



How to Research Your Home in Newport, RI

Every house has a story to tell, and uncovering that story is like a treasure hunt. Take the time to sift through the records and the history of your property will slowly unfold. You will come to learn more about the history of the structure, its residents, and its role in a larger neighborhood story.

1. Determine what research has already been completed on your property.

- a. If your house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, thorough research is on file with the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission (RIHPHC). Check the electronic RI National Register Search (www.ri.gov/preservation/search/) to see if your property is included. If it is, contact the RIHPHC office (150 Benefit St., Providence or 401-222-2678), to receive a copy of your property's National Register nomination form.
- b. If your house is located within the Hill, Point, or Kay-Catherine-Old Beach neighborhoods, the Newport Historical Society will have a Historic House Survey that describes its architecture and history.

2. Determine an approximate date of construction for your property.

- a. Start your research at home, using what you already have. Your house's **architectural style and building materials** can give you hints about its past. Use an architectural field guide such as Virginia & Lee McAlester's *Field Guide to American Houses* to identify features that may reveal a date range in which your house was built.
- b. Consult **historic maps and atlases**. Maps are a great way to determine an approximate date of construction. Search for a map on which your building *does not* appear and then the first subsequent map on which it *does* appear. The years between the publication dates of these maps will most likely be the time period in which your property was constructed. See below for a list of Newport maps and the repositories at which you can obtain them.

Newport City Hall = NCH, Newport Historical Society = NHS, Newport Public Library = NPL, Redwood Library = RL, Salve Regina University Library = SRU

Copies of a few maps are available in *The Architectural Heritage of Newport Rhode Island*, by Antoinette F. Downing and Vincent J. Scully, Jr., 1967. = DS (Page #)

Stiles, Ezra, *Map of Newport (1758)* –DS (34), NHS (copy), RL (original)

This map does not delineate building footprints. Instead it identifies properties and their use using a number and letter system; a legend is included on the map.

de Barres, J.F.W., *Map of Newport (1776)* –DS(97), NHS

This map identifies the location of public buildings, streets, and wharfs. It does not delineate the footprints of private residences.

Blaskowitz, Charles, *Map of Newport (1777)* –DS(93), NHS

This map delineates the footprints of private residences unless there is a large concentration of structures in one area. While the map may not identify your property individually, it may tell you if it was part of a dense neighborhood.

Dripps, M., *Map of Newport, Rhode Island* (New York: M. Dripps, 1850). -NHS

Dripps, M. & B.J. Tilley, *Map of the City of Newport, RI* (Newport, RI: M. Dripps & B.J. Tilley, 1859). -NHS

D.G. Beers & Co., *Atlas of the State of Rhode Island* (Philadelphia, PA: D.G. Beers & Co., 1870). -NCH

Hopkins, G.M., *City Atlas of Newport, RI* (Philadelphia, PA: G.M. Hopkins, 1876). -NHS, NPL

Atlas of the City of Newport, Rhode Island (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, 1883). -NCH, NHS, NPL

Newport, R.I. (New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., 1884). -RL, SRU

Newport Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1891). -RL, SRU

Elliot, Charles L. and Thomas Flynn, *Atlas of the City of Newport, RI* (Massachusetts: L.J. Richards and Co., 1893). -NHS

Atlas of Rhode Island (Everts and Richards, 1895). -NCH

Insurance Maps of Newport, Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1896). -RL, SRU

Insurance Maps of Newport, Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903). -RL, SRU

Atlas of the City of Newport and Town of Middletown and Portsmouth, Rhode Island (Massachusetts: L.J. Richards and Co., 1907). -NCH, NHS, NPL

Atlas of Newport, Jamestown, Middletown and Portsmouth Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1921). -NCH, NHS, NPL, RL, SRU

Insurance Maps of Newport, Rhode Island (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1953). -RL, SRU

3. Create a chain of title for your property.

A chain of title is the progression of a property's ownership from the present to the original owner.

a. The first step is to determine the property's **plat and lot number**. This can be done in one of two ways:

- Online
 - Visit the Tax Assessor's "Maps and Plans" webpage; www.cityofnewport.com/departments/planning-zoning/maps-plans/home.cfm.
 - Here you will find the "Plat Map Key." Locate your property and its correlating plat number from this map.
 - Next, go back to the "Maps and Plans" page and find the plat map you just recorded. This will download a .pdf on which you will find the lot number for your property.
- Tax Assessor's Office, first floor of Newport City Hall. Here a plat map key is posted on the wall where you can locate your property and its correlating plat number. Next use the maps on the desk below, organized by plat number, to determine your property's lot number.

b. The next step is to locate your property's **title card**. To do this you will need to visit the Tax Assessor's Office.

