



PRESERVATION BEST PRACTICES # 3 | APRIL 2022 | MICHIGAN.GOV/SHPO

A Starter Guide to Online Property Research

Research is fundamental to many preservation activities—completing historic resource surveys, preparing National Register of Historic Places nominations, developing interpretive signage and historical markers, and more. Yet, if you’ve never looked into the detailed history of a property before, research can seem like a daunting task, particularly if you don’t know where to start.

For most projects, online resources are a good starting place. Easily accessible from your home or local library, they allow you to make the most of your time by gathering readily available information about your property. This information can then be used to identify research gaps and plan a focused approach to the more time intensive, in-person research that might be necessary for your project.

To get you started, this brief highlights some of the most useful online resources and common locations for finding them. This information isn’t exhaustive as online resources on Michigan history are abundant and vary by location, but it will help jumpstart your property research.

Be sure to keep the following in mind:

- Each property has its own research needs. Different sources need to be reviewed based on the type of property. For example, different types of maps are going to be useful for rural and urban properties.
- Don’t overlook local online resources. Many local and regional libraries, historical societies, and archives have their own digital collections, which are invaluable for property-specific research.
- Some websites are more trustworthy than others. Always carefully evaluate the information you find and, if possible, cross-reference it with other sources. This helps ensure that you are basing your findings on verifiable facts.
- Keep track of where you’ve looked. Taking notes on the online sources you’ve used helps keep your efforts organized and leads to more efficient in-person research.

ONLINE RESEARCH GUIDES

Many libraries and other entities across the state have their own research guides, which may be helpful as you continue your work. A few examples include:

- [MSU Map Research Guide](#)
- [MSU Land and Property Info Guide](#)
- [MSU Genealogy and Local History Guide](#)
- [MSU Michigan History Guide](#)
- [Library of Michigan County Guides](#)
- [Library of Michigan Bibliographies](#)
- [Michigan Genealogical Council Research Tools](#)

TOPIC SPECIFIC ONLINE RESOURCES

Online resources are constantly expanding. Even if you’re dealing with a unique resource type, chances are that you can find info on your topic. Examples of topic specific resources include: the Association for Preservation Technology (APT) [Building Technology Heritage Library](#), which is full of trade catalogs, home plan books, and more from the 1870s to 1960s; the American Institute of Architects (AIA) [Historical Directory of American Architects](#), where you can find information on the career of individual architects; and US Modernist’s [Architecture Magazine Library](#), which is the world’s largest digital collection of 20th century architectural journals and magazines.

Remember—**online research is just the start!** Online resources are a good place to begin, but they typically do not tell you the whole story. There are many types of records and local collections that are not available online. Always check your local and regional government offices, libraries, historical societies, archives, and other such sites for relevant resources.

Resource	What information can I find?	Where can I find these resources?*
Aerial Photographs	Aerial photographs help reveal landscape-level changes to a property over time. For example, they can be used to tell the story of a property's evolution through construction, additions, and demolitions and to understand changes to road networks, fields and agricultural lands, property boundaries, and other landscape and cultural features.	<p>*Examples only. Keep in mind, local collections available through libraries, archives, and other such repositories should also be explored.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michigan State University Aerial Image Archive • USDA Farm Service Agency • USGS EarthExplorer • Wayne State University (Detroit metro only) • HistoricAerials.com
Census	Available every year except 1890, census records provide info on individual households and details about their residents, such as age, birthplace, and occupation. Agricultural and industrial records are also available for certain years, which provide info on acreage, crops, livestock, products, and employment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Census Bureau • National Historical Geographic Information System • Ancestry.com • Familysearch.org
Community Histories	Community histories from the 19th century onward commonly include detailed municipal histories and biographical info on important persons, businesses, organizations, and industries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michigan County Histories and Atlases Project • Archive.org • HathiTrust Digital Library
Deeds	Deeds are used to trace the ownership history of a property. Details such as sale values can also provide clues about the presence of buildings and property improvements over time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Index to County Register of Deeds Websites
Directories	City, business, and social directories provide valuable information about the persons, businesses, industries, and institutions in our communities at a specific point in time. Using directories from various years, you can often track the movement of persons within a community or the growth of a business or organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ancestry.com • Archive.org • HathiTrust Digital Library
Genealogical Records	Genealogical records are useful when you want to do detailed research on a particular individual or family. They include vital records (birth, death, marriage, divorce), school records, family histories, cemetery records, and other such documents that can be used to tell the story of a person's life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ancestry.com • Familysearch.org • Fold3.com • Find-a-Grave
Historic Photos and Postcards	Photographs and postcards capture a property at a specific point and time and, when used in conjunction with physical clues, can help you understand a property's evolution over time. They can also help you track changes in a property's use.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upper Peninsula Regional Digitization Center • Western Michigan University • University of Michigan Library • Michigan Technological University
Maps	Historic atlases, highway maps, city maps, topographic maps, plats, subdivision plans, and other such maps are incredibly useful for tracking changes to a property and developing a property chronology. Sanborn maps are particularly useful in urban areas. Created by the Sanborn Map Company to support fire insurance company assessment of properties, these maps were created from the 1870s to 1950s and show individual building footprints, construction materials, building heights, and uses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TopoView (Historic Topographic Quadrangles) • Michigan County Histories and Atlases Project • State of Michigan (General Land Office Plats) • Library of Congress (Sanborn maps) • Library of Congress (Atlases and other maps) • MI Department of Licensing & Regulatory Affairs (subdivision and development plats)
Newspapers	Newspapers provide contemporary insight into major community events and trends and are key to understanding the broader story impacting a property's development and evolution. They are also useful for finding information such as construction dates, developers, architects, and contractors for housing developments, businesses, schools, churches, industries, and more.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library of Congress: Chronicling America • CMU Digital Michigan Newspaper Portal • Newspapers.com • Newspaperarchive.com
Tax Records	Tax records provide a good starting point for research since they often give you estimated construction dates and document recent changes to a property. They also provide owner information and often include sales history and deed references.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BS&A Online <p>BS&A provides data management for most (but not all) assessment departments in Michigan. Many provide online access to records.</p>



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