

A Guide to Researching the History of a New York City Building

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It's like the weather: Everybody talks about the history of their buildings, but nobody does anything about it. And why should they? While historic preservation has become a billion-dollar industry, actual historical research on buildings is a near-orphan, and receives lip-service in the big business of architectural "preservation." Even today the lingua franca is still usually just what you heard from a real estate broker.

And it is not surprising: the path to understanding even the most basic facts of a buildings history can be maddeningly byzantine, stretching sometimes through half a dozen research sources just to be sure of the date of construction. It is not uncommon for travel time between them to exceed the research time while there. No wonder walking-tour guides get by with outlandish tales.

If you're dedicated, here are the classes of information that help with the history of a building in Manhattan. If everything goes your way, with no glitches and almost everything derived from the web, you might assemble a reasonable dossier on a private house in 3-5 hours. If you're swimming upstream, and have to visit several different archives, 6-8 hours is the minimum.

Building permits - in Manhattan, beginning in 1866 - are tricky, but the most direct source for documenting construction and alteration. ([Department of Buildings](#), [Office for Metropolitan History](#); Real Estate Record & Guide.)

Conveyances (deeds) offer indirect evidence of construction and use - if Smith sells a single 100-foot front parcel to Jones, and two years later Jones sells it off as five different 20-foot front parcels to five different parties, then you figure Jones built a set of five dwellings. The [Office of the City Register](#) has on-line records back to the 1960s - but you have to visit for pre-1960s deeds. They are under the [Department of Finance](#) - but I bet you'll never be able find the Manhattan location on their website - it's 66 John Street, 8:30-4:30 M-F.

Yearly tax assessment records, for houses prior to 1866, are critical - the 1846 assessment for one parcel may read as vacant, but the 1847 assessment may be marked as "H&L" - house and lot. This is a nasty, complicated process, in part because street addresses were rarely used. You must have good landmap sources (in part to provide exact lot measurements.) And you would be wise to understand the conveyance history of several lots flanking yours - although the assessment inventory was tallied sequentially house by house, the house numbers themselves were often not used (or they are obsolete ones) and the evolving cohort of owners is a basic way to locate your house in the list ([Municipal Archives](#)).

With problem buildings, **landmaps** of successive years - showing the outlines of individual houses - are a basic tool in understanding the development of a lot, especially with early or complex structures. (Hard copies are at [New York Public Library](#) , [New-York Historical Society](#), and the [Municipal Archives](#), but try to find a library - like NYPL - which subscribes to Digital Sanborn Maps.)

Directories list people by last name - you can check a known owner to see if they occupied a specific house. Some directories are arranged by street address. ([NYPL](#), [NYHS](#), [Ancestry.com](#))

Censuses (every ten years) list residents, usually house by house and block by block, and are most conveniently accessed through [Ancestry.com](#) - but [NYPL](#) has microfilm copies (plus the non-standard New

York State censuses of 1905, 1915 and 1925 and the 1890 "Police Census", useful because the Federal one for 1890 burned in a fire). The Municipal Archives also has the Police Census and the New York State censuses. There is no particular reason to go to the local branch of the National Archives.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission, has designation reports for every historic district and individual Landmark in New York City. A list of historic districts is on-line, and the most recent actual reports are on-line - if your building is in one of these, you're golden, at least for basic info.

Starting Out

Those are the tools in your arsenal. Here's how they play out in the case of two west side townhouses: 233 West 72nd Street and 52 West 74th Street, built in 1895 and 1904 (although you don't know that yet.).

The 74th Street house is in the LPC's Central Park West Historic District. The designation report is not yet on-line, but you can buy a copy, or perhaps find it in a library, or write the commission and ask for the data - which (as with most reports) will probably be just date, architect, developer and style - and you certainly want to go beyond that.

With these buildings there is no need to find landmaps of flanking dates - they are obviously turn of the century rowhouses, not much altered.

Hey, The Real Estate Broker Told Me It Was by Stanford White!!!

Yeah, well, the check's in the mail, too. Try first the Department of Buildings' fabulous BIS system, at on the right side of their homepage. Enter the address and, scrolling down for "applications", you can find summaries of alteration permits for the last 15 years - perfect for nosy parkers. But the old stuff is buried deep, way deep, under the hieroglyphic "actions".

For 233 West 72nd the "actions" section gives you two NB (= New Building) application (or permit) numbers, NB 92 of 1888 and NB 1716 of 1895. What the heck do those numbers mean? Well, the first is the 92nd application to build a new building (in Manhattan) filed in the year 1888, and the second is the 1,716th filed in 1895 - the numbering starts over again in the new year. This system, established in 1866, continued through 1989, so there are duplicate application numbers for 1866 and 1966, 1867 and 1967 and so on, through 1889 and 1989, another potential pothole on your information highway. Then, too, you will shortly find that the 1888 permit is an indexing error, and sooner or later that missing or erroneous NB citations are common.

