

RESEARCHING YOUR HOUSE IN AUSTIN, TEXAS



Compliments of the City of Austin Historic Preservation Office



Learning the history of your house provides you with fascinating information about the place you call home. You can determine the age of the house, who lived there, and how the house fits in with the development of your neighborhood and the city as a whole. Many people are interested in learning the history of their house to see if it qualifies for designation as a City Historic Landmark or for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, for their own edification, or even for cocktail party conversation.

The questions your research will answer are:

- When was the house built?
- Who lived in the house before me?
- How has the house changed over the years?

This pamphlet will help guide you in your research, and we wish you fun and good luck in your endeavor.

Step One:

Get to know your house.

When we first meet someone new, we are interested in the details of their lives and how they came to be the person they are today. The same is true of any building. You don't need any specialized knowledge about architecture to make good observations about your house – just learn how to find the clues that reveal its story to you.

First, look at the entire building. Notice the siding, windows, doors, ornamental details, and porches. What siding material was used on the house? Has the house been covered by aluminum, vinyl, or asbestos shingles? Are there any areas on the house where it looks like the siding was patched in? That may mean there was

originally a window or a door there. How about any areas where the siding material or pattern changes? That would indicate an addition to the house. What are the window frames made of? What is the material of the porch posts and railings? Taking an inventory of the materials used on the house will allow you to become more familiar with the way the house was built, and figure out if there are additions to the house. In many cases, the windows in the addition are different from those in the original part of the house. Look at the types of windows your house has and where each type is located. There may be more elaborate windows on the front of the house than on the sides or rear of the house. Next, go inside. Are there differences in the floor elevations of certain rooms? That may indicate that there was an addition at that point, and may confirm your observations about an addition from the outside of the house. Look at the interior finishes in each room – do some rooms have wood finishes on the walls and floors, while others are sheet-rocked and carpeted? Finally, look in the bathroom. If you have older bathroom fixtures, take the lid off of the commode and see if there is a date stamped into the underside of the lid. That will indicate the date the commode was manufactured, and give you a clue to the date of the bathroom, if not the whole house.

Step Two

Look for documentary evidence about your house. There are several resources for you to consult.

1. *Real estate records* at the Travis County Clerk's Office (5501 Airport Boulevard). The County Clerk's Office maintains microfilm files of deed transactions dating back to the 1800s. You will need to know the legal description of your property, and who you bought the property from, so you can work your way back through the deeds. Look in the reverse index (grantee index). The grantee is the person who purchased the property, and when you find who sold the property to you, you can find who sold the property to them, and so on, until you find the original owner of the property. Knowing the legal description of the property is essential to identifying the correct transactions in the index, as you may find the grantee's name, but with several transactions, so you need a legal description to identify which transaction was for your property. When you find the transaction in the index, you can then look up the microfilmed copy of the deed. Sometimes, the deed itself can give you a history of the transaction, as it will recite that the property being transferred by the deed is the same property which was transferred to the grantor by the previous owner. The County Clerk's records will also have any mechanic's liens that were filed on the property. Mechanic's liens were filed by contractors as a lien against the property, and were released when the contractor was paid for the work. Sometimes, mechanic's liens recite the work that was performed, and its price. Mechanic's liens can tell you when the house was built, or when additions were made to the property. Look for the lien as well as the release, showing that the lien was satisfied with full payment.

Reading the deeds can also provide you with information about your property and neighborhood if they contain restrictions, such as the required setback from the street, a prohibition on garages or apartments, and minimum house size and cost. Deed restrictions in the 1920s and 1930s also often contained prohibitions on sale or

occupancy by non-whites or non-Christians, as well as any other but a residential use of the property.

Record all of the transactions, showing the grantor and grantee, the type of instrument recorded, the date the instrument was recorded, and the volume and page number of the deed records.

You can also hire a title company to do this research for you. Many people have abstracts or chains of title done when they purchase a property so they are sure that there are no claims on the property when they buy it.

