Tacoma Municipal Building), administers the policies and programs pertaining to historic preservation within the city. The Historic Preservation Officer can help answer any questions you have about research. The office also has records on all properties listed on the City of Tacoma's Register of Historic Places and can give guidance on how to go about nominating your property for the local or the national registers of Historic Places. Also available is information about income tax and property tax credits for rehabilitating historic buildings.

University of Washington

There are two libraries on the main campus of the University of Washington, which are excellent resources for more in-depth research. **Special Collections** at Allen Library contains both primary and secondary material on regional history and on well-known architects and citizens. Special Collections material cannot be removed from the library and therefore cannot be loaned to the Tacoma Public Library. You can call ahead (206-543-1929) to see if they have resource material which would be worth your trip to the campus. The **Library at the College of Architecture and Urban Planning** (206-543-4067) has an extensive collection of books and periodicals on architecture, historic preservation, construction, land use, urban planning, and landscape architecture. In addition, this library keeps bound volumes of graduate student theses from the college, which may also provide useful information. Books may be checked out by non-students as an interloan through the Tacoma Public Library. The University of Washington also has a library open to public use at their **Tacoma Branch Campus** at 1902 Commerce Street (253-692-4440). Private citizens cannot check out books, but are welcome to use the University computer catalogs, research materials and Internet connection.

Other Sources

Researching deeds on a particular property, called a title search, can be conducted by you through the **Pierce County Auditor's office**, or you may opt to pay to have a **title company** conduct this research. Of the local title companies, Commonwealth Title has been in business the longest and has the most extensive records, going back to the 1880s. A title company will need the property address, parcel number, and how far back you would like a search to be done.

Antique stores and flea markets are a good source for postcards or old photographs of historic sites around Tacoma. They may be especially helpful if your property is located next to a significant landmark building which was often photographed.



The Charlesbee Apartments, located on South G Street in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood, was the first multiple family dwelling in the city to have "radio service" and loud speakers in every suite at the time it was built in 1929. The speakers, connected to a central receiving set closeted in the main hall of the building, had individual power and volume control dials. There were also antennae and ground plug attachments for those occupants who had their own radio sets. Other features of the apartment included the Ad-a-Room door bed, which closed into a dressing room with built-in dresser and shelves, and kitchens with electric ranges and frigidaire cabinets. A basement parking garage was provided to accommodate the increasing number of private automobiles among city dwellers. The Hilltop has a strong history as a residential and business neighborhood, which attracted immigrants from other regions of the United States as well Europe and Asia.

Sources: Tacoma Cultural Resource Survey (1993); Tacoma House and Building Index; newspaper articles; South on the Sound.

General Guide To Sources

Northwest Room Main Branch Tacoma Public Library

1102 Tacoma Ave. So.
Phone: 253-591-5622
Hours: 9-9 M-Th
9-6 F, Sat

Research Library WA State Historical Society Museum

315 N. Stadium Way
Phone: 253-798-5914
Hours: 12:30-4:30 T, W, Th
*Access to library
by appointment only*

Tacoma Building and Land Use Services Division

City of Tacoma
Tacoma Municipal Building
747 Market Street, 3rd Floor
Phone: 253-591-5030
Hours: 8-5 M-F

*Deposit required to borrow
building plans*

Tacoma Historic Preservation Office— Culture & Tourism Division

City of Tacoma
Tacoma Municipal Building
747 Market Street, Rm. 1036
Phone: 253-591-5220
Hours: 8-5 M-F

Pierce County Auditor

Pierce County Annex
Self-help Counter, Rm. 200
2401 S. 35th
Phone: 253-798-7472
Hours: 8:30-4:30 M-F
Nominal photocopy fee

MATERIAL	POTENTIAL LOCATION	INFORMATION YIELDED
Architectural/ construction drawings/plans	Owners; architectural or engineering firm; Tacoma Building and Land Use Services Division (no residential plans); library archives (if prominent architect)	Build and alteration dates; original appearance and building materials; general construction information
Building Permits	Tacoma Building and Land Use Services Division	Cost and dates of original construction and subsequent alterations; identity of architect and/or builder; original owner/client
Census reports (Washington State census reports available for 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910 and 1920)	Northwest Room	Property ownership and information on residents, including ethnic background, ages, level of education; population and housing make-up of neighborhood
Deeds, mortgages, real estate records	Pierce County Auditor; title company	Names of owners; dates when property changed hands; historic names of property; plats; possible information on property or building dimensions
Directories Polk City Directory The Keystone of Tacoma Society Blue Books Farmers Directories	Northwest Room	Occupation history of building, including changes in building use and ownership
Dissertations or theses	Northwest Room; UW College of Architecture and Urban Planning Library	Academic study of issues of architecture, urban planning, land use, historic preservation
Guidebooks and local history books	Libraries; WA State Historical Society; bookstores	Local or regional history; information on architectural style or construction
Maps Sanborn Fire Ins. Metsker's Tacoma Atlas Pierce County plat maps	Northwest Room; WA State Historical Society	Property boundaries; location and use of property; building additions and changes; proximity of building to public utilities

