# WORKBOOK: "WHO, WHY, WHERE, HOW RESEARCH PROPERTY HISTORY"

Use with Kent County Recorder of Deeds Fact Sheet by the same name

# **Abstract**

This document is comprised of resources found on the internet regarding how to learn more about the history of your home. Includes a list of resources in the state and Kent County.

# WORKBOOK FOR "WHO, WHY, WHERE, HOW RESEARCH PROPERTY HISTORY"

# **DISCLAIMER**

This Workbook provides more information than in the Fact Sheet by the same name.

We are providing this Workbook to help you get started in learning the history of your home. We copied, verbatim, the information found herein from the internet, occasionally annotating it. We are not in any way responsible for its contents, nor do we guarantee that it is up to date. We recommend that you use the links to go to the source document. We recommend you use caution when working physically around the structure of any home, and especially when scraping paint as is suggested in one of these articles. Professionals are best at working with construction. Finally, we limited our searches to free or low cost alternatives. There may be many more resources you can find on your own that will meet your needs, but you may have to pay for them.

Occasionally, you will see a *note* by Eugenia Thornton (*initials - et*), the Kent County Recorder of Deeds. These notes, or sometimes highlights, are to alert you that in Delaware or in Kent County, what is in the article does not apply. In some states and counties, government is organized differently. With the exception of the office of the Kent County Recorder of Deeds, we make no claim that you will be welcome in any other county or state office. Please check with them using the link provided in the Delaware Resource section of this document.

Once again, this is a quick guide for you to use as a starting point. We make no claims this information is up to date, accurate, or even safe (such as where the article suggests you scrape paint in an old house). You must do your own due diligence and hold Kent County Recorder of Deeds, and Kent County harmless if you choose to use this information.

Not included here is a .pdf published by New Castle County Planning Department about researching the history of your property in NCC. It has many suggestions that still apply today and will help in NCC, Sussex or Kent. A link to this document, which can be found on the State of Delaware's Public Archive website, is provided on the Fact Sheet entitled "The Who, Why, Where, How Research Property History" published by the Kent County Recorder of Deeds.

# HOW TO OBTAIN LIBRARY MATERIALS

Reserve library materials at <a href="http://www.lib.de.us">http://www.lib.de.us</a> -- Please expect a minimum 48 hour turnaround as some materials may already be checked out or must be used in-house.

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# HOW TO RESEARCH THE HISTORY OF YOUR HOUSE

### **About This Article**

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Download Article: https://www.wikihow.com/Research-the-History-of-Your-House

# METHOD 1: EXAMINE THE HOUSE'S CONSTRUCTION

If you own an older home, you've probably at some point wondered who slept in your bedroom long before you, when your plumbing was last updated, or why that ghost keeps hiding your car keys. Researching the history of your house is not only an exciting trip into the past, but it can tell you how the house is built and give you clues as to how it should be maintained. You can research the history of your house by examining the house itself, looking at government records, and reading through historical archives maintained for your city or town. [1]

# 1 EXAMINING THE HOUSE'S CONSTRUCTION

**Evaluate the materials used.** Over the years, many different types of materials and styles of craftsmanship are used to build houses. The types of materials used can give you some ideas about when the house was built and how long it has been since any changes were made.[2]

For example, one place you can look is under the water tank lid of the toilet. If there is a toilet in your house that is original to the house, the date stamp on the water tank lid will give you a good idea of when the house was built. If the toilet isn't original, that date will at least give you an idea when the bathroom was last remodeled.

If your house has a mansard roof, for example, it was likely built in the late 19th century. However, keep in mind that certain styles and housing designs were still being built in more provincial areas long after they had fallen out of favor in urban centers, so the location of your house will be important in identifying the era in which it was built.

Look closely both inside and outside your house, and try to identify building materials used. Bring in an expert if you're unsure what type of wood or stone was used.

# 2 CHECK OUT SOME ARCHITECTURE BOOKS.

Go to your local library or research online to find out the design style of your house and when that style was popular in your area. This can give you some clues as to when the house was built.[3]

- Keep in mind that old houses often have been updated several times to reflect changing trends or the desires of the owners. Your house may incorporate several different architectural styles.
- Your house also may have been built at different times. For example, the original house may have been built in one style, and then the owners built an addition in a different style 40 years later.

