

Every House is Historic: Researching Old Homes in Brazos County

by Bill Page

What Approach?

There are three ways to think about the history of old homes.

1. The building itself – What materials is it built from, when was it built, were there additions or significant renovations; what is the style of architecture, who was the architect, what color(s) has it been painted, etc. When was the house electrified? When it was built, did it have indoor plumbing, or was that added later? What changes have there been in heating or air conditioning? Related topics may include descriptions of external factors, such as landscaping, sidewalks, drives, water wells, etc.

2. The social history of the house – Who lived in the house (owner's family, servants or renters); what activities took place in the house (parties, weddings, funerals, births, etc.). Were there businesses on the property? How does the house reflect the common experience of people living in that area? How does the house differ from other homes in the area? How did the house influence the neighborhood or contribute to the community? Etc.

3. The history of the neighborhood – Who were the neighbors? What was the racial, ethnic or economic status of the neighborhood? When was the neighborhood developed? Why were houses built at that time in that location? Why were the streets given their particular names? Did those street names ever change? Etc.

You can think about the history of public buildings (churches, schools, businesses, etc.) in similar ways.

Researching the occupants of the house:

Important: Cite all your sources as completely as possible.

Libraries

Carnegie History Center – Located in Bryan, this is the best place to begin historical research on any topic relating to Brazos County, except Texas A&M University.

Cushing Library at Texas A&M – This library includes the university archives for Texas A&M, and has extensive collections relating to people who worked at or attended the university.

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First Step:

Talk to the current or previous owners or their relatives. This can save you hours of research time, and it frequently will give you information that is not written down anywhere else.

Talk to neighbors (both current and also former). This is especially useful if you cannot contact the former owners. In addition, this is a good way to see how your home fits into the general history of the neighborhood.

Review any documents in your possession (title abstract, deeds, tax receipts, insurance records, etc.) This should help you determine the legal description of the property where the house is located. Typically, in town this will include a lot and block number, along with the name of a subdivision.

If there is any indication that the house had been rented to non-owners at any point, then get the names of as many of the people renting the house as possible. If people rented the house, then much of your research will concern the people renting the house, rather than the property owners. Some of the sources listed below will help you determine the names of renters.

Second step: Consult county and other local records to document the lives of the inhabitants of the house. Not every source will provide you with information, so you must be persistent in your search.

Government records typically document three important events in occupants' lives: births, marriages and deaths.

Once you have the dates of these events, then you can check other records (especially newspapers).

Marriage Licenses are recorded in the County Clerk's office at the courthouse in Bryan. These are listed in a series of record books, each of which covers several years. Each volume is indexed by the names of the persons getting married. The records give the date of the marriage, the name of the person performing the ceremony, and often the place the ceremony took place. The Research Ramblers' **Brazos County, Texas, Marriage Records** reproduce records from 1841 to 1895. These books are available at the Carnegie History Center and at the Texas A&M University Library.

Once you have a marriage date, check the **Eagle** to see if there was a story about the wedding. In addition to providing biographical information about the couple, the story will likely state where the ceremony took place, which may have been in the house.

Birth records – Except for a brief period in the 1870s, Texas did not begin keeping birth records until 1903. Many of these records are in the County Clerk's office; some are in the City

Secretary's office in Bryan. Prior to the 1920s, most births took place at home. Even up to World War II, home births were not especially uncommon.

There is also a class of documents called Delayed Birth Records (also called Probate Births) that were recorded years after the birth. These records may date back to the 1870s. The oldest of these records have been published as Nadine Billingsley's **Brazos Co. Texas Births: 1850-1910**. This book is available at the Carnegie History Center and at the Texas A&M University Library.

Death Records – Texas did not begin keeping death certificates until 1903. Many of these records are in the County Clerk's office; some are in the Bryan City Secretary's office. Death certificates list the name of the deceased and his or her parents, the date and cause of death, and sometimes the place of burial.

