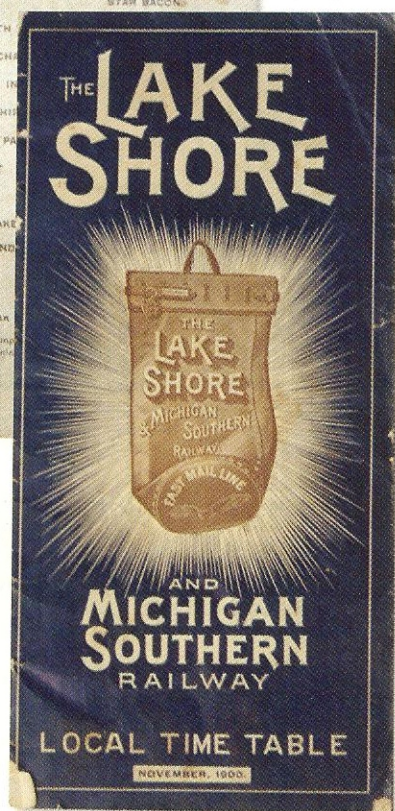
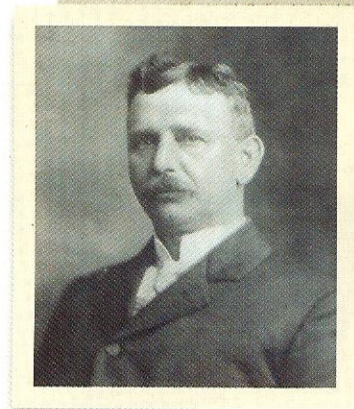
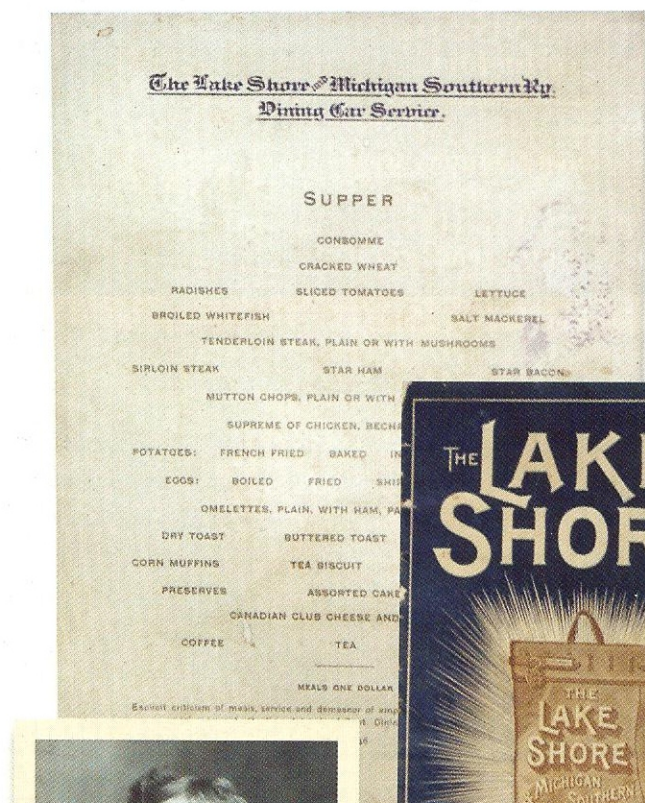


OLD HOUSE MEETS NEW TECHNOLOGY

Being Internet savvy can help make researching your home's hidden history easier—and more intriguing—than ever.

BY CHARITY VOGEL

I love talking to people about my Victorian home. Let dinner burn, let the laundry mount. I'd rather speculate about who installed those heavy oak panel doors or why someone bricked up the fireplace. Vintage home owners are like that—we enjoy sharing our passion and spreading our enthusiasm. And we all know that talking to others about old houses is a great way to learn more.



Strangely enough, a plethora of information lies in the hands of people you'll never meet or in record rooms you'll never visit. Yet you can—and should—cull these sources. And the Internet should be a key part of your investigation.

In a way, we're luckier than previous generations who tackled this sort of amateur historical research. Information that would have taken hours or days to uncover just 20 years ago can now be tracked down in minutes.

