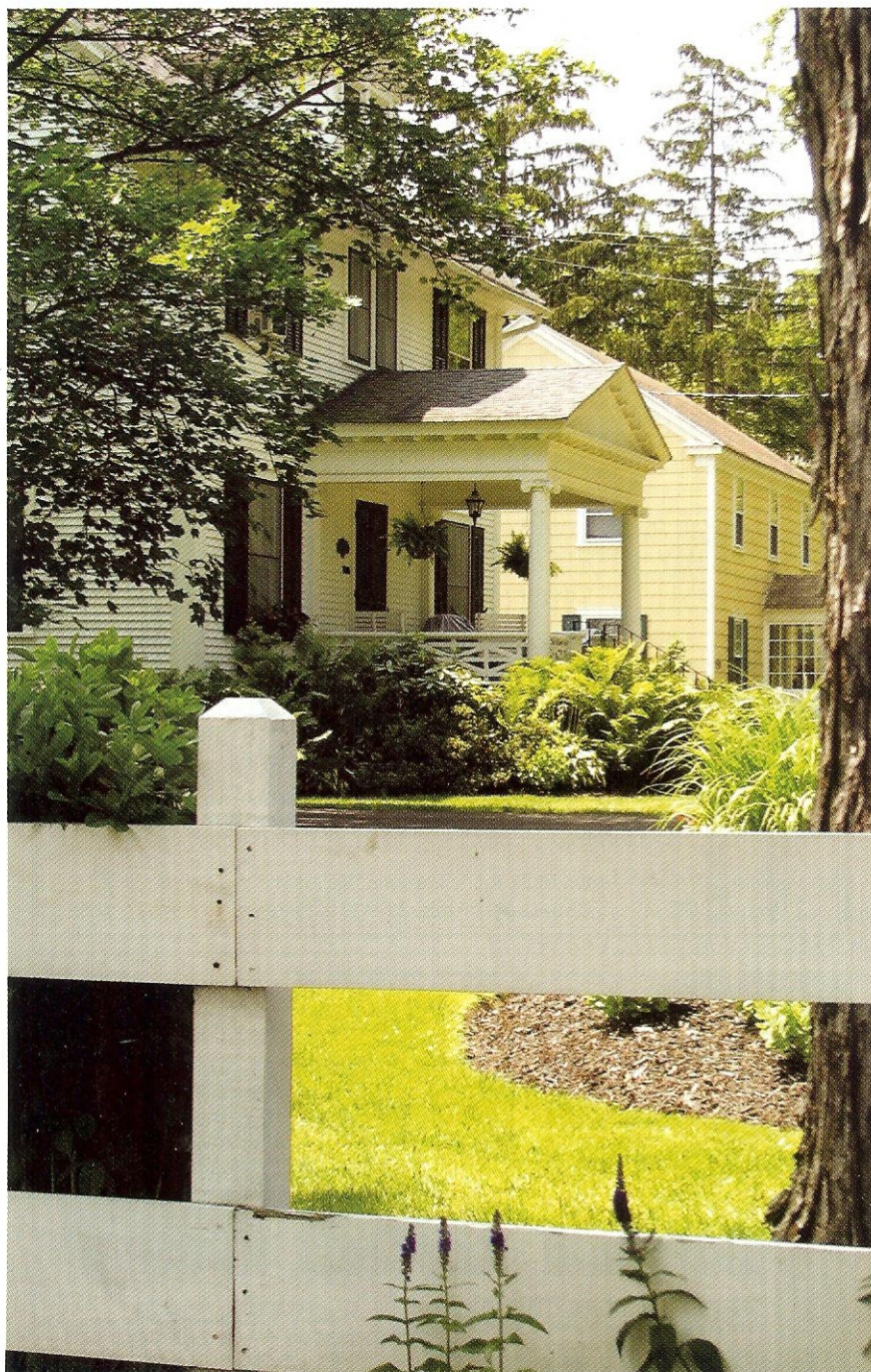


STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN

Don't just look at your old house. Listen to it.

BY CHARITY VOGEL • PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD PIGNATARO



As the owner of a vintage Victorian home, you are lucky.

Victorian-era home builders were prolific—they had to be, with the country changing and growing—and they were community-minded, too. Find one vintage Victorian and you'll likely find others around it. And it is possible that some of these old houses are owned by people who have lived in them for many years. Don't neglect word of mouth—a precious resource in uncovering the hidden history of your Victorian home.

