

2023

HOME SWEET HISTORIC HOME

KENAN
RESEARCH
CENTER

ATLANTA
HISTORY
CENTER

Research Your Historic Home

Researching your historic home or neighborhood can be an adventure in curiosity or a crusade in preservation.

Curious about your home or neighborhood? From tidbits about previous owners to information on original millwork, research can help you preserve your home or neighborhood and appreciate its unique history. The Kenan Research Center is open by appointment Tuesday through Saturday from 10 am until 5 pm and offers free substantial resources to help you find out more about your abode.

First, Identify.

- Current Address
- Nearest cross street
- Town name
- Parcel ID/District/Landlot

Let's Find Out More...

House research should begin with an examination of the Atlanta city directories, which run from 1859-1997 with some exceptions.* Also known as “criss-cross” directories, these books contain cross references to residents of Atlanta and their homes. Each directory contains not only individual residential and business listings, but beginning in 1884, the directories also include a listing of buildings by street address.

Property addresses were renumbered in 1892 and 1926. The city directories for 1893 and 1927 note those changes by listing the current street number with the former number in parentheses. If your house was built before 1928 we recommend looking at the 1927 directory first for your historic address. If your house was built before 1893, we recommend looking at both 1927 and 1892 as the address may have changed twice.

If your house was built after 1927, it most likely has the same address! Start looking at the approximate date the house was built and work backwards until your house disappears from the directory, then you'll have the year it was built and often the original owner or renter of the house.

- Historic Address
- Approximate Date built
- Original Owner

City directories can also be used for neighborhood research. Simply expand the strategies outlined above to one or more streets in a neighborhood to trace its character and evolution over time.

All of this information will become valuable in searching for building permits, architectural drawings, manuscript collections, maps, and photographs.

*City directories often provide information about the occupant's marital status, occupation, and whether he or she rents or owns the property.

Is There A Permit?

The Kenan Research Center houses a microfilm collection of building permits issued by the City of Atlanta (1897-1983.) These permits document original construction, improvements and repairs to buildings in Atlanta. The permits are filed according to the street address of the structure at the time that the work was done on the structure.* They are filed first in alphabetical order by street name. The permits are then filed numerically by house number.

The microfilm collection of building permits is not comprehensive— not every building is referenced. However, these permits can contain valuable information including date of construction, builder's name, architect's name, estimated cost, and construction materials and should be searched thoroughly.

- Architect's Name
- Date of Build
- Permit Identification number

*This means that your 1910 house with 1950s addition may have permits listed under the historic address as well as the current address!

Map it!

The Kenan Research Center has a variety of historic maps available to view. Perhaps the most valuable of these for house/neighborhood research are the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps.* Fire insurance maps provide block-by-block inventories of America's cities frozen at specific moments in time. These maps document architectural footprints of buildings and outlines of property. The information on a Sanborn Map may include each structure's building materials, number of stories, roofing material, approximate proportion and size to the property and location and size of outbuildings. The Sanborn Maps also may document porches, patios, driveways and alleys.

Other maps of Atlanta are also available at the Kenan Research Center,**

- The Adair Realty Company plat books may provide information regarding neighborhood subdivision and growth. Much of this material documents the development and sale of property.
- Neighborhood plat maps, organized by district and land lot number, may also include subdivision maps and advertisements for auctions of property.
- The United States Coastal and Geodetic Survey maps of Atlanta serve as an excellent survey of roads and show outlines of existing structures. The research center houses a set from 1928.
- City and County street maps organized by decade (1870-1980).
- Fulton County Tax Plat Maps (1940-1980).

* See Terminus, our online catalog, for a full listing of the maps (1911-1965) in our collection. Also, many early maps are searchable via the Digital Library of Georgia at, <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/sanborn/>

** In addition, you can search memory.loc.gov for detailed maps of Atlanta in 1871, 1892, and 1919.

Learn more about your (neighbor) hood

The Kenan Research Center maintains subject files of newspaper clippings, brochures, newsletters, and other ephemeral material. The subject files include neighborhood files, architectural files, personality files, and other topics. All of these are listed in Terminus, our online catalog. These are great resources for folks new to the area who want to learn more about how their area developed.

Best Laid Plans...

The Kenan Research Center maintains a large collection of architectural drawings which can provide specific measurements and information on building materials and locate structural, mechanical, and other features of the home. Files can include renderings of façades, floor plans, cross sections, and many other design elements.* Significant collections in the Kenan Research Center include the works of Hentz, Reid, Adler, and Shutze; Ivey and Crook; Leila Ross Wilburn; and James Means.

