



# Duluth Preservation Alliance

## How to research the history of a Duluth house

Tracing the history of a house, finding its “roots,” involves all the thrills of detective work. You may learn who constructed the house (owner, architect, builder); who owned the house and land throughout the years; who lived in the house and what the residents did for a living; and the appearance of the house since its construction. The following provides guidance on researching the history of a Duluth house.

### City of Duluth Records

**1. City Assessor’s Office.** Room 108 City Hall, 723–3287. A call or visit to this office will establish the construction date for every house in Duluth. The address of the home or plat and parcel number (listed on tax statements) must be supplied.

**2. Building Inspector’s Office.** Room 210 City Hall. Not all houses will have complete files, but some records date back to 1889. Information to be found here may include the first owner, architect, builder, materials used, additions and occasionally even blueprints. Files are on microfiche and the public may use them. Only the property address is needed, but often a legal description can be helpful.

### Abstract of Title

The abstract of a property is a summary of legal actions pertaining to the property. An abstract includes a list of past owners of the land and dates of ownership. It does NOT indicate when a house was built, because it is a legal record of the land only. But the list of owners is valuable for further research. The following information should be copied for each transaction in the abstract: type of transaction (deed or mortgage); date of transaction; and names of the buyer and seller. This information can then be used in tracing ownership in city directories. Abstracts might be in the possession of the homeowner or the mortgage holder (usually a bank or savings and loan). Mortgage holders will allow one to examine an abstract in the office and will sometimes allow the owner to take the document out for examination.

### St. Louis County

**County Recorder’s Office.** Room 101 of the Courthouse, has the same information as that recorded on the Abstract of Title, but each transaction must be traced through real estate documents using indexes. Staff in the Recorder’s Office will help patrons in the retrieval of information, answering specific questions and making photocopies. But because of the time-consuming nature of these searches, this source is recommended ONLY if the information cannot be found elsewhere.

### Duluth Public Library

**1. City Directories** will indicate the resident of each house (not necessarily the owner). Duluth directories from 1883 to 1982 are on microfilm. Directories from 1924 to the current year are on the shelves. Early directories have only the alphabetical listing by residents’ last names. The 1930 directory is the first with a street-by-street listing. By starting with the most recent directory and working backwards to 1930, one can develop a complete list of occupants at a single address. One can sometimes extend the date of occupancy back to the date of construction, if before 1930, by tracing the name backwards in the directories. If the name disappears before the known building date, the Abstract of Title will have to be consulted to obtain earlier names.

**2. Duluth Houses: A Key to Slides, Clippings and Other References.** This is an index to information the library has on Duluth houses. Ask at the reference desk to examine this document. A clipping file of selected Duluth houses is available.

**3. Duluth newspapers** on microfilm may be helpful. Early newspapers sometimes made note of a house being built or sold. Occasionally recently constructed houses were pictured. After obtaining the date of construction, one can examine newspapers for mention of a house. Newspapers at the library are:

Duluth Evening Herald 1887–1982

Duluth Weekly Herald 1889–1917

Duluth Minnesotian 1869–1878

Lake Superior News 1878–1881

Commonwealth 1892–1896

Duluth Daily Star 1907–1909

Weekly Tribune 1870–1918

Daily News 1886–1892

Duluth News Tribune 1893–present

**4. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps** are on microfilm for the years 1884/1885, 1888, 1908/1909 (the most complete set of maps) with updates for 1932 and 1935. These may be the best source of information on the appearance of old houses, because the “footprint” (plan view) of each building is drawn to scale, indicating the shape of the home. The size of the house and construction materials also are noted.

**5. Historical atlases**, which show the size and shape of buildings and lots, can be examined. Ask for them at the reference desk.

Atlas of the City of Duluth by Fred’k B. Roe (1890, with supplement of 1893).

Atlas of the City of Duluth, Minnesota by C.P. Frank (1902)

Atlas of the City of Duluth, Minnesota by the Duluth Board of Realtors (1924).

**6. The Biographic File** is a collection of newspaper articles on Duluth residents. Ask at the reference desk for location.

**7. Federal and State Census Rolls** are on microfilm and can be examined to find family members, occupations, etc.

## Northeast Minnesota Historical Center

The Northeast Minnesota Historical Center is located in the UMD Library and is staffed by one person, so visitors should call the center, at 726–8526, before planning a visit. What’s available:

**Original city directories** from 1882 to 1989 are available, but many are fragile.

**Historical atlases** that are available at the Duluth Public Library also are at the Center.

**The Hyvarinen Collection** contains information copied from newspapers, city and county offices. Files are arranged by street address.

**Photographs** of some Duluth houses are available.

## Former owners, neighbors and relatives

These people may have information and/or old photos of the house and neighborhood.

## Duluth Preservation Alliance

The Duluth Preservation Alliance is dedicated to protecting our area’s historic resources by advocating for their recognition, appreciation, protection, restoration and sympathetic reuse. For more information about historic preservation or researching historic buildings, call the Centennial Homes Recognition Program chairwoman Jane Shull, at 728–3118.