In the previous two installments of this column, we outlined ways to investigate and uncover your home's unique history. The first step was basic: a thorough study of the home's deed and title paperwork, considering possible leads and insights from past owners. The second step involved research at the local library, particularly in old newspapers published at the time your house was built.

Now we've arrived at the third step in this process, the one that can be the most fun because it involves interacting with live people rather than dry papers and dusty books. Start talking. That's right. Start chatting with other people in your neighborhood and community about your house, and ask plenty of questions.

People who own the homes around you—especially those folks with good memories—can provide you with all sorts of tips about the history of your home. Be careful, of course: Some of these tales will be true and some will be wishful thinking, local legend or

bald myth. Be sure to check everything out thoroughly, using other (ideally, printed) sources.

Admittedly, this isn't easy for everyone. In very rural or urban areas, it will be harder to uncover the collective community memory found in a close-knit village. Kathryn Newell, owner of a Victorian home in Hackettstown, New Jersey, found that out the hard way.

Newell, who is restoring a c. 1885 home with her husband, ran into a major roadblock when she began digging into her home's past. She tried talking to people in the vintage homes around hers, only to discover that most of the houses had been transformed into multi-unit apartments whose tenants hadn't been around much longer she had.

"It's very frustrating out here," says Newell. "We are living in an area that was fairly rural until 40 years ago. Things are very laid back and not very efficient here."

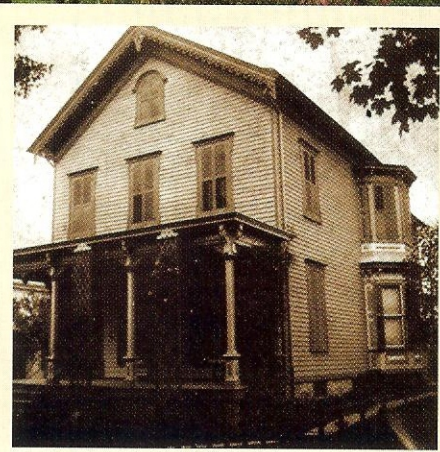
But Newell hit pay dirt when she kept talking persistently about her house project to people she ran into. One day, in a local Chamber of Commerce storefront, she met a woman volunteer who knew a little about one of the previous families who owned the house. On the spot, the helpful woman placed a phone call to an older resident in the area, who knew the family and put Newell in touch with them.

"I eventually got copies of photos of how our house originally looked," says Newell. Since then, previous residents walked through the home and told her how it used to look.

Quirky, word-of-mouth success stories happen all the time, and they can work for you, too. When my husband T.J. and I first bought our 1898 Victorian, we heard lots of stories



Right: This image of the Newell House was taken between 1900-1910, and shows how beautiful the c. 1885 structure was before its remuddle.



about our house. We were out for a walk recently when we ran into an older man who lives a few streets away. We got to talking about houses.

"Oh yeah," the elderly gentleman said. "You live in the big blue house. My brother was born there back when it used to be a hospital."

Here was yet another clue to our home's history that we've been hearing about for years: It once served as a local hospital. As the story goes, the surrounding town was so small and sparsely populated back in the 1930s and 1940s that no real hospital existed, and so a large home in the village (ours) was turned into a hospital. Some people have told us that it was specifically a maternity hospital. Later, when enough residents moved to the area and a real community hospital was built, the home went back to being a private residence.

It's a great story. We've yet to find hard evidence of it, but we're still looking. Someday we hope to locate something concrete—antique hospital records, an old doctor's journal, or photographs. Until then, we'll keep up the quest.

Believe this about vintage houses: People know their secrets. So ask them! They'll be glad to share.

In the next issue:

Using the Internet to probe further into your home's hidden history. ✿

Hidden History Editor Charity Vogel has a PhD in English, with a concentration in 19th century American literature and art. She owns a Victorian home near Buffalo, New York, with her husband T.J. Questions or comments can be mailed to P.O. Box 102, Angola, NY, 14006, or e-mailed to angolahome@adelphia.net.

Editor's note: If you own a vintage Victorian home that bears a signature—the name of the early owners written on a beam, etched on a window, or carved into a staircase—please contact Charity Vogel. She is working on a future story about such markings.