

# Researching Historic Buildings in New York City



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SUMMARY

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has created a Guide to Research Resources to help you learn more about your historic building. This guide is intended to assist you in finding construction dates, architects, and original owners; alterations to buildings and changes in ownership over time; the names of building residents; and historic photos, among other information.

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## General Resources

When visiting a library or other institution, consult its website in advance; note that some institutions may charge fees for accessing collections or archives and may have rules regarding the use of cameras and recording equipment.

This guide is intended to assist those undertaking primary-source research on New York City buildings with the goal of finding construction dates, architects, and original owners; alterations to buildings and changes in ownership over time; the names of building residents; and historic photos, among other information. Before undertaking in-depth primary-source research, the major secondary sources on New York City buildings, including the AIA Guide to New York City and Robert A. M. Stern's New York series (New York 1880, New York 1900, New York 1930, New York 1960, and New York 2000) should be consulted. These books are available in the Milstein Division of the New York Public Library at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street.

### Initial Steps

Before beginning your research, check to see if the building is a designated New York City Landmark or within a designated Historic District. The easiest way to do this is with the interactive "Discover NYC Landmarks" web map, located at [nyc.lpc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=93a88691cace4067828b1eede432022b](http://nyc.lpc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=93a88691cace4067828b1eede432022b). This map shows the location of every Individual Landmark, Interior Landmark, Scenic Landmark, and Historic District designated by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), and provides direct access to their designation reports. Every

Historic District designation report, except for the very earliest, contains detailed entries on buildings within the District, including their original owners, architects, dates of construction, and alterations. In some cases, the names of original owners or architects were not known at the time of designation, but this information may now be obtainable using new research tools, including searchable digitized newspapers (see below) that have come online since the early 2000s.

Also check to see if the building has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, or is within a National Register District. New York State's Cultural Resource Information System, or CRIS ([nysparks.com/shpo/online-tools/](http://nysparks.com/shpo/online-tools/)) features an interactive map making it easy to search for National Register properties and districts and find reports, photographs, and other related information.

After searching these sources, look up the building's Property Profile in BIS, the Department of Buildings' online Building Information System (<http://a810-bisweb.nyc.gov/bisweb/bsqpm01.jsp>). The Property Profile often contains a wealth of useful information, including the building's block-and-lot number, which is crucial for conducting in-depth research. (Buildings Department, conveyance, and tax information is generally easier to find when searching by block-and-lot number than by address.) It will also show an "L" next to "Landmark Status" if the building is a designated New York City Landmark or is within a designated Historic District. Other useful information may include the building's New Building (NB) application number, Alteration (ALT) application numbers, and pdf copies of Certificates of Occupancy (C of O's). To access this information from the building's Property Profile Overview page, click on the blue "Actions" link toward the bottom of the page. Note that the Property Profile sometimes contains a "Year Built" field which is not always accurate. The Property

Profile is also accessible through NYCityMap ([maps.nyc.gov/doitt/nycitymap](http://maps.nyc.gov/doitt/nycitymap)), which provides links to additional information about the building and its neighborhood.

For 20th-century Manhattan buildings, visit the website of the Office for Metropolitan History, which maintains an online searchable database of New Building (NB) permits issued between 1900 and 1986. The database may be searched by address, architect, owner's name, NB number, or other criteria. It's located at [www.metrohistory.com/searchfront.htm](http://www.metrohistory.com/searchfront.htm).

### **New Building and Alteration Applications**

A building's New Building (NB) application is generally the most accurate and complete source of information about its construction. New Building (NB) applications have been required for every new building constructed in Manhattan since 1866. They have been required for new buildings in the West Bronx since 1874—when New York City annexed the area west of the Bronx River—and for Brooklyn buildings constructed since 1878. NB applications became required for all other areas of what is now New York City, including Queens and Staten Island, by 1898, when New York City, comprising the five boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island, was consolidated into its present form.

New Building applications include the date of filing (and often, building completion), the architect's name and address, original owner's name and address, original building and lot dimensions, and construction details. The NB application for a building often resides within its block-and-lot folder, which may also contain later alteration (ALT) applications and architectural drawings documenting changes to the building over its history. For buildings in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island, block-and-lot folders may be

requested at the Manhattan office of the Buildings Department; folders for block numbers 968 and below may be paged from the Municipal Archives (see below) and are delivered to the Archives from offsite each Friday. For borough office locations and contact information, visit [www1.nyc.gov/site/buildings/about/borough-offices.page](http://www1.nyc.gov/site/buildings/about/borough-offices.page).

