



## Researching Your House

### *How Old is My House?*

By Betty Marvin, Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey and William Sturm, Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

Have you ever asked yourself this question, but haven't known where to go to find the answer? If so, the following information will help guide you. The challenge of finding information on the history of your house (or any building in Oakland) may be easy or complex, depending on a number of factors: the age of the building, the number of times it has changed ownership or been altered, and how tenacious you are. To accommodate the most challenging of situations, this brochure provides a detailed description of how to use the resources in the Public Library's Oakland History Room (OHR) and the Planning Department's Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey (OCHS). If what follows seems a bit daunting, don't lose heart. OHR and OCHS staff will help you through the process.

### *Step 1: Observation*

How old does the building look? Is it an 1890s Victorian, a 1920s bungalow, a 1940s ranch house? The City Planning Department's Rehab Right (available at the library and bookstores), among other books, can help identify styles. In general, if your building appears older than about 1910, start at the OHR, which has early tax records; if later, head for OCHS, for building permits.

Where is the building located? If it is in Central or West Oakland or Adams Point or certain other neighborhood centers, you can usually save work by consulting OCHS, which has researched and evaluated all buildings in these study areas. Over 34 completed volumes of the Survey, available for reference at the OHR and OCHS, contain State Historic Resources Inventory forms on the most notable buildings and districts. You may have found your answer here. If not, continue to step 2.

### *Step 2: Sanborn Maps*

Look at the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Oakland, held by the OHR for approximately 1882 to 1951 and by OCHS for 1912 to the present. Each Sanborn map

page depicts an area of about six blocks, giving the location of buildings and some structural information. Sanborn maps were updated periodically after their initial printings. The updates are pasted over the printed page and indicate a new structure, alteration, or change of use. This is also the easiest place to find a building's pre-1911 address. Make sure that you are looking at the right building, and note its orientation and its distance from the nearest cross streets. You will need this information for the next step.

### ***Step 3: Construction Date***

Is the building pre-1925? Consult the Oakland City Tax Assessment Block Books, which the OHR has for 1877 to 1925 (plus tax rolls earlier). The block books contain maps showing property ownership on each block. By comparing assessment figures on a given lot from one year to the next, you can determine when a building was built. A marked rise in the assessment for improvements (often marked “#” or “Imps”) indicates construction activity. It is usually easiest to start in 1925 to determine volume block and lot, and work backwards.

Is it post-1905? Except in areas not annexed until later, every building from late 1905 on should have a City Building Permit. Permits are on microfiche at the City's Building Department (1330 Broadway, 2nd floor): ask to see your Address Fiche. For buildings older than about 1930, however, this fiche is likely to have the permits for alterations but not for the original construction. OCHS (one floor up) has permit finding aids and the Permit Ledger Books which give date, names of owner and builder and sometimes architect, description, and construction cost. For buildings later than about 1914 you can then return to the Building Department to see if there is additional information filed by permit number in Fiche Tray 7. OCHS also has Contract Notices with permit-like information for some pre-1905 buildings, and information about architects and builders.

Was it built between 1905-1925? For buildings from the years when building permits and block books overlap, it is a good idea to check both, to verify your conclusions. Permits will also document alterations to earlier buildings, and give additional owners' names.

### ***Step 4: Biography***

With owners' names from the block books and building permits, go to the Oakland City Directories, containing names, addresses, and occupations of the adult (employed, male, householding: varies by year) inhabitants of the city. Published from 1869 to 1943 (plus 1967 and 1969), the directories can establish date and duration of residency. The OHR has a complete set; OCHS has a few at roughly 5-year intervals.

The OHR also offers other biographical data. Through newspaper clippings, obituaries, indexes to county and city histories, and voting registers, profiles of the residents can be formed.

### ***Additional Sources of Information***

1. U.S. Censuses are available at the Main Library's Newspaper Room and at other sites including the Mormon Temple, Bancroft Library, Sutro Library, and the California Geneological Society.
2. Photographs of Oakland buildings and their occupants can occasionally be found at the African American Museum and Library at Oakland (AAMLO; 510-597-5053), the Oakland Museum History Department (510-238-3842), U.C. Berkeley's Bancroft Library (510-642-6481) and Environmental Design Library (510-642-4818), the California Historical Society in San Francisco (415/357-1848), and other public and private collections.

## House Search – Oakland History Room

The OHR staff will assist you in filling out this form.

- Address of property \_\_\_\_\_
- Estimated date \_\_\_\_\_
- Annexation date \_\_\_\_\_
- Sanborn page \_\_\_\_\_
- Old address \_\_\_\_\_
- Block number: pre-1906 \_\_\_\_\_
- Block number: post-1906 \_\_\_\_\_
- Tract name(s) \_\_\_\_\_
- Block books: Vol. \_\_\_\_\_
- Lot number(s) \_\_\_\_\_
- Year \_\_\_\_\_
- Owner \_\_\_\_\_
- Land (if shown) \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- Improvements \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- Personal property \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- Reverse directories: 1936 \_\_\_\_\_ 1967 \_\_\_\_\_ 1969 \_\_\_\_\_
- City Directories \_\_\_\_\_
- Indexes: \_\_\_Local History Catalog\_\_\_Vertical Files\_\_\_Donogh Real Estate Files  
\_\_\_Photo collection\_\_\_California Architect & Building News\_\_\_Architect & Engineer
- House Search – Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey/Building Department
- Existing OCHS forms/files \_\_\_\_\_
- Building permits \_\_\_\_\_

Please note that the below facilities may be closed on some days. Please call ahead.

[Oakland Main Library History Room](#): 125 14th St., 2nd floor; Check website or call 510-238-3222 for hours.

Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey: 250 Frank Ogawa Plaza, Suite 3330; 510-238-6879. Hours: M-F 1-5, variable

Building Permits: 250 Frank Ogawa Plaza, 2nd floor; 510-238-3443. Hours: M-T, Th-F 8-4, W 9-4

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