- Even with many decades of additions and renovations, you typically can uncover a core style to your house. This gives you a general idea of the era in which the house was built.
- See page 1 for how to obtain books from the Delaware library system et

### 3 PAY ATTENTION TO DESIGN DETAILS AND HARDWARE USED.

Cabinetry and design styles go in and out of fashion through the years, and these details not only tell you something about the history of your house, but also give it a unique character. [4]

- The types of nails and molding used can provide some important clues as to when your house was built.
- You can review design books or look online to find other instances of original molding or cabinetry to help date your house. Even if these elements aren't original, dating them can provide clues as to when that particular room was remodeled.

# 4 SCRAPE THROUGH LAYERS OF PAINT.

The walls of an older house may have 10 or more layers of paint. If you don't want to cause too much damage to your house, find an inconspicuous spot and scrape through the layers. [5]

- A professional can help you analyze the age of the lower layers of paint. The colors used also can provide clues, since different interior colors go in and out of fashion through the years.
- The composition of the paint also can be analyzed to link it to a particular era, since paint has been made using different chemical compounds over the years.
- Old houses used lead paint; we recommend you hire a professional et

# 5 TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBORS.

Anyone who's been living in your neighborhood for a long time can help you understand more about the history of your house. Neighbors can be particularly helpful if you're new to the neighborhood.[6]

- Ask them if they knew the people who lived in the house before you, and whether they can remember any renovations being done.
- If they are amenable, you also can talk to them about the history of their house or ask to inspect its details. Since your neighbors' house may have been built around the same time as yours, this can offer you some important clues.

# 6 TRACK DOWN PREVIOUS OWNERS

You can typically uncover the names of previous owners by looking through the deed history of your house. In the United States, this information is typically available at the county recorder or register of deeds.[7]

- Once you have a name, you can track them down on the internet for free, or through a commercial people-locator service.
- Keep in mind that some people may not want to be contacted, and may not want to talk to you. The
  house may hold painful memories for them, or they may just not want to be bothered. Respect their
  wishes and avoid infringing on their privacy.
- The best way to contact a previous owner typically is by sending a letter. Explain who you are and why
  you want to contact them. Provide them a means to contact you back if they're willing to talk.

# 7 USE A METAL DETECTOR IN YOUR YARD.

A metal detector can be a great way to uncover old coins and other artifacts that may add their own unique story to your house and help you learn more about the house's history and its previous owners.

- Take care digging up artifacts in your yard. You may want to contact an archaeologist or local historian if you believe you've found something of possible historic significance.
- Use https://missutilitydelmarva.com/ before you dig et

# METHOD 2: PULL OFFICIAL RECORDS

I copied this article as it was written, however, in your case you will be using the Recorder of Deeds office to review physical books dating back to 1646. You can review online through <u>uslandrecords.com</u> from Jan 30, 1874 to present day. You will also use the Archives. For tax records and mapping, use the county property records which are available through the county website. We also have an Historic Society which may prove useful. So please substitute these places in the below discussion - et

# 1 VISIT YOUR LOCAL COURTHOUSE OR COUNTY RECORDER.

At the courthouse, you typically can learn the official lot number or description of the property where your house is located. You may not find correct information using your street address, since these can change over time.[8]

Use the Kent County PRIDE to find the map number and owner, use USLandrecords.com and the Kent County Recorder of Deeds for deed information - et

- Your local or county tax assessor also may have this information within the tax records for your property.
- Keep in mind that official record keeping of land and properties typically uses a different system than street addresses with which you're familiar. This system allows you to track the history of your house from the moment it was built.
- If you live in a place that has been continually inhabited for hundreds of years, even the property grid/lot system itself may have changed over time. In this case, you may also need to make a trip to your local historical society.