2. *Building permit records at the City of Austin.* The City of Austin began requiring building permits in 1937, and maintains a database of building permits, utility connections, and certificates of occupancy for properties within the city limits. However, if your house was not within the city limits at the time it was built, the City will not have a record of any building permits for the address before the property was annexed. City staff can help you find building permits in the system.

Sample permits:

2404 Tower Drive
(now called Tower Dr.)

Bay Wilson 2404 Copo St.
 1&W. 1/2 of 2

Tarry Town Oaks

2sty Brick Venr. Res. & Frame Garage

21241 - 2-11-41

8

Building permit for 2404 Tower Drive – 1941
 This building permit shows the former name of Tower Drive (Copo Street) which will be useful information when researching the city directories. The permit contains the name of the owner of the property – Bay Wilson, the legal description of the property, the type of construction, and the date of the permit.

OWNER	Dr. James D. Glynn	ADDRESS	2404 Tower Dr.
PLAT	170	LOT	1 & W. 1/2 of 2
		BLK	--
SUBDIVISION	Tarrytown Oaks		
OCCUPANCY	Closet & carport		
BLD PERMIT #	105631	DATE	10-30-67
		OWNERS ESTIMATE	900.00
CONTRACTOR	Owner	NO. OF FIXTURES	--
WATER TAP REC #	--	SEWER TAP REC #	--
	Stone ven. & frame addn. to existing res. 366 sq. ft.		

Permit for carport and addition - 2404 Tower Drive – 1967
 This building permit shows the date, type of construction, and the square footage of the addition and carport.

Emil Roos 2404 W. 9th St.
 149 11-12 6
 Marlton Sec
 Moving house onto lot-att carport
 73054 6/4/59 1500.00
 Jesse Sharpe 5
 W. on lot S. 32299
 FROM: 1406 Orlander St. RESIDENCE

Permit to move a house from 1406 Olander Street to 2404 W. 9th Street - 1959
 This relocation permit shows the date the house was moved from its original location to its current site on W. 9th Street, and name of the property owner (Emil Roos), the name of the contractor (Jesse Sharpe) and the original location of the house.

Connection # 2891 No. 17458 A
 APPLICATION FOR SEWER CONNECTION.
 Austin, Texas, 2-13- 1941
 To the Superintendent of Sewer and Public Improvements,
 City of Austin, Texas
 Sir:—
 I hereby make application for sewer connection and instructions
 on premises owned by Bay Wilson
 at 2404 Goppe St. Street,
1 W. 9th
 further described as lot 2, block _____, outlot _____
 subdivision Tarry Town Oaks division _____ plat _____
 which is to be used as a Res
 In this place there are to be installed 8 fixtures.
 I agree to pay the City Sewer Department the regular ordinance
 charge.
5' DEET Respectfully,
AT-PL M. Plumb.
 Stub Out _____
 Connected 4-2 1941 Permit Pd. _____
 Size of Main 4 inches. 3-4-41
 Size of Service 4 inches. 3-25-41
8 Feet Deep main ST
12 1/2 Feet from Property Line Con 16' E
 Feet from Curb Line of well
 Inspected by B. ...
 Connection made by J. Sharpe E-1404
14826 Sewer in Goppe drive

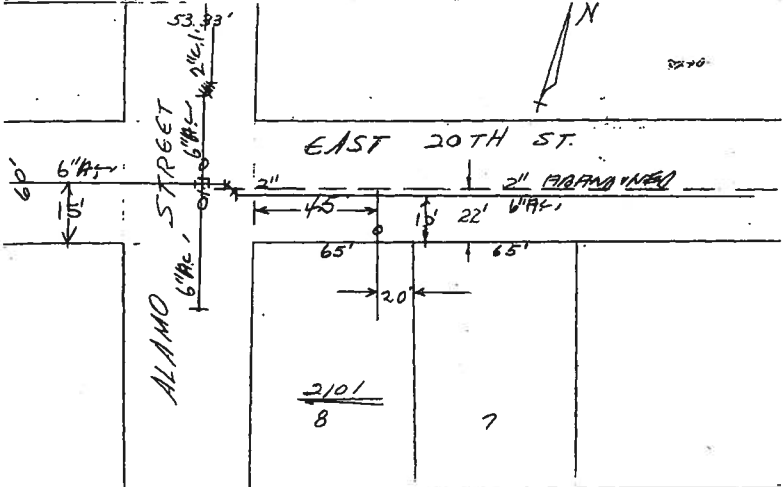
Permit for sewer connection - 2404 Tower Drive - 1941
 This sewer connection permit application shows the name of the owner, the address of the connection and the date of the connection.

