

3.2 History - the Story of the Structure through Time

This is the first section in which the historian will elaborate on his or her findings. It is sometimes called the “Site History” or “Legal History” because it describes the owners of the property. Sometimes this section will contain the details of the strategies of the people associated with the site, so it is not strictly limited to the history of bricks and mortar. It should be factual and carefully researched.

Example: “The Davidson family moved to this city in the 1950's from Montreal. They bought and operated a stationery store. In the beginning, the family lived over the store, but they later moved from the downtown core to a house on Green Street. While there, they were able to acquire the lot where the present house is situated. At that time, there were no other structures nearby. Family tradition relates that the large oak trees on the property were a major reason for the purchase of the site.

In 1959, Mr. Davidson was elected to City Council. About that time, his daughter Muriel married Stanley White, a local architect. In 1963, Mr. Davidson became Mayor. He asked Mr. White to design a house for the family, but requested that the house be close enough to the street to allow for a large garden behind and to protect the oak trees from construction activities. Letters now in the Pleasantville Archives record that the Mayor was not pleased with White’s first plan, and asked for several modifications. In particular, he wanted a wider, more elaborate front door than was common at the time. (Footnote: Pleasantville Archives, Stanley White Papers.)

The Davidsons moved into the house in 1964 and lived there until Mr. Davidson’s death in 1989. The house was then sold to the Wigle family, who still live there.

While the Davidsons were in residence, the house was frequently used for social activities generated by Mr. Davidson’s political activities. In particular, neighbours remember lavish garden parties, which were often were reported by the local newspaper. (Footnote: Pleasantville Echo, July 16, 1966; August 10, 1967)

In 1964, the architect, Stanley White, submitted plans and pictures of the house for the Home and Garden Prestige Awards. Mr. White was awarded second prize for the design. (Footnote: Home and Garden Press, October, 1964.)”

The above example involves a structure with a rich, reasonably well-documented history. All too often, however, sources for the history of a building are poor or non-existent. The historian makes the best use of what little is available. The following is the history of a workman’s cottage:

Example: “This lot and those east and west of it were part of the Gentry Estate and the small houses on them were rented out to labourers who worked at the nearby mills. According to local tradition, the cottages were built before 1860. The earliest definite reference occurs in the Greenhills Gazette, April, 1875, which says, ‘Cornelius Gentry is making numerous improvements to his houses on the Topham Road.’ Mr. Gentry began to sell his properties at the end of the 19th century, and land registry records show that this particular house was sold in 1897 to one Richard Black, a carpenter, and his wife. The Blacks sold to Titus Ewing in 1906, and it is to Mr. Ewing that we owe the earliest photographs of the property.”

Here is another, even less satisfying site history:

“The Crown deeded the 200 acres to John Giles in 1803, but Mr. Giles never moved there. Instead, he sold the land to the Smith family in 1804. The Smith family were already living on the lot next door. The Smiths severed fifty acres in 1845 and sold the parcel to John Black for £50. The price is evidence that there was no house on the property at the time. Not much is known about Mr. Black. When the property next changed hands in 1872, the price was consistent with a modest house on the property.”

In these instances, the history of the property and the persons associated with it must be worked in combination with the architecture and structural evidence to reach an hypothesis about the date of the building.