How to Hunt for Hidden Histories

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(with thanks to Kate Clifford for Delaware County sources, editing, and other improvements)

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This guide will help you get started with your search for hidden history, whether for a single building, a block, or an entire historic district. The guide is based on the experience of the "Learning From Cooper Street" project in Camden, New Jersey, but you will find ways to get started no matter where you live.

This handout contains tips and links for:

To learn more about the Continuing Education Program in Historic Preservation, offered by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities (MARCH) at Rutgers-Camden in partnership with the New Jersey Historic Trust, visit: https://preservation.rutgers.edu/

Genealogy Portals

We have learned that it helps to think like a genealogist, to track people as well as buildings. You may want to take advantage of free trials or check into other availability of some of these:

- **FamilySearch**, https://www.familysearch.org/en/ – This is free, but it requires setting up an account. To find out what this site may have for your community, follow these steps:
  - Click "Search" in the menu bar.
  - Select "Catalog"
  - In the search box, type the country, state, and county. For example:
    - United States, Pennsylvania, Delaware
  - This will lead you to the list of available sources, which you can limit to digital.
  - If you want deeds, after you search look for the link to Land Records

- **Ancestry.com**, https://www.ancestry.com/ – This is a subscription service, but it has a 7-day free trial. Also check your county library to see if public access is available. To find out what this site may have for your community, follow these steps:
  - Click "Search" in the menu bar.
  - Select "All Collections."
  - When the window opens, scroll down to the map and click the area you want to investigate.
  - OR: Look for "Quick Links" on the home page.
  - Click on "Ancestry Card Catalog."
  - A variety of search options will be available, including geography.

- **If you have a Delaware County Libraries account**, you can go to any library to access its accounts. Haverford Township Free Library has Ancestry on the computers in the library, but it also has HeritageQuest by Ancestry and other sites which you can access at home: https://haverfordlibrary.org/research/genealogy/
  - HeritageQuest has City Directories, Census Records, Obituaries, Books, Revolutionary War records and more.

Visual Sources

Some places to search for photographs, postcards, and other visual evidence (but always check websites of your local historical societies and public and college libraries).

- Digital Public Library of America: https://dp.la/
- Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
- Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/photos/
- Historic American Buildings Survey: https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/
- National Register Database: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/database-research.htm
- Library Company of Philadelphia: https://digital.librarycompany.org/discovery
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania: https://digitallibrary.hsp.org/
- Temple University Digital Collections: https://digital.library.temple.edu/
- Free Library of Philadelphia: https://libwww.freelibrary.org/digital/
- Media Historic Archives: https://www.mediahistoricarchives.org/ (mostly Media, but also other places)
- Delaware County History: https://www.delawarecountyhistory.com/ (Keith may also have some images for sale. Don't copy without permission)
- Ebay: https://www.ebay.com/ (Do a search for your location, building, etc. and make a watch list so you'll be notified when a postcard or other item comes up)

Note: only the last 4 have been verified as sites with Delaware County images.

Sanborn Insurance Company Maps

These maps can help you get started if you do not know anything about a block, even if the buildings no longer exist. Look for your block in every year that a map is available to notice street numbers, size and materials of structures, and changes over time (demolitions or new structures). You can learn more about the colors and symbols on the maps here:

https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection/

The Library of Congress has digitized many Sanborn maps, including many from Pennsylvania (Philadelphia and other counties): https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/

Each volume of maps starts with an index and overview map for the city or county; the numbers on the overview map indicate the individual page for specific areas. https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/?fa=location:pennsylvania%7Clocation:delaware+county

Penn State University also has some Sanborn Maps: https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/maps1/search/searchterm/delaware%20county

More Historical Maps

- Philadelphia GeoHistory Network, https://www.philageohistory.org/geohistory/. If you are doing research in Philadelphia or eastern Delco municipalities, see especially the Interactive Maps Viewer, which allows you to create overlays of past and present maps.
- Historical Maps of Pennsylvania: http://www.mapsofpa.com/
- Library of Congress maps: https://www.loc.gov/maps/
- University of Texas: http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/histus.html
- Delaware County History: https://www.delawarecountyhistory.com/ (also has a lot of other information such as photos, tax records, newspaper articles, etc)
- Lower Merion History (for Haverford/ Radnor): http://lowermerionhistory.org/?page_id=577 and http://lowermerionhistory.org/?page_id=188978
- Delaware County Historical Society: https://www.padelcohistory.org/ (visit in person)
- Local historical societies or libraries may also have physical copies of maps

City Directories

Even if you do not know names of residents, you may be able to find leads to them by searching for addresses in city directories. Many are available via Ancestry.com or HeritageQuest (account required). Depending on location you might also turn them up with a search of Google Books https://books.google.com/ or the Internet Archive https://archive.org. Temple University Libraries has produced a helpful guide to finding online Philadelphia city directories, which often include adjacent communities: https://guides.temple.edu/philadirectories/online.

In Ancestry, this link will take you directly to the search page for city directories: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469/

Even before you know names of residents, you can jump-start your search by looking for addresses. In Ancestry:

- Leave names fields blank
- In the "Lived In" field, fill in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, USA
- In the "Keyword" field, fill in house number and street, for example: "423 Linden"
- For "Residence Year," fill in any year or leave it blank.
- Search.