WATER SERVICE PERMIT
Austin, Texas

C No. 3528
WS-188 3068

Received of JASPER TUNE Date 5-4-49
 Address 2101 E. 20
 Amount TWENTY & NO/100 20.00
 Plumber TRAVIS Size of Tap 3/4"
 Date of Connection 5-11-49
 Size of Tap Made 3/4"
 Size Service Made 3/4"
 Size Main Tapped 2" CF
 From Front Prop. Line to Curb Cock 7.5'
 From F - Prop. Line to Curb Cock 20'
 Location of Meter CURB
 Type of Box 2.0 CA
 Depth of Main in St. 3'
 Depth of Service Line 2.5'
 From Curb Cock to Tap on Main 8'
 Checked by Engr. Dept. R.W.P. 6-14-49

No. Fittings	Size	No. Fittings	Size
1 Curb Cock	5/8"	1 Elbow	3/4"
1 Scafflow	3/4"	1 Elbow	3/4"
1 Scafflow	3/4"	1 Elbow	3/4"
1 Scafflow	3/4"	1 Elbow	3/4"
10 Pipe	1/2" - 3/4" CF	10 Pipe	1/2" - 3/4" CF
1 Lead Comp.		1 Lead Comp.	
1 Nipples		1 Nipples	
1 Union		1 Union	
1 Plug	1/2"	1 Plug	1/2"
1 Step	1.5"	1 Step	1.5"
1 Box	2.0"	1 Box	2.0"
1 Lid		1 Lid	
1 Valves		1 Valves	
Job No. <u>61-323-507</u>		Job No. <u>61-323-507</u>	
Req. No. <u>1</u>		Req. No. <u>1</u>	