In cases in which the BIS Property Profile contains NB and/or ALT numbers but these applications are missing from the block-and-lot folder or otherwise cannot be located, the best next step is to consult either the Manhattan docket books in the Municipal Archives or, for buildings constructed in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide (see "New York Public Library" and "Online Resources," below).

Both NB and ALT numbers are in the format #####-YEAR. For the Municipal Building at One Centre Street, for example, BIS shows an NB number of 459-08, meaning that its New Building application was the 459th filed in the year 1908. If an asterisk appears next to an NB or ALT number in BIS, this indicates a filing date of before 1900.

### **Municipal Archives**

Located on the first floor of the Surrogate's Court-Hall of Records Building (John R. Thomas and Horgan & Slattery, 1899-1907, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark), the Municipal Archives houses a wide range of historical resources. For visitor information, see [www.nyc.gov/html/records/html/archives/archives.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/html/archives/archives.shtml).

In addition to the Manhattan block-and-lot folders for blocks 1 through 968, the most useful resources at the Municipal Archives are:

- Manhattan New Building and Alteration docket books, which provide NB and ALT information

for the period from 1866 to 1959. Although the docket books provide less information than the NB and ALT records themselves, they are invaluable when NB and ALT records are missing from their block-and-lot folders or are otherwise unavailable. NB and ALT numbers in the BIS Property Profiles for Manhattan buildings refer directly to the records in these books. Indexes are available for locating NB and ALT numbers that may not have been recorded in BIS, although using the indexes is often difficult and time-consuming.

- Tax assessment records, which provide the owner's name and tax valuation for each property going back to the late 18th century. These records often indicate the presence of a building on the lot and the height of the building in stories. The tax assessment records are especially useful for determining construction dates of buildings that predate the Buildings Department. The Municipal Archives holds tax assessment records for Manhattan (1789 to 1979), Brooklyn (1866 to 1975), Queens (1899 to 1988), the Bronx (1897 to 1962), and Staten Island (1899 to 1979). Note that block and lot numbers have often changed over time, and historic tax assessments were often organized by ward, making it crucial to consult historic maps to determine the correct ward number and historic block and lot numbers for the period of construction.
- The circa-1939 and circa-1988 "tax photos," which are photographs of New York City buildings taken in the 1930s and again in the 1980s. Prints of these photos may be ordered for a fee; although all of the city's buildings were photographed, some photos have become damaged or gone missing and are no longer available.

In addition, the Municipal Archives has an extensive historic photograph collection, much of which may be browsed online at [nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/](http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/)

[servlet](#).

## City Register

Conveyance (deed) records trace the ownership of buildings over time. Conveyances and mortgage records from 1966 to the present (except for Staten Island) are available online through the Automated City Register Information System (ACRIS) at <https://acrisweb.csc.nycnet/cp/>. For Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, property records up to 1965 are on microfilm at each borough's City Register office, located within the borough's Finance Business Center. For the locations and hours of Finance Business Centers, see [www1.nyc.gov/site/finance/about/contact-us-by-visit.page](http://www1.nyc.gov/site/finance/about/contact-us-by-visit.page). Staten Island property records are at the Office of the Richmond County Clerk at 130 Stuyvesant Place. For visitor information, see [www.richmondcountyclerk.com/information.htm](http://www.richmondcountyclerk.com/information.htm).

Deed and mortgage records prior to 1965 are organized by liber and page and have been microfilmed. To find liber and page numbers for records relating to specific properties in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, consult the index books in the appropriate borough's City Register office. There are separate index books for conveyances and mortgages as well as multiple deed and mortgage index books covering different time periods. Both the conveyance and mortgage books are organized by block and give the liber and page numbers for records associated with each property on the block. Note that within the index books, properties are often identified not by street address but by lot number and/or distance from the nearest intersection—for example, 150 95th Street in Brooklyn might be identified as "95th Street, S.S. (south side), 125' W. of Marine Avenue." Distance from the nearest intersection may be calculated by consulting the current tax map, which provides the dimensions of all city lots and is available at [gis.nyc.gov/taxmap/](http://gis.nyc.gov/taxmap/).