The abstract records all deeds or other legal transactions associated with your property. These documents typically are located at the county courthouse, although you may have been given a copy when you purchased the home. [9]

- Review the history of the purchase and selling price. A dramatic increase in the selling price over a short
  period of time may mean a building or room was added, or that the house was substantially renovated.
  You can cross-reference with any building permits for additional clues.
- If you live in the United States, visit your local or county courthouse to look at the deed registry, usually found in the clerk and recorder's office. This information is indexed by a lot and block number in a city, and a section, township and range for rural property.
- This information is found on the County Property Record Index, not US Land Records et

# 3 GO TO YOUR LOCAL MUNICIPAL PLANNING AGENCY.

Use online county records formerly known as PRIDE - et

The government office that issues building permits should have public records pertaining to your house. The building permit can contain a treasure trove of information including the house's original dimensions, construction dates and costs, and the names of the people originally involved in its construction. [10]

- Keep in mind that you typically must pay a small fee to acquire these documents, including a search fee as well as a fee for your own copy.
- If your house is hundreds of years old, you may need to visit the local historical society to find the building permit.

# 4 CHECK CITY DIRECTORIES AND ATLASES.

If you live in a larger city or town, directories and atlases can help you uncover details about your house throughout the past. In many areas, these city directories and maps were in use hundreds of years ago. [11]

- Directories and atlases also can help you identify changes in street names and other geographical details that you can use to target your research and find more information about your house.
- These directories and atlases typically are available at the municipal planner's office. If they are not there, staff typically will be able to point you in the right direction.

# 5 REVIEW SURVEY MAPS AND FIELD BOOKS.

Survey maps and property field books are common sources of information about the history of a property. These typically are located in either local or national archives, and were maintained for tax purposes. [12]

- Talk to someone at the property tax assessor's office to find out where historical records are kept and how you can access them. Keep in mind you'll typically need to pay a fee to have them retrieved.
- Use the Kent County online records known as PRIDE for the last several years of data. For earlier documents not found on PRIDE, talk with the Assessor's office et

# METHOD 3: DIG THROUGH ARCHIVES

### 1 READ LOCAL NEWSPAPER ARCHIVES.

Your local library typically keeps archives of the local newspaper. If there's more than one branch, the central or main branch usually holds the largest collection.[13]

- If you live in a rural area with no library nearby, try at the largest city or urban area, or maybe the county seat. That library typically will have archives pertinent to your area.
- Search backwards, looking for mentions of construction in your neighborhood or the names of the house's previous owners.
- Keep in mind that street names and numbers can change over time, so record any changes you see and the dates so you can construct a chronology.

# 2 VISIT YOUR LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Most regions have a historical society that maintains historical records and information about your house and your general neighborhood. Larger cities often have their own historical societies, but if you live in a rural area you may have to seek out the historical society that covers a larger regional area. [14]

- If you have an extremely old house, such as those commonly found in Europe, neighborhood information may be all you can find to research the history of your house.
- If your house is less than 200 years old, the historical society may have a wealth of information, particularly if any of the house's previous owners were well-known in the community or the house was the site of a significant event in local history.
- Take care handling delicate old documents, and follow the historical society's rules regarding the care and copying of these documents.
- A list of local historical societies and state agencies is provided at the end of this document et

# 3 SEARCH FOR INFORMATION ONLINE.

There are many websites dedicated to preserving genealogical records and property history records, often available for free. You can use these resources to find information about your house as well as its previous owners.[15]

- For example, if your house is in the United States, you might search for records at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) website. The NARA maintains all official government genealogical and land records, and also has links to other databases with a wealth of information.
- If your house is in Ireland or the United Kingdom, you might start your online research at the Building History website, located at buildinghistory.org. This site is maintained by a historian and provides a wealth of resources for researching the history of your house, including deeds, wills, tax documents, and maps, as well as images and information about towns and villages.

# 4 COMPILE A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF YOUR HOUSE.

As you uncover information about your house, order it chronologically so that you can map the house's history from original construction to the present. Keeping your information ordered this way also enables you to identify gaps in that history where more research is needed. [16]