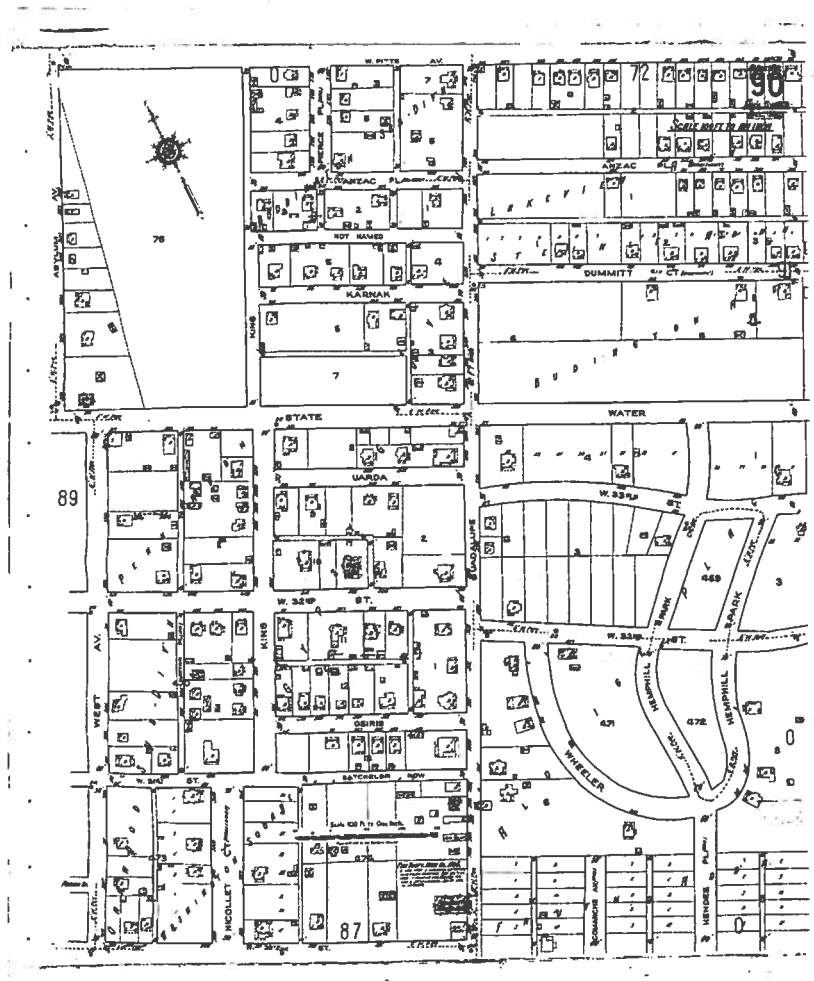


Application for water service - 2101 E. 20th Street - 1949

This water service permit shows the name of the property owner, the date of the connection, and includes a map showing the location of the service.

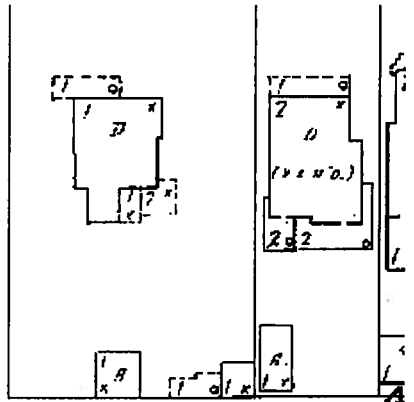
3. *Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps.* The Sanborn Fire Insurance Company produced maps of Austin showing the footprint of buildings within their coverage area from the late 1800s through 1962. The maps are available on microfilm at the Austin History Center (9th and Guadalupe), or on the Austin Public Library's website. You will need a library card number to access the website, and they are located under Research Databases, Digital Sanborn maps of Texas. Sanborn maps are also available at the Barker Center for American History at the University of Texas. Early maps show only the downtown area; the only maps showing most of the city are the 1935 map and updates to it through 1962. The maps were produced periodically - every couple of years until 1900, then with an addendum showing newer areas of the city in 1922, and a new map in 1935. The Sanborn maps can provide you with a wealth of information about your house. They indicate whether the house is one or two stories, the type of construction (frame,

masonry) and the footprint of the house at the time the map was produced, including any porches and out-buildings. You can compare the footprint of the house on the map with what exists today and determine which rooms are additions to the original house, as well as a range of dates for the construction of the house and any additions. For example, locate your street on the 1922 map and the 1935 map. If your house appears on the 1935 map but not on the 1922 map, you can assume that your house was built between 1922 and 1935. You can also determine whether your house was one of the first on your street or in your neighborhood by looking at the maps. They can reveal the development of your neighborhood by showing the oldest houses on the street.



December, 1921 Sanborn map showing Aldridge Place (east of Guadalupe Street) and Gypsy Grove (west of Guadalupe Street). Notice the street names in Gypsy Grove – for example, what is now Washington Square is noted as Nicollet Court, and what is now 34th Street was State Street west of Guadalupe and Water Street east of Guadalupe. Also notice some of the original names for streets in Gypsy Grove – Osiris,