Although most City Register offices contain both the index books and microfilmed records, for Brooklyn, the index books are at the Queens City Register office in Jamaica while the microfilmed records are at the Brooklyn City Register office in Downtown Brooklyn.

On Staten Island, the research process is slightly different. Here, the indexes are “grantor/grantee indexes,” meaning that property ownership is traced back using the names of the grantors (conveyors/sellers) and grantees (acquirers/purchasers) of the property. Many of the deeds themselves are available for viewing in large bound volumes or on computer terminals, depending on the year. Staff is available for assistance, and property information may be printed from the computer terminals for a small fee.

### **New York Public Library**

The main building of the New York Public Library at the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street is an invaluable resource for researching the history of New York City buildings and their architects, owners, and residents. Designed by Carrère & Hastings and constructed from 1898 to 1911, this designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark is now known as the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. For visitor information, see [www.nypl.org/locations/schwarzman](http://www.nypl.org/locations/schwarzman).

Begin your visit at the Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy on the first floor. Reference librarians in the Milstein Division will be able to assist you in researching your building and its owner, architect, and historic tenants using the Division’s extensive collection of books and other resources. They will also be able to assist you in using the library’s online research tools, which include searchable newspapers and genealogical resources including the ProQuest databases of historic New York City and African-

American newspapers, Ancestry.com, and HeritageQuest Online. (These electronic databases are also accessible at New York Public Library branches.) For a list of online databases available at the New York Public Library, see [www.nypl.org/collections/articles-databases](http://www.nypl.org/collections/articles-databases) and filter for the subjects “New York City History” and “Genealogy.” The library’s catalog may be searched from its home page, [www.nypl.org](http://www.nypl.org).

The Library also houses an extensive microfilmed collection of city directories for all boroughs dating back to the 18th century, and well as historic telephone directories and address telephone directories, the latter of which list residents by address instead of by name. The address telephone directories, along with state and federal census records available through Ancestry.com and HeritageQuest Online, make it possible to find the names of building residents at specific points in time. The Library also has microfilmed copies of the Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide, which contain NB and ALT information for Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx from 1868 to the 1920s, although it is often easier and faster to download issues of the Guide directly from Columbia University’s website (see “Online Resources,” below). A separate Brooklyn and Long Island edition of the magazine, available from offsite at the New York Public Library (and not available from Columbia), contains NB and ALT information for Brooklyn from 1905 to 1912.

Other New York Public Library resources include:

- The Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, which houses an extensive collection of New York City maps, including historic fire insurance atlases showing individual lots and building outlines. Many of these maps have been digitized and are available online at [digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/explore/](http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/explore/)

[dgexplore.cfm?topic=all&col\\_id=442](#). These maps may be useful in narrowing down construction dates when other documentation can't be found, and in determining historic block, lot, and ward numbers for tax assessment research.

- The Library's collections of New York City photographs, accessible through a map-based interface at [www.oldnyc.org](http://www.oldnyc.org).
- The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at 515 Malcolm X Boulevard, one of the country's leading African-American history resources ([www.nypl.org/locations/schomburg](http://www.nypl.org/locations/schomburg)).
- The Latino and Puerto Rican Cultural Collection at the Bronx Library Center ([www.nypl.org/locations/bronx-library-center](http://www.nypl.org/locations/bronx-library-center)).
- The Library's Art and Architecture Division on the third floor of the Schwartzman Building, which has an extensive collection of architecture books and journals as well as clippings files, on microfiche, relating to specific architects. The Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals, which is available online throughout the library, is an index of journal articles about specific buildings and architects. For visitor information, see [www.nypl.org/locations/schwartzman/art-architecture-collection](http://www.nypl.org/locations/schwartzman/art-architecture-collection).

### **Museum of the City of New York**

The museum is home to an extensive collection of New York City photographs, thousands of which are now available online. To access the online collection, visit [collections.mcny.org/Explore/Formats/Photographs](http://collections.mcny.org/Explore/Formats/Photographs). For additional information, see [www.mcny.org/content/research-policies](http://www.mcny.org/content/research-policies).

