

A Quick Guide To Researching Historic Properties



Researching your home's history can yield information about its age, architectural style, changes over time and information about the people who lived there. Perhaps equally as important, understanding the past can facilitate a deeper connection to your home and your community.

Still, it can be a daunting process to start so the City of Allentown has gathered some resources to help you begin your journey.

We recommend reviewing [National Register Bulletin 39 \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/bulletin/39) before starting the process. It will help to make better use of the resources we have provided below as well as the extensive resources provided by the Pennsylvania Historic & Museum Commissions [Research Guides](#) page.

Let's get started!

Visual Assessment:

[National Park Service Preservation Brief 35 Understanding Old Building; The Process of Architectural Investigation](#) is a valuable tool to help you start a visual assessment of the building and begin to understand its evolution over time.

Deeds

Start by looking up the current book and page number for your deed which will provide the previous deed. You can continue to work your way backwards from there. Lehigh County provides these documents digitally back to 1812. Deeds, along with plats (surveys) and transaction records should generally be accessible through [Lehigh County Recorder of Deeds](#). A title company can also be used to complete deed research.

Census Records

Census records contain information for genealogical research. These records can contain information about names, ages, race, and occupations and indicate how many people were living in the house, whether they owned or rented, and the place of their birth. You can use the [federal website](#) or an online service such as [ancestry.com](#)

Existing Resource Surveys

The City of Allentown is currently working on a survey plan to document historic resources outside of the historic districts alongside the State Historic Preservation Office. There are several existing base level surveys and determinations of eligibility available including areas around Hamilton Street and Walnut Street.

Building and Zoning Permits

These documents can provide information about physical alterations, utility locations and connections as well as previous uses. To obtain building and zoning permits for the property you are researching, submit a detailed and precise [Right-to-Know Request Form](#) or contact [Building Permits & Inspections \(allentownpa.gov\)](#) and/or [Zoning \(allentownpa.gov\)](#).

Property Assessment Records

Property assessment records are available online through Lehigh County. These records can yield information about current and past owners, size of the lot, uses of the building, materials, photographs, assessed valuation and estimated age. You will need the property address, parcel identification (PIN) or document ID/Instrument number.