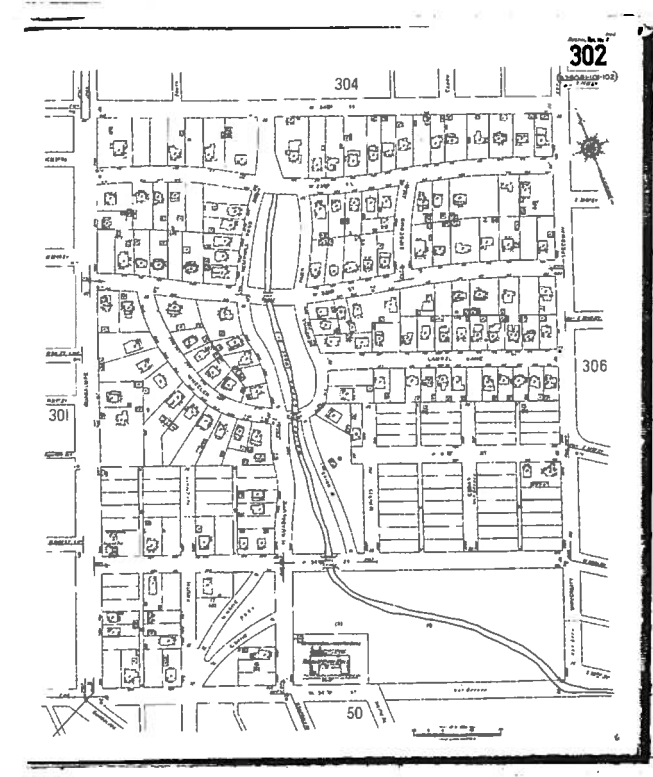
Karnak, etc. The map shows the footprints of the buildings in 1921 - the "D" inside the footprint indicates that the building is a dwelling. The number indicates the number of stories. Dotted lines indicate porches.



(13)

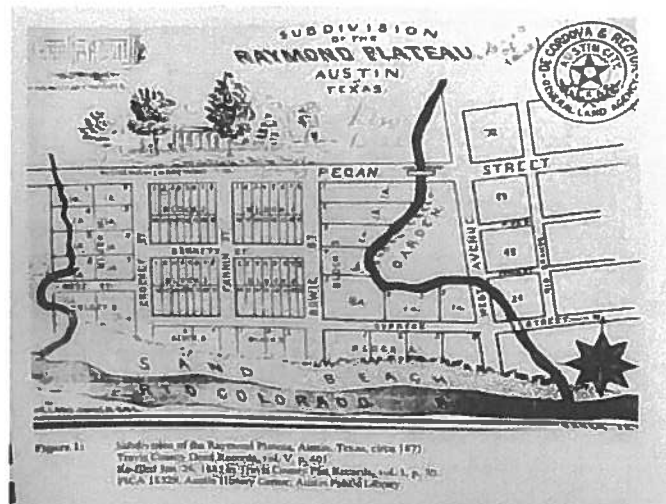
The house on the left is a dwelling (D) – it was one story tall with a one-story porch across the front. The house on the right was a two-story house with a one-story porch across the front. The house on the right was veneered – in masonry, while the house on the left had wood siding.

Compare the 1921 map of Aldridge Place above with the 1935 map of the same area below to see how the neighborhood developed. By 1935, the number of houses on Wheeler Street had increased significantly, showing which houses were built before 1922 and which were built between 1922 and 1935. The 1962 map would show houses built between 1935 and 1962.



Sanborn map of Aldridge Place – 1935.

4. *Plat maps.* Every developer who divided up property into lots for sale filed a plat with the County Clerk showing the street names, lot sizes, and other information about the subdivision. The plat maps are very useful for understanding the history of your neighborhood. The date of the plat reveals the age of the neighborhood, because there were generally no houses on the land being platted before the developer divided it up into lots. The plat map also shows the boundaries of the neighborhood, and may list some of the restrictions that would be incorporated into deeds when the lots were sold.



Subdivision map of Raymond Plateau – 1871

5. *City directories.* The Austin History Center has city directories dating back to the late 19th century. These directories were designed for business people and are not the phone books. The directories provide the most information you can get about the residents of your house. The directories are located along the north wall of the History Center reading room. Please be careful in using the books – many of them are very fragile.

Start with a recent directory (1980s or so). Find the section cross-referencing the street addresses (light green pages in later directories, pink pages in earlier directories). Find your street and address and see who was listed as the resident, then look that person up in the main section of the directory and find out their occupation, and to double-check the accuracy of the street listing. The directories will denote whether that person is an owner or a renter, and you can double-check the information against the real estate records you have already compiled on the ownership history of your house. Once you have the information from the first directory you consulted, start working your way back. The first directory with a cross-reference list of streets is the 1905 directory.