# REFERENCES (HYPERLINKED)

- 1. \https://www.thisoldhouse.com/ideas/how-to-research-history-your-house
- 2. \https://www.thisoldhouse.com/ideas/how-to-research-history-your-house
- 3. \https://www.thisoldhouse.com/ideas/how-to-research-history-your-house
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- 7. \https://baltimoreheritage.org/resources/research-guide/#.WL3CzxiZMxc
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- 10. \https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/research-guides/history-your-house
- 11. †https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/research-guides/history-your-house
- 12. \http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/houses/
- 13. †https://www.thisoldhouse.com/ideas/how-to-research-history-your-house
- 14. \https://baltimoreheritage.org/resources/research-guide/#.WL3CzxiZMxc
- 15. \http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/7-online-resources-trace-history-house/
- 16. \http://www.nj.gov/dep/hpo/4sustain/houseresearch.pdf

# FROM GENEALOGIST TO HOUSE HISTORIAN

A version of this was published in the Family Tree Magazine Jan/Feb 2014 edition. To view it online visit: <a href="https://familytreemagazine.com/house-history/free-online-resources-to-trace-house-histories">https://familytreemagazine.com/house-history/free-online-resources-to-trace-house-histories</a>.

From genealogist to house historian isn't a big leap, but there are some differences between researching the history of a building and researching the people who occupied it. For example, it helps to have a rudimentary knowledge of historical architecture and construction. Fortunately, a number of free online resources can help you construct house histories.

In addition to the sites listed here, run a Google search to find other resources for your locality. Deed and tax records, at least for recent years, are often on county, city or town websites. Also search state and local historical societies and libraries, and check out the state office for historical preservation. You'll learn about architecture common in the state, and how to register your home once you've successfully completed your house history.

# CHRONICLING AMERICA

Newspapers can be a rich source of information about the development of an area and the people who lived there. This collection has digital newspapers predominantly from the 1860s through the early 1900s. Use the advanced search option to focus on a certain paper, place, time period or other criteria. The US Newspaper Directory can help you find microfilm or print copies of other newspapers not yet online. Source: <a href="Chronicling America">Chronicling America</a>

# **FAMILYSEARCH**

More and more deeds are becoming available through FamilySearch's historical record search. At press time, all of New York and Massachusetts are available, as well as select counties in Illinois, Minnesota, Vermont and Washington. FamilySearch also has a growing collection of probate records. To see if records for your state and county are available, go to the FamilySearch website, click on Search, and select United States from the regional list. Click on a state name on the left to show collections from only that state. Source: <a href="FamilySearch">FamilySearch</a>

### GENERAL LAND RECORDS OFFICE

This U.S. Bureau of Land Management portal allows you to view original land parents, survey notes, tract books, and more. Order a certified copy of a document for a fee. Source: <u>General Land Records Office</u>

# HISTORIC MAP WORKS

Historic Map Works offers a variety of atlases and maps to help you locate properties and property owners. For easy searching, just type the name of the county and state into the search box on the home page. Once you find a map or atlas to view, look for an Overlay button (not available for every map) to overlay the atlas on a current map. It's free to view the maps here; the site charges for downloads and prints. Source: <u>Historic Map Works</u>

# KANSAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY: HOUSE HISTORY CHECKLIST

Although published by the Kansas Historical Society, this free, downloadable PDF checklist is useful for any locale. Once your head begins to spin from absorbing all of these resources, print it as a reminder of house history records to check. Source: <u>Kansas Historical Society: House History Checklist</u>

# LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The Library of Congress (LOC) has digitized many maps—cities, towns, railroads and more—that can be useful in your search.

There's even a collection of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, which can tell you what materials a structure was made of, along with other details. (Many local and state libraries and historical societies also are digitizing these.) The LOC's inventory of all the <u>Sanborn maps</u> in its collection can help you determine what years maps were published for your area, even if they aren't online. Source: <u>Library of Congress</u> The Library of Congress also has a collection dedicated to <u>historic American buildings</u>.