U.S. Census

These are available via Ancestry, or the U.S. Census also through Family Search (which is free). Names are needed for searching, but once you get a hit you will also be able to see neighbors at adjacent addresses. The U.S. Census is available for each decade up to 1940, but not for 1890, when the records were destroyed.

Different Census years will yield different sets of information. Here's some background from the National Archives: https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/census/about

- To search on FamilySearch.org:
    - Click on Search in the top menu
    - Select "Records"
    - Fill in as much as you know.
    - Under "Restrict records by," select "Type" and then "Census, Residence, and Lists"
- To search on Ancestry.com or HeritageQuest:
    - Click on Search in the top menu
    - Select "Census and Voter Lists"
    - Fill in as many fields as you know.

Always click through until you see the image of the original Census record, so you get the most complete information.

More Biographical Sources

While you are in FamilySearch or Ancestry, you may find additional useful information in records of marriages, births, deaths, military service, or family trees. Be cautious about family trees – make sure any findings are documented to original sources.

If you have names of individuals, also check https://www.findagrave.com/, which will also come up in Ancestry.com searches. This is a crowd-sourced project to document cemeteries and often includes other user-contributed content.

Digitized Newspapers

Search for names of people, especially for obituaries.

Search for addresses, which may yield additional people not present in other records or classified ads that shed light on usage of buildings.

Some sources for digitized newspapers:

- Always check with your local library and historical society!
- Library of Congress: https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/

- Free Library of Philadelphia: https://libwww.freelibrary.org/locations/departments/newspapers-and-microfilm-center (scroll down the page to find digital access)
- Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive: https://panewsarchive.psu.edu/
- Newspapers.com – Commercial service, has a 7-day free trial. https://newspapers.com/

Deeds

- FamilySearch.org includes these for many communities, although not for all time periods. Searching requires knowing the name of at least one property owner.
    - https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/233459?availability=Family%20History%20Library for Delco deeds 1770-1866
    - https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/246232?availability=Family%20History%20Library for Chester County, 1688-1903 (Delco was part of Chester County until 1789)
- The Camden County Historical Society has a good guide to how to search for deeds in FamilySearch. It focuses on Camden and Gloucester Counties, but the search techniques are useful for anywhere.
    - https://13202cb3-78d8-aa1d-0400-919ba7269001.filesusr.com/ugd/26d209_90693e155a354ccd95798146a509f497.pdf
- Delaware County Tax Assessor's Database:
    - http://delcorealestate.co.delaware.pa.us/pt/search/CommonSearch.aspx?mode=PARID
    - Use the map search to find the parcel id, current owner and most recent deed book/page references
- Delaware County Deed Office:
    - https://delcorodonlineservices.co.delaware.pa.us/countyweb/loginDisplay.action?countyname=DelawarePAROD sign in as a guest
    - https://delcorodonlineservices.co.delaware.pa.us/DelawarePAROD/SimpleSearch_Guide.pdf is a guide to researching historic deeds
    - Use the deed book/page search and work your way backwards looking for 'being the same premises' description that has the previous deed book/page. Keep track on a sheet of paper with Grantee (buyer) and Grantor (seller) names, dates and book/page. If you have trouble with the book/page search, use the Indexes by putting in the last names and first initials and choosing the correct book- grantee or grantor and what year range. This can help you find the next book/page, but also make sure if you get an error you have the 0 in front- 0A02 rather than A2 for example. You may have to go into the deed office (make an appointment) to view older deeds or access microfiche. Chester County has deeds prior to 1789.
- Deeds have a description of the property with measurements and directions. There is a Metes and Bounds software to help visualize the description. There is a free version as well. https://www.tabberer.com/sandyknoll/more/metesandbounds/metes.html

Putting It All Together

How to keep track of your discoveries? In the "Learning From Camden" project, we use Google Sheets to create a database so that many people can search and contribute information.

https://www.google.com/sheets/about/

Here's a sample of one block, the 400 block of Lawrence Street:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1oOkUYd5Qa7w5M0Ga0vWhq9evz980wMElF8jhPuw3GHM/edit?usp=sharing

Database Tips

Create columns to capture each type of data you want to record, for example, address, age, name, race, occupation.

Create a row for each source that you find.

From past experience, here are some things to keep in mind:

- For every line, fill in the house number and street, even if it is the same as the line above.
- Fill in a row of the database for each record you find, even if it duplicates information in another source. For example, if you find someone in the city directory and in the census, include both on separate rows. If you find the same information for multiple years, create a new row for each year.
- Don't worry about the order of the rows as you enter data – you can use the "Data / Sort" function of the spreadsheet to put them in order by house number, year, and so on.
- Only fill in information that is stated in the source. For example, only record "male" or "female" if that is stated in the source. If it isn't stated, leave it blank.

Fun with Data Visualization

Turning your data into a chart or graph may help you discover patterns that are not evident in a spreadsheet. Here's an easy-to-use website that allows you to paste in information directly from your spreadsheet to make beautiful visualizations: https://rawgraphs.io/

Going Public

The "Learning From Cooper Street" project uses two free, open-sources platforms for sharing findings with the public:

- WordPress for our project blog: https://wordpress.com
    - Our site: https://cooperstreet.wordpress.com/
- Omeka for our digital archive: https://omeka.org/
    - Our site: https://omeka.camden.rutgers.edu/