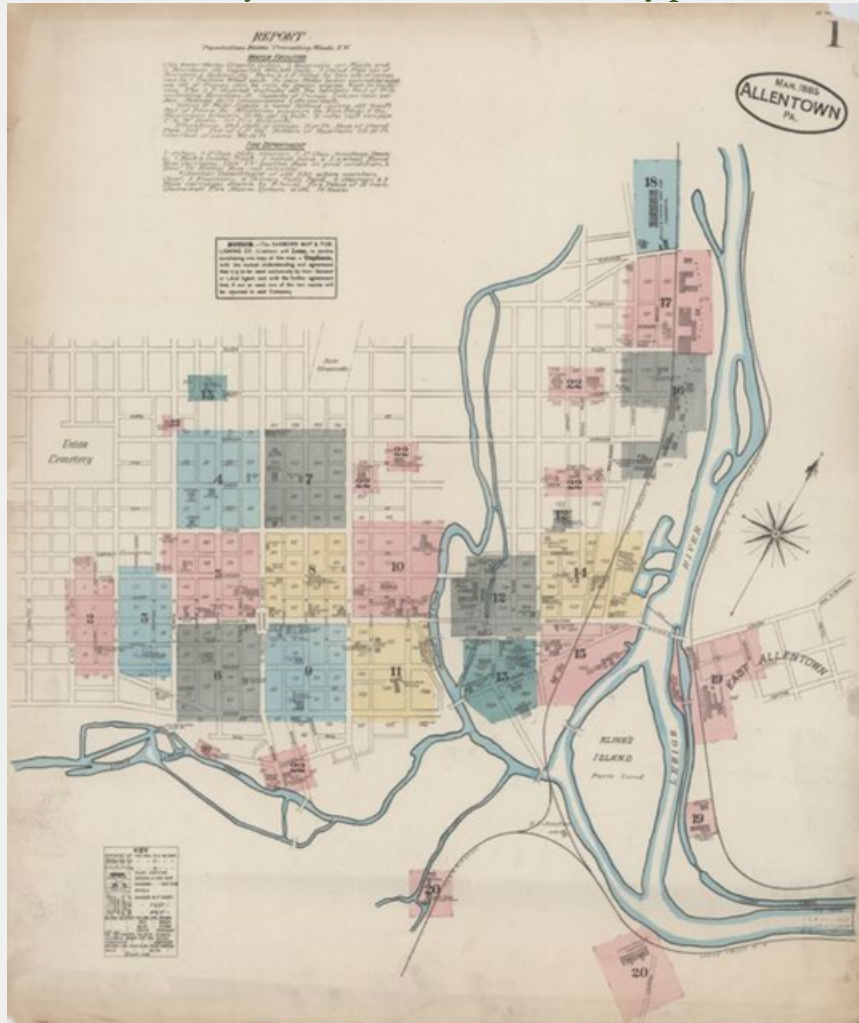
Digital Mapping

The City of Allentown GIS maintains multiple maps including a Historic District Boundary Map, The Hamilton Street Historic Resource Survey Map, and the City of Allentown Historic Locations StoryMap. The city will be continuing to expand on existing maps and integrating more as we gather information about Allentown's historic resources. Currently available maps can be found here: [City of Allentown, PA \(arcgis.com\)](#)

PA-SHARE is an online mapping platform maintained by through the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). There are multiple subscription levels available that will permit access to varying levels of information. This mapping system has documents such as eligibility forms, project reviews and resource surveys. You can learn more by visiting: [Welcome to PA-SHARE! Please login](#)

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

These maps are available from 1885 to 1957 for the City of Allentown and serve as an excellent resource to start your research endeavor. They provide information about the number of stories, type



of construction, associated buildings and building footprints in an easy-to-use format.

Due to the large span of time that they were printed, Sanborn Maps can be used to track the basic evolution of your property and the buildings on it. Don't be discouraged if you don't see your building on the earliest maps. It's possible the building isn't as old as you think, the city had not yet incorporated that area, or the street name changed.

If you're not a map reading connoisseur, it can be helpful to use current aerial images to ground yourself with major landmarks that haven't changed (like rivers), distinct intersections or City boundary lines. Digital versions can be found several places including Penn State University Libraries and the Library of Congress. (links below)

[Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps | Penn State University Libraries \(psu.edu\)](#)

[Home | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#)

Library of Congress

Here you can find some incredible documents including maps, photos, architectural drawings, newspaper articles and more. [Home | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#)

Historic District Property Directory:

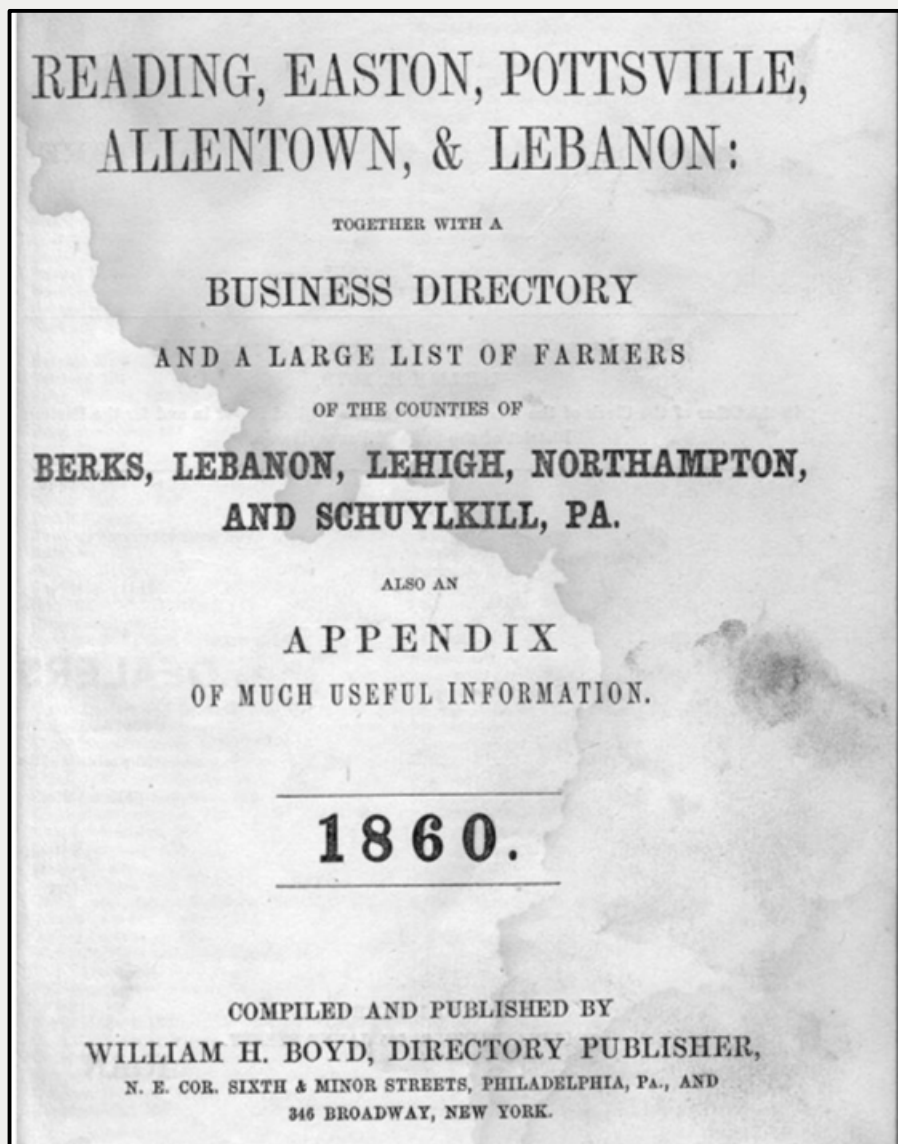
The City of Allentown maintains a property directory for all the properties located within the Old Allentown, Old Fairgrounds and West Park Historic Districts. These directories are continually updated so be sure to check in with the City Planning Office with your address. If you aren't sure if your home is in a historic district you can check using [City Historic District Map \(arcgis.com\)](#)