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

The National Park Service maintains the National Register of Historic Places, which you can search by county and state to see if your home has already been researched and registered. Even if it isn't listed, try to find another house from the same area and time frame: This may lead to sources that'll inform your own search. Source: National Register of Historic Places

# OLD HOUSE WEB: FIND THE HISTORY OF A HOME

These Old House Web articles focus on investigating architectural features, building materials and construction. Scroll down and click the link to see all the house history articles (you'll need to return to this page to link to each article in the series). Start with "Determining the Purpose of Investigation." Source: Old House Web: Find The History Of A Home

### OLDHOUSES.COM HOUSE STYLE GUIDE

This field guide from OldHouses.com provides examples of home styles from the 1600s to the present. You'll see photographs of homes in the styles covered along with handy lists of the defining features for each style. Source: OldHouses.com House Style Guide

# PRESERVATIONDIRECTORY.COM

Looking for a listing of historical societies, history and house museums, historic neighborhood preservation groups, state historic preservation offices, and similar organizations? This is the site for you. Thousands of links to local resources are collected here, all of which lead you to more locality-specific information. You might even end up purchasing your own historic home from the real estate listings. Source: <a href="mailto:PreservationDirectory.com">PreservationDirectory.com</a>

# RED BOOK: AMERICAN STATE, COUNTY, AND TOWN SOURCES

RootsWeb (now part of Ancestry.com) offers a free, online version of this essential resource. If you're not sure what records are available for the time and place you need, scroll down and select a state of interest, then choose from the topics offered on the right. Click County Resources to see a table of counties and availability dates for major record groups. Source: <a href="Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources">Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources</a>

# THE SPRUCE: TIPS FOR DETERMINE THE AGE OF YOUR HOME

This guide provides an overview of house history research and links to preservation briefs issued from the National Park Service. Source: <u>The Spruce: Tips for Determine the Age of Your Home</u>

# THIS OLD HOUSE: 9 WAYS TO RESEARCH YOUR HOUSE HISTORY

Here, the "This Old House" experts offer guidance on piecing together a house history. Learn what kinds of clues you can glean from a home's physical features, and examples of how that information fits into the home's story. Source: This Old House: 9 Ways to Research Your House History

# THOUGHTCO: INFLUENCES ON AMERICAN HOME STYLES, 1600 TO TODAY

This online architecture guide is an excellent reference for different styles of American homes. You'll learn about architectural styles and their evolution over history. Source: <u>ThoughtCo:</u> Influences on American Home Styles, 1600 to Today

# **BOOKS ABOUT HOUSE HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE**

Compiled by Maureen A. Taylor

<u>America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups that Built America</u> by Dell Upton (Preservation Press)

<u>The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home</u> by George Howe Colt (Scribner)

If These Walls Had Ears: The Biography of a House by James Morgan (Warner Books)

<u>Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History</u> by Barbara J. Howe, Dolores A. Fleming, Emory L Kemp, and Ruth Ann Overbeck (AltaMira)

<u>How to Research Your House: Every Home Tells a Story</u> by Pamela Brooks (How To Books)

A Visual Dictionary of American Domestic Architecture by Rachel Carley (Henry Holt)

<u>Windows on the Past: Four Centuries of New England</u> Homes by Jane C. Nylander and Diane L. Viera (Bulfinch Press)

See page 1 for how to obtain these and other books about history and architecture - et

# **DELAWARE RESOURCES**

Last edited by Eugenia Thornton on Aug 20, 2023 at 9:25 am

# IMPORTANT DELAWARE WEBSITES

Delaware Historical and Cultural Affairs: 29 N. State St., Dover, DE 19901, (302) 736-7400. <a href="https://history.delaware.gov/about-agency/contact/">https://history.delaware.gov/about-agency/contact/</a> And for general interest the "Details in Delaware" posts highlighting details found in Delaware architecture – a new detail is posted, generally, once a month. <a href="https://history.delaware.gov/2022/02/15/details-in-delaware/">https://history.delaware.gov/2022/02/15/details-in-delaware/</a>

Delaware Historical Society: https://dehistory.org/

<u>Delaware Public Archives</u> – Official Website for the State of Delaware Public Archives Department https://archives.delaware.gov

PDF about property research in New Castle County is found on the Delaware Public Archives website by typing "property research" into the search bar. Direct link is: https://archivesfiles.delaware.gov/ebooks/House Research Guide.pdf

The Division of Historical Cultural Affairs (DHCA) – Cultural & Historical Resource Information System (CHRIS) from the State of Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs includes survey forms, photos, and report attachments for various properties throughout the state. Users can ignore the password link – a password is not necessary to access information on the public map (just scroll to the bottom and click "Details"). Website is <a href="https://chrisusers.delaware.gov/#/">https://chrisusers.delaware.gov/#/</a>

Preservation Delaware has a webinar available "Is this Original?:Tips for Investigating Historic Architecture." https://preservationde.org/education---webinars

The University of Delaware's CHAD program has some resources in their website (CHAD can also be found on Facebook) https://www.bidenschool.udel.edu/chad

Delaware Genealogy Website

<u>Delaware Heritage Commission</u>

Delaware Public Archives - Photo Exhibits

<u>The Delaware Collection</u> – an over 500 page link from the Delaware Public Archives to a vast digital collection of photos, documents, and recordings.