Now, these are just NB numbers, like a library call number instead of the actual book: you're going to have to dig for the actual info. For 19th century NBs, you have three choices:

1. You could apply at the Department's "Plan Desk" for the microfilm of the records (now, don't get excited - it's very doubtful the plans will be in there). If you want to be completely diligent, check the microfilm for the matching houses in the row - because a rowhouse developer only files a single permit (which is supposed to wind up in the folder with the lowest lot number).
2. If you do find the paper permit, it usually doesn't tell you a heck of a lot more than the basic details. If you are a library freak, you can painstakingly look up the weekly publication of New Building permits in the Real Estate Record & Guide, published 1868 - 1980s. But that is still just bare bones stuff.

3. That's why most experienced researchers will just bite the bullet and go directly to the Docket Books, yearly permit logs which were prepared by the Department of Buildings. Those are now on microfilm at the Municipal Archives, filmed in the 1990s by the director, Kenneth Cobb. A trip there will show you that NB 92 of 1888 is an indexing error but that the 1895 application covers the construction of five rowhouses completed in 1896, at 233-241 West 72d Street.

The docket entries show that the houses were designed by the architect Henry F. Cook for the developer Charles Buek - you've probably never heard of them, and there's no reason you should.

To get the basic data for 52 West 74th Street, resort again to the "actions" page at the Department of Buildings where you'll find NB 389 of 1902, indicating the 389th application for a new building permit filed in 1902.

When you find this permit in the docket book, it reads "74th, ss, 100 e Columbus av, eighteen 5-sty and stone dwellings" - this is dreaded "metes and bounds" description. In this case it's the row of houses on the south side (ss) of 74th Street, beginning 100 feet east (e) of Columbus. You can decipher this with a landmap, but a free subscription to [Property Shark](#) offers maps that allow such calculations, albeit somewhat awkwardly, and offers recent ownership information. Either way it's complicated.

And God help you if you have a street name change (how in tarnation are you supposed to know that, before 1890, Amsterdam was Tenth Avenue?), or, far worse, a street numbering change. It took me 15 years before I could suss out the numbering change of the old Century Club, at 109 East 15th Street, which was 42 East 15th Street in 1869, when H. H. Richardson designed it.)

On NB 389-02, the owner is listed as F. Ambrose Clark, of Cooperstown, N.Y., and the architect as Percy Griffin. Because this is a post-1899 new building permit, it also appears on the website [Office for Metropolitan History](#), which contains a searchable database of almost all such permits from 1900 to 1986. You can also use it separately from the DoB BIS system, although address issues on the database can be very complicated.

So, Who Lived There?

OK, so who lived at 233 West 72nd? In the case of rowhouses, checking deeds is one basic approach (although many rowhouses were held for rental by developers). At the [Office of the City Register](#) don't bother to look up the actual deeds themselves; just scan the bound indices, by block and lot number, for a brief title search. This indicates that Buek sold the house at 233 to Theresa Rawitzer in 1898, and that the next sale was more than ten years later. At this point it is still not certain if Theresa Rawitzer occupied the house; she might have bought it for investment. Having trouble? Just look sort of dazed and one of the regulars should take pity on you.

But checking the Manhattan city directories for her surname, you will find that Herman Rawitzer, "rags," first appears at 233 West 72d Street in 1899. Other directories describe him as a wool merchant and mention that in 1898 he, or someone in his family, built the Rawitzer Building, which still stands at 285 West Broadway, at Canal Street.

Commercially published address or criss-cross directories - listings of householders arranged by street address - are less reliable, but also useful. The 19th century has a single one in 1812, another in 1851, and a run of Phillip's Elite Directories beginning in 1874, and continuing on with Dau's New York Blue Book until 1937 - usually listing only upper middle class householders. More democratic are the address directories for telephone

subscribers, beginning in 1928 - the earliest ones gave even subscribers with unlisted numbers! This valuable group is on film at NYPL.

A variation on these criss-cross directories is a regular, alphabetical directory which has been fully digitized - often you can pop in the address terms and to find the occupants. Ancestry.com - to which you can get a 3-day free trial membership - offers digitized versions of the 1786, 1829, 1839, 1869 and 1890 directories for New York (1829 and 1839 are under "Manhattan") - these are too early for both of these sample houses, but good for other buildings.