MATERIAL	POTENTIAL LOCATION	INFORMATION YIELDED
Newspaper articles	Northwest Room; UW Special Collections	Local social events; information on previous owners or building architect; articles about local building efforts, architecture and/or neighborhood history; classified ads may have photos, building cost or selling price
Oral histories, family or personal papers	Past owners, relatives or neighbors	Ownership; appearance of original structure and alterations; photos; architectural plans; history of associated events, people and use
Plan and pattern books	WA State Historical Society; UW Special Collections	Architectural style, design or construction information
Photographs and postcards	Past owners, relatives or neighbors; Northwest Room; WA State Historical Society; UW Special Collections; antique stores or flea markets	Documentation of architectural and landscape features; alterations to structure; association with persons and events of interest
Tacoma Cultural Resource surveys and nominations to Registers of Historic Places	Historic Preservation Office; Northwest Room	Pertinent neighborhood or building history; information on architecture and construction; newspaper references
Tacoma House and Building Index	Northwest Room	Original owner, architect, builder, architectural style and build date (if known); any known published references to property
Wills and probate records	Pierce County Clerk	Information about previous property owners, including household inventories

Pierce County Clerk

County-City Building
Records Dept., Room 110
930 Tacoma Ave. So.
Phone: 253-798-7461
Hours: 8:00-4:30 M-F
Nominal photocopy fee

UW College of Architecture and Urban Planning Library

Seattle Campus—Gould Hall
University of Washington
Phone: 206-543-4067
*Hours: 8-9 M-Th; 8-5 F;
1-5 Sat, Sun
Most books available through interloan with Tacoma Public Library

UW Special Collections Allen Library

Seattle Campus
University of Washington
Phone: 206-543-1929
*Hours: 10-5 M-F; 9-5 Sat
Material for in-library use only; photocopies and prints available

UW Library

Tacoma Campus
University of Washington
1902 Commerce Street
Phone: 253-692-4440
*Hours: 9-10 M-Th; 9-5 F-Sat, 1-5 Sun
Material for in-library use; computer catalogs and access to Internet

**hours vary when school not in session*

Historic Preservation Office

The Historic Preservation Office is a section within the Culture & Tourism Division of the City of Tacoma's Tacoma Economic Development Department. The Historic Preservation Office administers the policies and programs pertaining to historic preservation within the city. For guidance and information concerning historic preservation, and for assistance with state and federal programs on historic preservation, contact the Historic Preservation Office (253-591-5220).

Brochure produced and written by Eileen Pilcher, with thanks to Brian Kamens, Tacoma Public Library.



Reading List

The following books offer good general information on a number of relevant subjects:

Architectural Guides

American Architecture since 1780: A Guide to the Styles, by Marcus Whiffen (Cambridge Mass.; MIT Press, 1969). A succinct yet scholarly historical introduction to American architecture.

What Style Is It? A Guide to American Architecture, by John Poppeliers, S. Allen Chambers and Nancy B. Schwartz (Washington, DC., Preservation Press, 1977). A practical guide to changes in American architecture for the layman.

Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia and Lee McAlester (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). This guide focuses on residential structures.

A Field Guide to American Architecture by Carol Rifkind (New York, New American Library 1980). Lists classifications by function and style and gives information on characteristic construction techniques.

Local History

Both the Northwest Room at the Tacoma Public Library and the Research Library at the Washington State Historical Society Museum have numerous books on the history of Tacoma and Pierce county. Of note are the volumes of *History of Tacoma* by Herbert Hunt, which chronicle the early years of Tacoma and the people who shaped it; and several books by noted historian Murray Morgan, particularly *Puget's Sound: A Narrative of Early Tacoma and Seattle*, and *South on the Sound*, both richly illustrated.

Historic Preservation/Theory

What Time is this Place? by Kevin Lynch (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972). An analysis of the role played by older buildings in the urban context.

America's Forgotten Architecture by Tony P. Wrenn and Elizabeth Mulloy (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976). Emphasis on preservation of lesser structures which nonetheless contribute to the man-made landscape.

Techniques of Survey and Recording

Recording Historic Buildings by Harley J. McKee (Washington D.C.: HABS, 1971). Available at the Library of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Washington, this resource book would be helpful in producing a formal survey of your historic building.

Original Source Material

Many period plan and interior furnishings pattern books are available at the Washington State Historical Society Museum library. Use these books to help determine the original appearance and/or maintain the character of your older building.