			Leona
	1600	Franks Claud	
	1601	Woodward P L	Ⓞ
			Sahna
	1704	Bayer R P	
			Chicon
	1901	Gooden Arth	(c)
	1902	Vacant	
Guadalupe	1903	Bryant Frank	(c) Ⓞ
	1904	Overton Sylvester	(c)
Ⓞ	1906	Fields Jas	(c)
	1907	Vacant	
n Antonio	1909	Jackson Julius	(c)
s	1911	Atkinson Geo	(c)
	1913	Baker Geo	(c)
			Poquito
Ⓞ	2003	Hayden A J	(c) Ⓞ
		Thomas John	(c)
Nueces	2005	Anderson Oscar	(c)
Ⓞ	2007	Parks Saml	(c) Ⓞ
rs Ⓞ	2008	Vacant	

1929 Austin City Directory showing the 1900 block of E. 17th Street between Chicon and Poquito Streets. The (c) indicates that the person listed was African-American. The O in a circle indicates that the person owned the house.

	160	(1929) MORRISON & FOURMY DIRE
	BRYANT	BRYANT
	" Danl (c) shoe shiner Goodyear Shoe Shop r1908 E 3d	" Tobe (c)
	" David M (Ollie) dairy es S Congress av 2s La Prella pl	" W Allison Sabine
	" Edw (c) (Hattie B) truck driver Quality Mills h1900 (1700) W 10th	Bryce Ann
	" Edw B (Lillian) waiter h827 W 11th	San Jac
	" Ella (c) maid 508 Bowie	" Anna S A
	" Ethel sten Rountree Laboratories r209 E 13th	" Mae r1104
	" Florence C emp Chivers Book Binding Co r1508 W 8th	Brydson B
	" Frank (Marie) electn h1410 Canterbury	W 19th
	" Frank (c) (Lillie) concrete wkr h1903 E 17th	" Celesta C
	" Fred J (Gladys) h1505 W 8th	Inc h19
	" Fredk (c) (Lula) h ws Deep Eddy av	" Daisy h1
		" Eric (Fla
		" Helena (
		av
		" John (M
		" John Jr
		hIdeal
		BRYDSON

1929 Austin City Directory for Frank Bryant, who lived at 1903 E. 17th Street. The directory shows that Frank Bryant was African-American "(c)", his wife's name was Lillie, and that he was employed as a concrete worker.

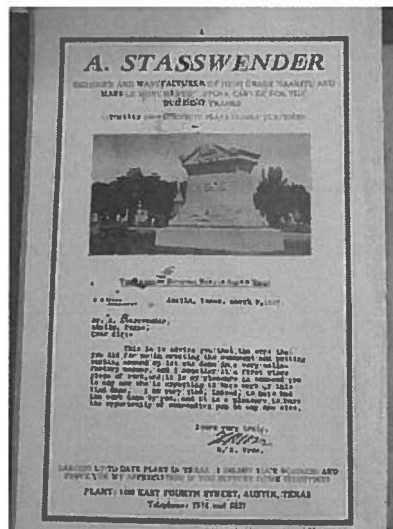
BE VERY CAREFUL when using the earlier directories, because house numbers and even street names changed frequently. Consult your Sanborn maps to better understand the history of development on your street – and if the street name or block numbers changed. Use the street intersections to help you. For example, if your house is on W. 31st Street between Guadalupe

and King Streets, look for the list of houses between those streets, rather than the block numbers in case they changed.

If your backward search through the directories shows that John Smith lived in your house, say in 1939, and you find John Smith living at a house with a different block number or house number in the 1937 directory, you may be able to assume that the house number or block number changed between those years. Remember, you are the detective investigating the history of your house – make reasonable assumptions when confronted with inconsistent evidence.