### **New York Historical Society**

The Historical Society's library is one of the city's great repositories of manuscripts, printed materials, and photographs. Much of its photographic collection has been digitized and is accessible online at [www.nyhistory.org/library/research](http://www.nyhistory.org/library/research). Among

the Historical Society's photographic holdings are pictures taken between 1900 and 1908 during construction of the city's original subway lines to document the conditions of buildings adjacent to construction. The Society also has large holdings of historical atlases, maps, and architectural drawings and records. An appointment is required to access some of these materials; consult the website for details.

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## Borough-Specific Resources

### The Bronx

- The library and archives of the Bronx Historical Society contain thousands of books, maps, city directories, manuscripts, photographs, post cards, and other materials related to Bronx history. In addition to its Archives, the Society operates two museums: the Museum of Bronx History, housed within the Colonial-Era Valentine-Varian House at 3266 Bainbridge Avenue; and the circa-1812 Edgar Allan Poe Cottage at 2640 Grand Concourse. Both of these houses are designated New York City Landmarks. Use of the Society's Library and Archives is by appointment only; see [bronxhistoricalsociety.org/library-archives/](http://bronxhistoricalsociety.org/library-archives/) for details.
- The Bronx was annexed by New York City in stages beginning in 1874; before then, it was part of Westchester County. Because of this, the Westchester County Archives in Elmsford, N.Y. holds extensive records on Bronx properties through the 19th century. For information on collections, location, and hours, visit [archives.westchestergov.com](http://archives.westchestergov.com). Land records for Westchester County, including old conveyance records for properties that are now in the Bronx, may be searched online (for a fee) and downloaded by clicking the "Records Online" tab at [www.westchesterclerk.com](http://www.westchesterclerk.com).

### Brooklyn

- In addition to its collections of historic atlases, directories, and real estate brochures, the library of the Brooklyn Historical Society houses the Brooklyn Land Conveyance Collection and Brooklyn and Long Island Scrapbook

Collection. The former comprises an enormous collection of index cards, organized by block number, that document individual property transactions in Brooklyn from the 17th century to 1896. Each card contains information about the property's grantor and grantee, as well as an outline of the property including its dimensions. The Scrapbook Collection consists of newspaper clippings that are searchable using an onsite card catalog. These clippings often contain obituaries and other stories about Brooklyn residents, architects, and building owners. The Society, which is housed in a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark designed by George B. Post and built in 1878-81, also mounts several exhibitions each year related to Brooklyn history. The Library is open Wednesday through Saturday afternoons; for visitor information, see [www.brooklynhistory.org/library/visit.html](http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/visit.html). To search the Library's catalog, visit [www.brooklynhistory.org/library/search.html](http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/search.html).

- Along with books, historic maps, films, and other resources related to Brooklyn history, the Brooklyn Collection of the Brooklyn Public Library is home to a comprehensive collection of newspaper clippings that originally served as the "morgue file" of the old Brooklyn Eagle newspaper. The Collection, which is located on the second floor of the Brooklyn Central Library on Grand Army Plaza, includes hundreds of thousands of photographs and other images of the borough, many of which have been digitized. These images may be searched through the main online catalog of the Brooklyn Public Library: [www.bklynlibrary.org](http://www.bklynlibrary.org). For more information on the Brooklyn Collection, visit [www.bklynlibrary.org/brooklyncollection](http://www.bklynlibrary.org/brooklyncollection). The Brooklyn Public Library also provides digitized, downloadable Brooklyn city directories dating from 1856 to 1908 (<http://www.bklynlibrary.org/citydir/>) as well as full, searchable access to the Brooklyn



Eagle newspaper between 1841 and 1955 ([bklyn.newspapers.com](http://bklyn.newspapers.com)).

