

# UNCOVERING THE PAST

Maybe Abe Lincoln didn't sleep here, but don't be discouraged. Your Victorian-era home has a unique history all its own.

BY CHARITY VOGEL • PHOTOGRAPHY BY T.J. PIGNATARO

**E**very old house is a history book.

Problem is, unless you're living at Mount Vernon—and that's something you probably shouldn't admit to since it's a national historic site—the history contained within an old home often remains hidden, even from the people who think they know it best.

Sure, you may have polished the leaded-glass windows, ripped out worn carpeting and refinished painted woodwork, but until you've done some digging to uncover your home's hidden history, you know very little about it.

Relax. This doesn't mean endless hours of dry, dusty research. Think of it more as detective work—like solving a real-life historical mystery.

Uncovering your home's unique past life—or lives—isn't difficult. In fact, it can be a lot of fun. It requires just a few resources: computer access, the willingness to do some legwork and persistence. Once you begin, you'll be captivated by the thrill of the hunt. Best of all, when you're done, you'll have added greatly to your enjoyment of your home—and maybe to its value, if you uncover a significant or compelling past. You may find that your home has a backstory that's more prosaic than romantic, more *Everybody Loves Raymond* than *Gone With the Wind*. Still, your home's story is as one-of-a-kind as the decorative touches you've added to it, and it deserves to be remembered.

In the issues to come, we'll provide a step-by-step guide to begin your own detective mis-



This 1898 Victorian beauty had a few stories to tell after the homeowners did a bit of "house detective" work.



The plot thickens as the Vogels peruse the title to their home, looking for clues.

sion, along with practical tips on how to use your newfound knowledge. We'll also include real-world examples of homes whose hidden histories revealed vivid past lives.

Without further delay, let's begin a sleuthing adventure into the hidden history of your old house.

**1. Study the title.** The most basic way to begin uncovering your home's history is to study the papers you received when you bought it. Note carefully the name of the original owners. Scrutinize the title for details, including how long they owned the home, when they died or sold it, and so on. After you've researched the original owners, read through the rest of the document to ascertain all the subsequent owners' names, in chronological order, and information pertaining to their buying and selling of the house. The key here is to look for any unusual details that jump out. Each of these details will become an avenue for further research.

For instance, did a woman own the house back when such a thing was rare? Was the home handed down through a family for decades? Did people of different ethnic backgrounds own the home? Who owned it during The Gilded Age? Were there any prominent names on that list?

**2. Research old city directories.** You can find old directories at a library or historical society, or call your local newspaper and ask if they have vintage directories. The city directory—like a phone book, only organized by street addresses—will reveal who lived in your house during a particular year, and, often-times, the occupation of the former owners.

14	James H. Lord, sole executor of the last will and testament of Franklin Belknap, deceased to Emily Belknap	Executor's Deed dated August 17 1886 recorded in liber 462 of Deeds page 97 April 1 1887 Conveys premises and more
15	Emily A. Belknap, widow to Frank F. Watt	W Deed dated January 2 1897 recorded in liber 836 of Deeds page 208 January 5 1897 Conveys premises and more, subject to a mortgage since discharged

Look up any bygone year in the directory for a glimpse into the occupants of your home. You'll learn who the neighbors were and whether any important people lived nearby, all invaluable information as you begin your investigation.

When my husband and I bought our Victorian home, built c. 1898, we were impressed with its many beautiful details: the intricate oak staircase, the stained-glass windows and the five windows in our third-story attic, each one a different shape. We could tell that someone special had built our house, someone who treasured beauty and took pride in good craftsmanship. We wanted to know more about this person, so we closely inspected the papers we received at closing.

We discovered the name of the original owner, Frank F. Watt. We hunted down a city directory from 1898 to find a notation that listed Watt as a railroad conductor. Since we live in a tiny village that sprang up in the 19th century as a railroad stop, Watt's career seemed especially fitting. We began to look at our home as the prized possession of a man who worked on the railroads during America's Golden Age of Rail.

We knew we were onto something special. What we didn't know was just how right we were or how much we would enjoy the journey of discovery.

**Next time:** How long did it take to dig your basement? Where did the first owners buy their lumber? Learn tricks for uncovering these kinds of details about your home's construction in the next installment of this column. ✍

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