# OTHER IMPORTANT LINKS

Titles are hyperlinked - et

Digital Public Library of America

Geographical Description of the States of Maryland and Delaware; Joseph Scott, 1807

Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad Guide; Charles P. Dare, 1856

<u>Thomson's Mercantile and Professional Directory for the State of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia</u>, . . . 1851-52

Family Search

<u>Library of Congress – Map Division</u>

<u>Old Maps Online</u> — A map search engine for any need. The site interfaces with major map repositories.

USGS Topographic Map Explorer - Many maps of the United States spanning over 100 years.

<u>Library of Congress, Print & Photographs</u> – The Library has a large collection of online images from Delaware. Enter search term.

# KENT COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Titles are hyperlinked unless noted otherwise - et

Claymont Historical Society

Clayton Historical Society

Delaware Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society

Delaware Historical and Cultural Affairs

Delaware Historical Society

**Delaware Mennonite Historical Society** 

**Duck Creek Historical Society** 

Friends of Historic Camden – Facebook Page Only

Friends of Old Dover

Friends of the Furness Railroad District

**Greater Harrington Historical Society** 

Jewish Historical Society of Delaware

Milford Historical Society - Facebook Page Only

The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the State of Delaware

# KENT COUNTY MUSEUMS

Titles are all hyperlinked - et

Air Mobility Command Museum

Barratt's Chapel & Museum

Belmont Hall

Bethel Methodist Protestant Church – No Online Presence, Historical marker information.

Bowers Beach Maritime Museum

Delaware Agricultural Museum and Village

**Delaware Public Archives** 

Delaware State Police Museum

First State Heritage Park Welcome Center and Galleries

First State Heritage Park's John Bell House

Friends of Old Dover Museum

Greater Harrington Historical Society Museum

Griffiths Chapel – No Online Presence. Historical marker information.

John Dickinson Plantation

Johnson Victrola Museum

Messick's Ag. Museum

Parson Thorne Mansion - Facebook Page Only

Railroad Tower Museum

Smyrna Museum

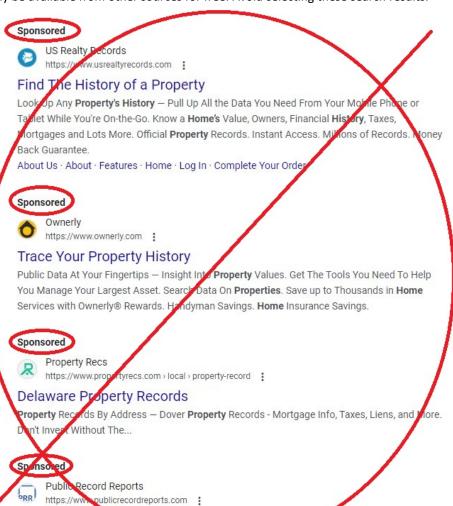
The Old State House

Woodburn: The Governor's Residence

# KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN AD AND A GOVERNMENT WEBSITE

Last updated by Eugenia Thornton on August 20 2024 at 8:45 a.m.

"Sponsored" means it is an ad for a product you must buy. These advertisers are selling products that may be available from other sources for free. Avoid selecting these search results.



# Check The History Of a Home

**History of my property** free — Sea. A Valuable Info on **Properties** Including Owners, Taxes, Deeds, Estimated Value & More.

When you search you will see a lot of "sponsored" ads, keep scrolling until you see legitimate resources, government websites or verified destinations that will help your property research. While searching for house history in Kent County, be sure to use <u>US Land Records</u> or <u>Kent County Property Records Search</u> (for maps and taxes). You may also use the <u>Kent County website</u> to enter these databases.