

Finding Your Roofs

Thoughts on Tracing the History of Your South End Home – and Perhaps Your Family as Well

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In the past several years, it has become a *lot* easier to trace the history of your home – it is no longer necessary to ascend the dark upper reaches of the Registry of Deeds at the Pemberton Square Courthouse. The state’s land records (deeds, mortgages, etc.) from 1620 through 1986 have been digitized thanks to assistance from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and are available on line at <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcdigitalrecords/digitalrecordsidx.htm> or by visiting the State Archives on Columbia Point. I have found the Archives staff very helpful in getting started, both over the phone (617-727-2816) and in person. The digitized records also include birth, death, and marriage records, census records from 1789 through 1940, naturalization records, military records, among others, records which can be tremendously valuable for genealogy.

Basic

The place to start is with your own deed, which shows whom you bought your home from and the book and page (or other information) where your deed is recorded at the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, Brooke Courthouse, 24 New Chardon Street (near North Station). You’re going to be working backwards, from your own deed to as far back as you wish; the documents on file include not just the deeds but also mortgages, easements (e.g., for sewer lines), plot maps, and other land-related materials of permanent importance.

Property gets recorded now in one of two ways: registered land and the traditional recorded land. If you don’t know which you have, a registry clerk will be able to tell you (617-788-6251). The Registry of Deeds search website is <http://masslandrecords.com/suffolk/> and it does come with a tutorial. The *first* thing that you want to do when you open the site is to go to the link for “Search Criteria” *above* the heading **masslandrecords.com** and select Name search under either Recorded land or Registered land, as relevant. Enter your name, hit Search and you should get a list of all the documents related to your ownership. Select the hit that shows your original deed and to the side you will see blocks that lists you and the people you bought your home from and the related documents. Click on their name and it will bring up hits for property that they owned, and repeat the process. (Note: This works for Registered land. Something similar probably works for Recorded land for as far back as the on-line records go.) Be sure to write down the “Book and Page” as well as the names of previous owners. You will probably want to make print-outs, photocopies and/or PDF files of the documents you find, both to ease the task of looking earlier in time and to assist in finding out more about the residents of the household.

Next, you will want to go to the State Archives, mentioned above. The key website is: <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcdigitalrecords/digitalrecordsidx.htm> . On the “Digital Records” page, the link at the end of the list is “Other Records,” which opens to “Massachusetts

* This guide is not as complicated as it may seem – I have included some guidance on how to use a digital microfilm reader since some people may not be familiar with them. © Edward Jay Allan, 2019

Land Records, 1620-1986.” which is a subset of the Mormon’s “Family Search” site. There is a very detailed “Learn More” link (opens on a separate tab). “Browse through” opens to the land records for all of the counties in the state. Click on “Suffolk” and Voilà! 300 years of land records are before you!

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/image/index?owc=MCB2-DWL%3A361613401%3Fcc%3D2106411>

These are records on rolls of microfilm. The first column contains the names of everyone who received some sort of right to property. (The South End files begin in the 1800-1899 records. These grantee files can be helpful if you know someone’s name and want to know where s/he lived or had property, e.g., the Hunnewells, who were major early developers of the South End.)

Go to the roll for the year and book number you want. It will open onto a microfilm viewer. You will have to scroll to the page you want. The page numbers are at the top right corner of the side-by-side pages. A roll contains a couple of books totalling several hundred pages, so a time-saver is to guess approximately where in the roll the page you want is located and to enter it into the box for Index number and go back and forth from there.*

Next Steps – Who Lived Here?

You now have the names of the people who owned your home. But who actually lived there? (Please note that the actual owners may not have lived at your home, especially during times that it may have been a boarding house or lodging house.)

- The Boston Public Library in Copley Square has the **annual residents lists/voting lists** in a mixture of formats (print, on-line, microfilm, misc.) listed by street address, from approximately 1875 to the present. These lists are of people 17 years of age and older. The general catalog subject search is: “Voting Registers -- Massachusetts – Boston.” Please note that over time the ward and precinct numbers for the South End (and other parts of Boston) have changed, and there seem to be gaps in the files.
- The **most complete listings**, including children, appears on the Decennial U.S. Census, on-line at the Massachusetts Archives, mentioned above, for the entire United States for every ten years from 1790 to 1940 except for 1890. For the Census, go to “Census Records” from the Digital Records page, pick the census you wish, and enter the first name and last name of the person you are looking for and enter Boston under Residence. You should get a list of hits. Click on the most probable one and you will get a page with the demographics of the person whom you were searching for plus the names and relationships of other people at that address and a snapshot of the actual census page.

Click on “View the original document,” or right-click, and you will get the microfilm image of the original census page in a new tab or new window, sometimes with a print transcription

* **How to work a digital microfilm reader.** Once you get to the image you want, the rest works largely like a Google map. Use your mouse or touchpad to move to the part of the image you want to see, and click on the + to enlarge. I then find it easiest to download the page, which yields a JPG which can be cropped and printed and/or saved as a JPG or a PDF file, which can be used like any other PRG or PDF file.

of all the handwritten demographic entries below the image. You can print and/or download the whole page. And/or you can click to enlarge and use your mouse or touchpad to get to the portions of the page that you wish to read more easily and save those.

- For **birth, marriage, death, and/or residence records** of individuals, go to “Other Records” from the Digital Records page, click on “Records” under the Family Search logo. Fill in what you can – too much may result in too few or no hits, whereas too little may result in far too many since Family Search includes as many records as the Mormons could get from the entire United States.

Going Further

- **Pictures.** The South End Historical Society has photographs of every building in the South End from 1972, taken in conjunction with the application for Landmark status.
- **Maps.** There may (or may not) be a map of your block among your deed or condo association documents. The Leventhal Map Collection of the BPL has a massive (and confusing) collection of maps of the South End, the rest of Boston, and much of the rest of the world. Many of these maps are on-line. collections.leventhalmap.org but they are not filed in numerical order. Among other places, the Eight Streets neighborhood can be found on the 1888 Atlas of the city of Boston : city proper : plate 55 and Atlas of the city of Boston : city proper : plate 60 and plates 17 and 18 of the 1928 Atlas.
- **News, Information, “Current Events,” and Trivia.** The Boston Globe has opened its archives for full-text searching for its issues from 1872 to the present. You can search by name, topic, street, etc. This service, which is great for browsing, is free for subscribers. <https://bostonglobe.newspapers.com/>
- **Directories.** There are a number of annual directories of businesses, eminent citizens and other people, and streets, such as Clark’s Boston Blue Books, that might be of interest are available on line from the Boston Athenaeum <http://cdm.bostonathenaeum.org/cdm/browsecollectionsbycategory> and other internet resources.
- **Other Family History Records.** As noted, the state archives also has records of immigrants through the Port of Boston between 1841 and 1891, naturalizations and probate records of various dates, and military records for the Revolution and War of 1812 plus legislative and executive records. Other on-line sources include the National Archives in Waltham, the Mass. Historical Society in the Fenway, the New England Genealogical Society on Newbury Street.