## Queens

- Formerly known as the Long Island Division, the Archives at Queens Library is the borough's most comprehensive historical resource, its collections of books, historic maps, photographs, clippings files, and other resources numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Although the Archives' primary focus is on Queens, its collections cover all of Long Island, including Brooklyn and Nassau and Suffolk Counties. The Archives is housed within the Queens Central Library at 89-11 Merrick Boulevard in Jamaica. For additional information, visit [www.queenslibrary.org/research/archives](http://www.queenslibrary.org/research/archives).
- The Queens Historical Society in Flushing maintains a research library that is open to the public by appointment. For information, visit [www.queenshistoricalsociety.org/library-and-collections.html](http://www.queenshistoricalsociety.org/library-and-collections.html).
- Housed in the striking Gothic Revival style Fort Totten Officers' Club (c. 1870; enlarged 1887; a designated New York City Landmark), the Bayside Historical Society maintains a library and archives dedicated to Bayside and its surrounding neighborhoods. Visit [www.baysidehistorical.org/collections.html](http://www.baysidehistorical.org/collections.html) for details.

## Staten Island

- The archives and library of the Staten Island Museum, also known as the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, contain 15,000 reference volumes, historic maps, directories, military enlistment records, church and cemetery records, genealogical resources, and more than 60,000 historic images, along with an architectural survey collection. The archives and library are open by appointment only. For information, visit [www.statenislandmuseum.org/collections/history-archives](http://www.statenislandmuseum.org/collections/history-archives).

- The St. George branch of the New York Public Library contains a section devoted to Staten Island history, including all issues of the Staten Island Historian from 1938 to the present, as well as microfilmed issues of the Staten Island Advance dating back to 1886. The library also has microfilm reels of the early Staten Island New Building and Alteration docket books. These are especially useful in researching Staten Island buildings constructed before the 1910s because of a fire that destroyed most of the borough's earliest Buildings Department files.
- The library at Historic Richmond Town houses 15,000 volumes, archives dedicated to the borough's history, and thousands of historic photographs, and is open by appointment. For details, visit [www.historicrichmondtown.org/treasures/collections/archives](http://www.historicrichmondtown.org/treasures/collections/archives).

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## Online Resources

In addition to the previously mentioned online resources provided by the city's libraries and other research institutions, there are many free online sites.

- For those researching New York City buildings, their owners, architects, and occupants, Columbia University provides three key resources, the most important being the digitized Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide ([rerecord.cul.columbia.edu](http://rerecord.cul.columbia.edu)), a weekly chronicle of building activity searchable for the period between 1868 and 1922. During this time, the Record and Guide listed all of the NB and ALT applications filed in Manhattan (and, for many years, in Brooklyn and the Bronx), making it possible to look up new building and alteration information using the NB and ALT numbers from a building's BIS Property Profile. Volumes of the Record and Guide may also be downloaded directly from this site as searchable pdf's. Brooklyn NB and ALT records from 1905 to 1912 were published in a special Brooklyn and Long Island edition, which is available through the New York Public Library. Columbia University also maintains the Biggert Collection of Architectural Vignettes on Commercial Stationery (<https://biggert.cul.columbia.edu>) and the New York Real Estate Brochure Collection ([nyre.cul.columbia.edu](http://nyre.cul.columbia.edu)), a searchable database of nearly 10,000 pamphlets promoting new apartment houses built throughout the five boroughs between the 1920s and 1970s.
- The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation maintains an archive of historic images at [www.archive.gvshp.org/items/browse](http://www.archive.gvshp.org/items/browse). Click on "Search by map" at the top of the page

to find images by location.

- Brooklyn Visual Heritage ([www.brooklynvisualheritage.org](http://www.brooklynvisualheritage.org)) contains thousands of historic Brooklyn images accessible through a keyword-searchable database. The site was created through a collaborative effort of Pratt Institute, the Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn Public Library, and Brooklyn Museum.
- The Old Fulton New York Post Cards and New York State Historic Newspapers websites ([www.fultonhistory.com](http://www.fultonhistory.com) and [nyshistoricnewspapers.org](http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org)) provide unlimited access to keyword-searchable 19th- and 20th-century newspapers from around New York City and State, including, at Old Fulton Post Cards, the historic African-American newspaper The New York Age.
- Dozens of historic New York newspapers, including the Amsterdam News, Herald, Tribune, and Sun, as well as newspapers from around the country, may be searched at the Chronicling America website of the Library of Congress ([chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)).
- People, organizations, and addresses associated with historic properties are easily searchable through Google Books ([books.google.com](http://books.google.com)) and the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>), which provides access to millions of books and other documents, many of which may be fully downloaded.