Once you have death dates for persons who lived in the house, check the **Eagle** to see if you can find an obituary. In addition to providing biographical information about the deceased, obituaries may also indicate place of death (which might be the house) and where the funeral held (in earlier times these were often held in the home).

Probate Records deal with the settling of a dead person's estate. These are filed in the county clerk's office and go back to the 1840s. Although probate files exist only for some residents (you rarely find them for persons who did not own any property, for example), these can be useful because they sometimes include detailed inventories of belongings, including household furnishings.

Deeds – record the buying or selling of land. These records are in the County Clerk's office. Sometimes the deeds specifically note what buildings are on the property; in other cases, the purchase price gives a clue whether or not there were any buildings on the land. The Deed Record Books are in order by the date the deeds were filed at the court house. This may be years, or even decades after the property was sold. One index usually covers several volumes of deeds. You must check several indexes to do a thorough search. Each deed index volume is divided into two sequences: grantor (seller or giver) and grantee (buyer or receiver). Entries are alphabetized by the first letter of last names, and then in the order in which the deeds appear in the deed books. Important: land ownership can be transferred without leaving a record in the deeds, most often by inheritance, marriage, divorce or lawsuit.

Another type of records at the County Clerk's office which may be useful are **Mortgages**. People often mortgaged their property when they bought property or when they built or remodeled a house.

Mechanics Lien Records, also on file in the County Clerk's office, were created when tradesmen said that they had not been paid for their labor. Sometimes these records document what materials were used in building a house and who built it.

Plat Records – When a new development or neighborhood is being planned the developer has to file a plat showing how the streets and lots will be laid out. This gives a base date for when the house was built, as well as a way to compare the original plans for the area with the current layout.

Tax rolls – were updated annually, so they can help identify when people bought, sold, or inherited land. When the property value jumps from one year to the next that may be an indication that a house or other structure was built. Be cautious in using these records, since complicating factors (such as one house being replaced by a newer one) may not be apparent solely by checking the tax rolls. Tax rolls for Brazos County from 1841 to 1910 have been microfilmed and are available at the Texas A&M University Library. Check with the County Tax Assessor's office for more recent tax records.

Current tax information is available at the Brazos County Appraisal District website:

http://www.brazoscad.org/tax_info.htm

Law Suits – Records of lawsuits may either be in the County Clerk's office or in the District Clerk's office. Lawsuits are indexed by the name of the plaintiff (person suing) and defendant (person being sued). In general, the cases recorded in the District Clerk's office tend to be of greater interest; among such records are lawsuits over estates and other civil matters, as well as divorce cases. Lawsuits in the County Clerk's office tend to be for smaller amounts of money, but a thorough search requires you to check both sets of records.

Building permits – In Brazos County, these are a fairly modern development and almost never date back far enough to be of use in documenting historic homes. To find out if there are building permits of interest, contact the city offices of Bryan and College Station.

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Cemetery records – are another place to get birth and death dates for former occupants of the home. All of the known marked graves (prior to 1988) for persons buried in Brazos County are listed in Brazos Genealogical Association's **The Brazos County, Texas Cemeteries: List of Persons Interred in Brazos County, Texas to 1988**.

Most burials in the Bryan City Cemetery prior to 1910 – including many persons buried in unmarked graves – are listed in Mary Collie-Cooper's **Bryan City Cemetery, Brazos County, Texas: Books 1, 2, 3, & 4**. (These records and burials after 1910 are also listed on the Bryan city website as a part of the city GNIS).

Both of these books are available at the Carnegie History Center and also at the Texas A&M University Library.

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Census Records – were taken every ten years, up through 1930. The censuses list people in each household and are arranged in the order that the census taker visited houses. In addition to giving information about the people who lived in the house (occupation, age, place of birth, etc.), they also let you identify who their neighbors were.

Each census asks slightly different questions. For example, the 1910 census asks whether men were Civil War veterans. The 1930 asks whether people owned radios.