Allentown Public Library [Online Resources – Allentown Public Library \(allentownpl.org\)](#)

The City of Allentown has an extensive number of online and in-person resources. Try starting with historic newspapers. There may be articles about your building including the construction, architect, events and people. Since you have already taken all that time to scour the City Directories and taken copious notes about previous residents, looking through genealogical records can yield additional information about previous residents and life in Allentown.

City Directories:

This is where you will find detailed information about the people who once occupied your building. Using these can be somewhat challenging especially as you start to get further back in time because street names and house numbers often change. This is where cross consultation with your Sanborn maps will be helpful. To use the directories, we recommend working backwards from the most recent (probably the 1980s). Start by finding the section that cross references the street address, find your street then address and then see who is listed as the resident. Once you find the resident, flip to the main section of the directory where you will be able to cross check the address and find out about that person's occupation and whether they rented or owned the property. Take CAREFUL and CLEAR notes documenting the directory year, resident names, addresses and page numbers. From there, start working your way back through the decades. City Directories can usually be found at your local library but some can also be found online through Penn State: [BoydsDir1860-000 - PA's Past: Digital Bookshelf - Penn State University Libraries' Digital Collections \(psu.edu\)](#)



City of Allentown Historic Preservation Plan

Completed in 2020 the Historic Preservation Plan contains, among other things, information about the history and development of Allentown as well as more detailed information about Allentown's many neighborhoods. Check it out here: [City of Allentown Historic Preservation Plan](#)

Neighbors and Neighborhood Associations

Let's not forget that when we ask people to share memories and stories that they can not only provide clues for our research but can also make us feel more connected to our communities and our homes. Remember to talk to your neighbors and look to see if your area has a neighborhood association.

We wish you the best of luck and are always here to answer questions!

Reading List

Blumenson, John. Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600-1945. (American Association for State and Local History, 1977. Revised editions 1981, 1995.)

McAlester, Virginia & Lee. A Field Guide to American Houses. (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1984.)

Poppeliers, John et al. What Style Is It? A Guide to American Architecture. (National Trust Preservation Press, 1983. Revised: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003.)

Rifkind, Carole. A Field Guide to American Architecture. (Random House, 1987.)

Whiffen, Marcus. American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles. (M.I.T. Press, 1969.)

Guides to House History Research American Association of State & Local History:

Nail Chronology as an Aid to Dating Old Buildings. (Technical Leaflet No. 48, 1968.) House History: Some Assembly Required. (Technical Leaflet No. 257, 2009.)

Howard, Hugh. How Old is This House? A Skeleton Key to Dating and Identifying Three Centuries of American Houses. (Home Renovation Associates, 1989.)

Light, Sally. House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home. (Golden Hill Press, 1989.)