When you work your way back to the 1905 directory, you are going to have to rely more on what you've learned so far than on the directory, since there are no cross-references for street addresses before 1905. See who lived in your house in 1905. Get the next earlier directory and see if that person still lived there, and continue working backwards for as far back as you can trace your 1905 resident. Check your ownership history and lot registers to see who owned the house prior to 1905, then look them up in the directories to see if they lived in the house. If the owner of the property rented it out, you may have hit a brick wall, but keep checking the names on your ownership history through the earliest directories.

If any of the previous residents of your house were store or business owners, see if there is an ad for the business in the city directory. While the advertisement does not give you any real information about the resident of your house, it can help illuminate the type of business the person owned.



Advertisement inside the front cover of the 1929 Austin City Directory for Anton Stasswender's granite works.

6. *Lot Registers.* The Austin History Center has lot registers showing the owners of city lots year by year. You will need to have the legal description of

your property, including the subdivision name; the lot registers are organized by lots in the original city of Austin, then by subdivisions. The lot registers will give you the name of the owner of the property for any given year to help identify owners of your house and adjacent lots. The lot registers also provide a valuation of the lot – if you see a big jump in the value of a lot, this may indicate the construction of improvements.

7. *Photographs and Architectural Archives.* The Austin History Center has an excellent photographic file for many streets in Austin, although the majority of the photos are of commercial streets. If your house was designed by an architect, you may be able to find the plans for the house in the architectural archives at the Austin History Center, or at the University of Texas School of Architecture.

You may also be able to contact descendants of former residents to see if they have photographs of the house or the family that they might be willing to share with you. The photographs are very useful for determining what the house looked like on a certain date, as long as you know the date of the photograph.

8. *Bird's Eye View Maps.* Bird's eye view maps were drawn in the late 1800s in Austin and show many of the buildings in the central part of the city as of the date of the map – if the building you are researching is within the area covered by the maps, you can determine whether the building was in existence as of the date of the creation of the bird's eye view, and may even be able to tell something about the architecture of the building, as the maps are surprisingly detailed.

9. *Biographical information* about the previous residents of your house. Investigating the lives of the previous residents gives you a much better picture of who they were. The city directories will give you their names and occupations, but there is so much more information about a person than their employment. Biographical files at the Austin History Center may contain clippings, photographs, and other information about the residents. If a previous resident was a doctor or lawyer, check with the Texas Medical Association or the Texas Bar Association to see if they have any information about that person. If a previous resident was a clergyman, find out what you can about their church and denomination, and see if there is any information in their archives about the person. Check with the Carver Museum (1165 Angelina Street) to see if they have any information about African-American residents or owners. Finally, look at the cemetery interment records at the Austin History Center to see if the person was buried in a city cemetery. The cemetery records will list the date of interment, from which you can estimate a date of death, then check the microfilmed files of the Austin newspapers to

see if the paper ran an obituary when that person died. There may be more information regarding that person's civic achievements, membership in lodges, and other avenues for further research. If the person was not buried in a city cemetery, check the AncestryPlus database at the Austin History Center. You can enter the person's name and see what records the database has. You may be able to find a death record, draft registration card, or a census entry that can give you more information about the life of the person you are researching and their family.

Household	Name	Age	Sex	Race	Marital Status	Occupation	Value	Year	Address
1903 E. 17th	Frank Bryant	38	M	African American	Married	Laborer	\$1,000	1930	1903 E. 17th
	Lillie Bryant	36	F	African American	Married	Laundress		1930	1903 E. 17th
	John Bryant	12	M	African American	Single			1930	1903 E. 17th
	Anna Bryant	8	F	African American	Single			1930	1903 E. 17th

Section of the 1930 U.S. Census showing the listing for Frank and Lillie Bryant, who lived at 1903 E. 17th Street, a house they owned which was worth \$1,000. The census tells us that both Frank and Lillie were born in Texas, they had no other family members living with them, that they were African-American, and that Frank worked as a laborer for a building contractor, while Lillie worked as a laundress for a private family.

Have fun and good luck!