The census records for Brazos County can be accessed online through databases called Ancestry, and Heritage Quest. You can access both databases at the Texas A&M University Library, and the Carnegie History Center in Bryan.

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Other Sources:

Local histories – a variety of history books have been published about Brazos County. These may contain information on the people who lived in the home. In addition, they may provide valuable facts about events which shaped the history of the neighborhood. Copies of these historical books can be consulted at the Carnegie History Center and also at the Texas A&M University Library.

City directories – surviving city directories for Bryan and College Station date back to 1937. These are arranged both by persons' names and also by street addresses. They give a person's occupation, and sometimes the number of people in a household. The listing by street address tells you who was living at an address (useful for rental property) and also who the neighbors were. These books are available at the Carnegie History Center and also at the Texas A&M University Library.

Telephone directories – The Carnegie History Center has scattered copies of the Bryan-College Station telephone directories dating back to the 1920s. These books are arranged only by a person's last name – remember, in the earlier years not everyone owned a telephone. These may help verify that a person was living at a given address in a certain year and also that the house included a telephone. In addition, the Cushing Library at Texas A&M has older copies of the Texas A&M staff telephone directories. These directories may also be useful if Texas A&M employees lived in the house of interest.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps – These are incredibly detailed maps of buildings within the city limits of Bryan and College Station. The maps also give details about the types of materials used in constructing buildings. The Bryan maps date back to the 1880s and were updated at irregular intervals. They do not give the names of house owners or occupants, but do show street names, so it usually is easy to locate houses of interest. These maps can help narrow the time period when a house was built. Copies of these maps are available at the Carnegie History Center and

also at the Texas A&M University Library, on microfilm and also in electronic form through a Texas library service called TexShare.

Newspaper articles – While newspapers contain a wealth of information, including such things as notices of homes being built, marriages, deaths, business openings, political elections, golden wedding anniversaries, etc., only scattered indexes have been done of the local newspapers. For that reason, any sources that give dates of events may help you search for articles. Two local newspapers are of special interest – the **Bryan-College Station Eagle** (the name varies over the years) and the **Battalion** (the Texas A&M newspaper). The Carnegie History Center is the best place to begin research in the **Eagle**. The staff there are familiar with what limited indexing has been done and can suggest research strategies to use in doing newspaper research. Older issues of the **Battalion** are available on microfilm at the Texas A&M Library (on the 2nd floor of the Evans Library) BUT the better place to begin research on people affiliated with Texas A&M is the Cushing Library on campus. That library has extensive clipping files (and other records) relating to Texas A&M, including not only clippings from the **Battalion** and the **Eagle**, but also from other newspapers, such as the ones published in Houston or Dallas.

For public buildings, changes in the group using the building often generate newspaper articles. For example, if a new owner purchases a business, there may be articles or advertisements, perhaps including photographs. If a new minister comes to a church, or a new principal to a school, again there may be articles in the newspaper.

Photographs – The Carnegie History Center has some old photographs of Bryan and Brazos County. The Cushing Library at Texas A&M has some photos relating to the University. Most photograph collections are poorly indexed, and finding useful photos can be time consuming.

Aerial photographs – The Map Department at the Texas A&M Library has aerial photos of Brazos County dating back to the 1940s. These may occasionally be useful.

World War I Draft Registration Records – provide some biographical information about most men of draft age during 1917 and 1918, including such things as their marital status, their next of kin, their date of birth, and their occupation. These records are available commercially through an online database called Ancestry.

Other sources – Once you know enough about former occupants, you may want to check other records from groups such as churches, lodges, civic organizations, clubs, etc.

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Complicating factors:

Street names may have been changed at some point.

There may have been earlier homes on the lot (perhaps an earlier home burned, was moved, or was torn down and replaced with another home).

There may have been multiple buildings – sometimes more than one house – on a single piece of property.