Your house wasn't designed by one of these firms? Kit homes, which were popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s could be purchased from mail-order catalogs, like Sears Modern Homes, which operated from 1908-1940.**

If your house was built from a kit, or a mail-order catalog house plan, you might still be able to find the actual plans.

* Most of these drawings have been indexed on our Architectural Database and can be searched on our website using the original owner, architect, or job number.

** The most popular house kits were produced by the Aladdin Company or Sears. The Arts & Crafts Society has many of these online at, <http://www.arts-crafts.com/archive/kithome/>

But what did it look like?

The Kenan Research Center houses hundreds of thousands of images. These photographs can be useful in researching your historic home or neighborhood and can illustrate how the home or neighborhood looked at a particular moment in time.* Keep in mind, though, that most building images have been cataloged according to the structure's historic name or the name of the building's owner. You may also find images cataloged by neighborhood or street name.

* Many of the images in our visual culture collection have been digitized and can be searched through Album, our online database.

Who lived there?

The manuscript collections at the Kenan Research Center include items such as family diaries, letters, and reminiscences which may provide a fascinating addition to home research. In addition, the Hugh L. Luttrell Title Searches, MSS 448.1 and the Mitchell & Mitchell Property Documents, MSS 448, may be of particular value to historic house research since they can contain title information.*

Georgia census records are available in the Reading Room through Ancestry.** Beginning in 1850, the census recorded data on everyone in a household, their age, occupation, and the value of property. The 1880 Census includes street name and number for each household.

* This collection is ordered by land lot and district number and a finding aid is located in the Reading Room.

** Ancestry.com is a great tool for finding out more about the past residents of your house!

What's been written on it?

Use the Kenan Research Center's online catalog Terminus to search for books, periodicals, and newspapers related to Atlanta's history, neighborhoods, and architects. Newspapers and periodicals can also provide valuable information on Atlanta's people and the places they call home. The Kenan Research Center also provides on-site patrons with access to Newspapers.com, an online collection of 3,700 digitized newspapers from the 1700s to the 2000s, including the Atlanta Constitution. Partial indices for the City Builder (1916-1935) and Southern Architect and Building News (scattered issues from 1889 to 1932) are also available on Terminus. The Kenan Research Center has an extensive collection of newspapers on microfilm including a complete run of the Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution. An index of the Atlanta Constitution for 1868-1984 and 1985-present is available at pqasb.pqarchiver.com/ajc_historic/search.html. Hard copy indexes beginning in 1971 are located in the Reading Room.

What about Government Records?

The Kenan Research Center is the repository of many Fulton County and City of Atlanta records. The records include aldermanic minutes, city council minutes, zoning ordinances, county commission minutes, Court of Ordinary records, and tax assessors' records including property record cards. Many of these may be of use in searching for the history of your home or neighborhood.

Fulton County Tax Plat Maps from 1946 to 1986 are available at the research center.*These plats can provide insight into the development of neighborhoods and specific pieces of property. The plats show property dimensions, tax payments, and list owners' names for each property. There is a list of plat books available at the Kenan Research Center in the Fulton county finding aid.

*You will need a land lot and district number to determine which plat book to consult. Parcel identification numbers can be obtained from the Fulton County Tax Assessor's website fultonassessor.org, or ask a staff member for help.

Where else can I look?

To find the name of the original owner of your property, take the most current information and work backwards using Land Deed Records at your local Tax Assessors Deed Record Room. Tax assessor websites are a great source of information and information found on the sites can vary from county to county.*

Fulton County tax records
public9.qpublic.net/ga_address_dw.php?county=ga_fulton

Dekalb County tax records
web.co.dekalb.ga.us/TaxCommissioner/TCSearch.asp

Search the property by address or current owner. The site lists some valuable information: a rough floor plan of the house, the parcel (lot), and the deed records at the bottom of the page. Records related to your property will be listed with a short explanation (e.g. deed of sale, easement, and right-of-way). In addition, the deed book and page numbers for locating the deeds are recorded. Keep tracing the records until you find the original owner.

*Physical copies of property deeds for each county are held at the county courthouse. Remember to take the deed book numbers and page numbers with you.

Fulton County Courthouse
136 Pryor St., Ground Floor, Atlanta, GA 30303
Property Records (404) 613-5286/5287

Dekalb County Courthouse
556 N. McDonough Street, Ground Floor, Decatur, GA 30030
Property Deeds (404) 371-2836

The James G. Kenan Research Center is the research component of the Atlanta History Center's exhibitions, education, and public programs. The 42,000 square foot Research Center is dedicated to James G. Kenan as a tribute to his lifelong philanthropic support of historical scholarship and literature.

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Open by appointment
Tuesday–Saturday
10am–5pm
Sunday–Monday
Closed

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