Bethlehem Historic District Association

Guide to Researching Your Property

1) **Review Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps and Other Maps of Bethlehem**
   Originally, Sanborn maps were used to assess the risk of fire in order to determine insurance premiums. Today, we can use Sanborn maps to learn significant information about our properties. Sanborn maps often provide information such as the footprint of buildings, doorway and window locations, exterior materials, porches, outbuildings, etc. Because this step can be done from home, this is a good place to start your research.

   Some online sources of Sanborn maps for Bethlehem:
   http://library.lehigh.edu/content/digital_library/
   https://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/digital.html

   Sanborn maps are also available at the Bethlehem Area Public Library in the Bethlehem Room and in the archives of the Kemerer Museum. The Kemerer Museum also holds many other maps of Bethlehem. Please contact the curator for more information.

2) **Research your property's deeds and tax records.**

   Part 1: Research your property's deeds at the Northampton County Courthouse

   Researching a property through the use of deeds begins with the most current owner's name and moves backward through each transfer of ownership. This establishes a chain of owners that can lead to important information about your property. Deeds are now digitized and accessible through the use of Landex software and the Russell Deed Index on the computers at the Office of the Recorder of Deeds. The computers are free to use and available during office hours.

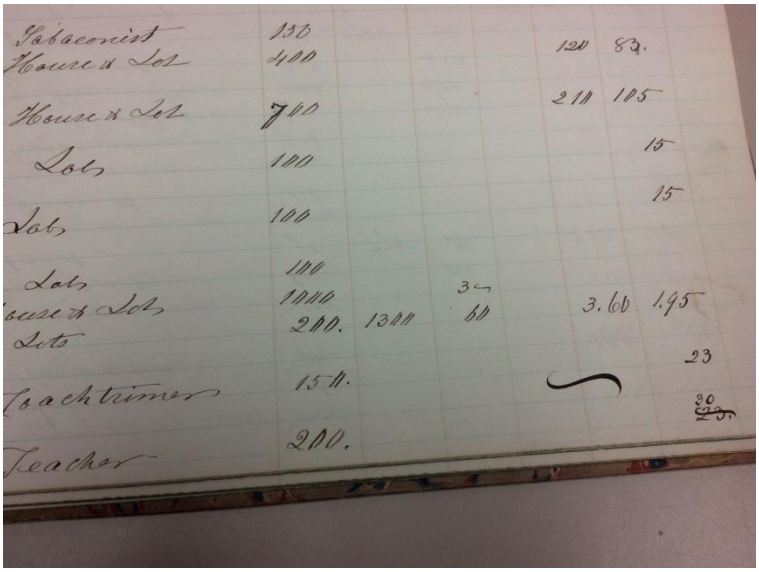
   Northampton County Recorder of Deeds Office:
   669 Washington Street, Easton, PA 18042-7475
   Lower Level, Room 116
   610-829-6210
   8:30am to 4:30pm, Monday – Friday

   Tips:

   - Pay careful attention to the location description (not just the address) of your property provided in every deed. Lots were often divided or combined which may lead to incorrect results.

- When you reach very old deeds, the handwriting may be difficult to decipher. If the deed scan is blurry, it may be helpful to use the original deed books which can be found on shelves behind the computers.
- If you get stuck, ask for assistance at the counter.
- If you would like to print any deeds, there is a $0.25/page fee.

Part 2: Use tax records to pinpoint exact dates of major changes to your property.



Once you have the names of previous owners, you can use tax records to find more information about your property. Northampton County maintains an archive of tax records as far back as the 1700's. These records are very easy to access and may provide significant information.

Because the records books are organized by year, you will need to provide the archivist with the year or range of years that are of interest to you. *Please note: you must conduct deed research first so that you have a list of previous owners' names. The old tax records do not reference addresses – only owners' names.*

Typically, the tax records will note the existence of a house/building or if the property is only an empty lot. Just like today's property tax system, major changes to a property such as the building of a structure, a major addition, a subdivision, etc. will be reflected in the amount of taxes paid and may even be noted in the description. You will want to look for significant changes in the tax bills for your property and note the years in which those changes occurred. Be sure to copy or photograph the record for your property and note the year.

Northampton County Archives
999 Conroy Place
Easton (Forks Twp.), PA 18040
610-829-1220
8:30am to 4:30pm, Monday – Friday
Archives Officer - Renee A. Drago, rdrago@northamptoncounty.org

3) Additional Resources

If you still have questions about your property or would like to learn more, here are some other potential sources of information:

Bethlehem Area Public Library's Bethlehem Room, the Moravian Archives, Northampton County Historical & Genealogical Society, the Canal Museum (Easton), Lehigh University, and online genealogy sites like Ancestry.com.

If you would like to hire someone to conduct research for you, please contact the Plaque Committee at plaques@bhda.org.