To begin, think about the people who lived in your home in generations past, including their age, gender, marital status, employment status and family size. You can find that information and more from historical census records. Visit www.census.gov to access old U.S. Census records online.

Let's use my 1898 Victorian home as an example. At the census Web site, I searched for the home's original builder, Frank F. Watt, in the 1900 census. I found that the 42-year-old homeowner lived in the house with his wife Mary and their two sons, Raymond and Arthur. Watt's profession as a railroad conductor is listed as well, along with the fact that his father was

TWELFTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES

SCHEDULE No. 1.—POPULATION.

State New York County Buffalo Representative's District No. 7 At-Large District No. 7

Ward or other division of county Buffalo Name of institution Buffalo Word of city, town or village, within the above-named division Buffalo

Enumerated by me on the 17th day of June, 1900. Signature [Signature] Enumerator

NAME	SEX	AGE	COLOR	MARITAL STATUS	OCCUPATION	EDUCATION	SCHOOLING	REMARKS	RELATION		FAMILY		HOUSEHOLD		WARD		CITY		COUNTY		STATE	
									Head	Wife	Children	Grandchildren	Other	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Watt, John	M	45	W	Married	Conductor	High School	12		Head	Wife	Children	Grandchildren	Other	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Watt, Mary	F	42	W	Married	Housewife	High School	12															
Watt, John	M	15	W	Single	Schoolboy	High School	12															
Watt, Mary	F	12	W	Single	Schoolgirl	High School	12															
Watt, John	M	10	W	Single	Schoolboy	High School	12															
Watt, Mary	F	8	W	Single	Schoolgirl	High School	12															
Watt, John	M	5	W	Single	Schoolboy	High School	12															
Watt, Mary	F	3	W	Single	Schoolgirl	High School	12															
Watt, John	M	1	W	Single	Schoolboy	High School	12															
Watt, Mary	F	1	W	Single	Schoolgirl	High School	12															

born in Scotland. (Six years after this census count, Watt died.)

The way to proceed with this kind of research is simple. Approach the project like you would genealogical research. Research the families who occupied your house as if they were distant branches of your own family. Then exhaust any and all online stores of records that might tell you more about them. In this vein, dedicated genealogy Web sites like www.genealogy.com can get you started. Depending on when your house was built, you can even check records for Ellis Island arrivals at www.ellisland.org to see if any of the people who lived in your home came to the United States that way.

Cemetery records are another potential resource. Many cemeteries have now put their past and present records online. These can also help you trace the life stories of your home's past owners. Gravestones are a great window into the past. If possible, visit those of your home's builder and other important owners. You may learn more based on the style, wording and placement of their tombstones. We found Watt's grave marker by using the Internet. It proved to be rather small and plain. Still, you never can tell what you'll find in an old cemetery.

Moreover, you'd be surprised at what published records people leave behind, even

those who don't seem to attract much public notice. Don't forget about the online archives that many newspapers make available (usually by clicking a link on the publication's homepage). You can use these search engines to conveniently hunt for long-past obituaries, news stories, wedding and birth announcements, as well as other bits of important factual information about the people who lived in your home over the years. This type of material is helpful for understanding what kind of people they were and their lifestyle. Did they serve in a war? Hold public office? Belong to charitable organizations? Use the Internet to help you find out.

Last, but not least: Don't forget eBay. In our case, once we knew that our home was built by a conductor on the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad, we knew we wanted to reconstruct a railroad theme for the foyer of our house. So we scoured eBay for vintage memorabilia from the railroad line.

Now, thanks to the Internet, we have a Lake Shore & Michigan Southern railroad manual and timetable displayed near our front door, along with a vintage menu from the railroad's dining car service. That menu was used by the company during Watt's

employment—he would have handled one just like it.

It gives our house a vintage feel. The process is a lot of fun and, best of all, the information is historically accurate.

Back in Time

To recap, here are the topics we covered in 2006:

In August, we looked at how to get started on the quest of researching your old home. Hint: Start with the basic paperwork you received when you bought it.

In October, we examined the value of old newspapers and periodicals to the search for a home's hidden past.

In December, we considered the power of casual conversation to unlock the past lives of an old home. Ask neighbors and older residents in your area what they remember—you may be surprised! ☞

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