The title card records all legal transactions regarding your property between 1889 and the present.

Obtaining the complete title card for your property is a two-step process.

- Transactions between 2001 and the present are recorded in the *Assessor's Taxpayer Information System* database accessible on the computer in the Tax Assessor's Office.

- Transactions between 1889 and 2001 are recorded in the file cabinet below the Tax Assessor's desk. The files are organized by plat and lot number
- Transactions before 1889 have not been recorded onto title cards and can only be established through more detailed deed research as described below.

c. You now have the preliminary chain of title for your property and you can begin **deed research**. To do this, visit the Recorder of Deeds Office in the basement of City Hall.

Deeds are the legal documents that record land transfers.

- i. Begin by finding the deed for the most recent transaction using the deed book volume and page number that was recorded on your property's title card. This deed will represent the transaction between the current and most recent property owners.
- ii. Read through the deed to learn more about your property. From each deed you may gain insight into the features of the property being transferred such as the boundaries of the property, number of buildings on the lot, or if the property was previously part of a larger parcel of land. Often you can also learn more about the individuals transferring the land such as the seller and buyer's occupations and their relation to each other.
- iii. You can continue reading the deeds of past transactions by referencing the book volume and page numbers from your property's title card. The location of deeds recorded prior to 1889 can be found in one of two ways.
 - Typically, each deed will reference the previous transaction and the correlating deed book volume and page number.
 - If it does not, you can use the "Grantor/Grantee" index to find where a transaction was recorded.
 - The index for deeds recorded between 1910 and the present is located on a computer in the Recorder of Deeds Office in a database searchable by the grantor (seller) or grantee's (buyer) name.
 - For deeds recorded between 1774 and 1910 you will want to search the card catalog also located in the Recorder of Deeds Office.
 - Deeds recorded between 1700 and 1774 are located at the Newport Historical Society (NHS). The NHS also has a card catalog "Grantor/Grantee" index similar to that at the Recorder of Deeds Office.

4. Explore additional documents to learn more about your property and its past owners.

City Directories

City directories are similar to today's phone books. They list the city's residents and businesses, and their corresponding addresses.

Newport City Directories, between 1858 and 2005, are located at the Newport Historical Society. Years 1856 to 1989 are also available at the Newport Public Library.

- Between 1858 and 1922, and after 1986 a property can be searched only by the last name of the present owner or resident.
- Between 1922 and 1986 a property can be searched by its owner or resident, as well as by street address.

Directories are a great source of information and will provide insight into the building, the neighborhood, and its residents over time. You can learn, for example, if the building was a single-family home or contained separate apartments. Who owned and/or who rented the property, and what their occupation was.

Census Records

The U.S. Census has been taken every ten years since 1790. There are also 1774 and 1782 Rhode Island censuses, and an 1889 Newport census.

- The U.S. and Rhode Island censuses are available through Ancestry.com, accessible online at the Newport Public Library.
- The 1774 and 1782 Rhode Island censuses, and the 1889 Newport census are available at the Newport Historical Society.

The range of information offered by censuses differs depending on the year. Among other things, you can gain insight into whether the building is being owned or rented, the value of the house, the number of household members and their occupation, age, race, or place of origin.

Newspapers

There are a number of Rhode Island and Newport specific newspapers that can provide insight into your property and its residents, including; the Newport Mercury, Newport Herald, Providence Gazette and Rhode-Island Republican.

- Rhode Island newspapers between the years 1732 and 1913 are available through an online database called *Newsbank*, accessible at the Newport Public Library

Newspapers have the potential to offer a wide range of information. Anything from an advertisement for the rent or sale of your property, to the obituary of one of its residents. Be creative in what you search for and how you connect the dots!

Probate Inventories

A probate inventory is the complete listing of the property owned by an individual at the time of their death.

- The index for probate inventories is located in the City Clerk's Office in the basement of City Hall; it is organized alphabetically by last name. The corresponding documents are located in the Recorder of Deeds Office.

Probate Inventories are a great way to learn more about your building's interior. The individual's possessions are listed in the order they were found, and often the room in which they were found. From this you gain insight into the number and type of rooms within the house. Compare this to your property's current floor plan and discover what has changed!

Building Permits

Building permits record physical changes made to a property, including new construction or changes to a pre-existing structure.

- Permits between 1970 and the present are located at the Planning and Zoning Office at City Hall. While permits prior to 1970 no longer exist, reference to the work completed on your property as early as the 1940s will be available in card catalog form.