You can sometimes double-team other sources to tease out recalcitrant information. For example, the 1913 Dau's New York Blue Book does not list a resident for 52 West 74th Street, but it does list an Edmond Haas at 40 West 74th. Ancestry.com has digitized all the decennial Federal censuses, so you can search for a person (although not, directly, for an address). But, aha! Haas turns up on the 1910 census, an entry on page 9 of the 1,304th enumeration district in the 22nd Ward -- and because the census taker worked house-by-house, the entry for Haas at 40 West 74th is just a few lines from our building, 52 West 74th Street. That's where one Norrie Sellar, age 37, a stockbroker, is tallied with his wife, Sybil, 33, three children and five servants. Bingo. The decennial censuses are good, but in New York we've got an embarrassment of riches - because we've got state censuses for 1905, 1915 and 1925. These censuses are not yet digitized (coming soon, says Ancestry), and are easiest to use at the NYPL, which has a good finding aid so you can zero in on a section of the city. The 1905 New York State census lists 13 occupants for 233 West 72nd, including Herman Rawitzer, 45, born in Germany; his wife, "T. Rawitzer," 30, American-born; two children, and some in-laws along with seven servants, all foreign-born, from cook to governess.

Rawitzer Who?

Rawitzer - a rag dealer - who was this guy? That's where newspapers come in.

The ur-source for newspaper material is The New York Times. About a jillion years ago - ten years in earth time - researchers were fairly satisfied with the paper's year-by-year annual Index and the related Obituary Index, and deliriously happy with Byron and Valerie Falk's comprehensive New York Times Personal Name Index.

But now the entire Times has been digitized by ProQuest and is word or string searchable. It's available in most libraries, or to you at home - if you are a subscriber to the Times.

At some point you will discover that the Rawitzers were also Rawitsers - that is, they varied the spelling of their surname. But, it is still uncommon enough to simply pull all articles with both spellings, just a few hundred items. That leads you to the 1897 marriage of Herman Rawitzer to Theresa Rosenthal at Delmonico's and, in 1924, the notice of his death at Aix-les-Bains - apparently the rag trade was good. There's also a 1922 article about a \$40,000 theft at the Rawitzer house by a band of burglars who lived in the building while the family was traveling in France. A Times story in 1932 said that a Rawitzer daughter, also Theresa, was a painter who suffered from "melancholy" - she committed suicide with poison that year.

If you are really dogged, checking other (unindexed) newspapers of the exact same date can leverage newspaper research.

When working with digitized sources, you have to conform to their idiosyncrasies. Thus, in the digitized Times, there are listings for "233 West Seventy-Second", "233 West 72nd", "233 West 72d" and who knows what else. And classified ads - for instance, for servants wanted - often invert the order, as "72nd, 233". Paid death notices are usually inverted, giving you a second chance if you can't find a published obituary. And, for the scrupulous, a gander at the Falks' Personal Name Index can still gather up some citations that the digitizers couldn't get right.

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle has been digitized (up to 1902) by the Brooklyn Public Library, and NYPL and the Library of Congress have digitized the New York Sun 1900-1910. (The publisher Paratext has digitized the index of the gossipy New York Tribune 1875-1906 - not the contents, just the index, but it's still useful - by subscription, at libraries.)

When Mr. Rawitzer died the family was living at 270 Park Avenue, one of the big new apartment houses that siphoned off private-house tenants, especially from newly commercialized streets like 72d. So how long did 233 West 72d Street remain a private house? On the DoB's BIS system is a listing for an alteration permit, Alt 2359 of 1926. The original application, on microfilm at the plan desk of the Department of Buildings recorded the building as having a "public dining room" on the first floor, offices on the second and third floors, and apartments on the fourth and fifth floors. The Municipal Archives has microfilm versions of the alteration docket books, if the microfilm record of the actual permit is flawed or missing.

A picture of Mr. Rawitzer? Always check the classic, 1899 mug book for white males of the era, King's Notable New Yorkers (1899). Mr. Rawitzer didn't make the cut there, but he does appear in the obscure Empire State Notables (1914). Main reference points for this kind of research are the Library of the New-York Historical Society, the Local History Division of the New York Public Library, and, the power nexus for professional genealogists, the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society.

And Now, on 74th Street, A Dakota Connection...

And what about more information on 52 West 74th Street? Well, F. Ambrose Clark's obituary -- and that of his father, Alfred Corning Clark -- indicates that F. Ambrose Clark was the grandson of Edward Clark, who built the Dakota at 72nd and Central Park West, completed in 1884. The 74th Street land was part of the grand plan of the eldest Clark to create a small community around his trademark building.

A search for the string "52 West 74th" in ProQuest doesn't turn up too much before World War II, but the term "52 West Seventy-Fourth" yields pay dirt: an article indicating the houses in the row were for rent for \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year and had billiard rooms, libraries and other amenities. A boolean search yields a 1904 article that notes water filters, electric elevators, silver safes and wine refrigerators.

ProQuest results indicate that Mrs. Sellar - identified as a tenant through the 1910 census, above - was an heiress "well-known in social circles" in Newport, R.I., and New York, and that in 1928 she opened a Parisian-

style gown shop on Madison Avenue. She told the Times, "I want to see what a woman, like myself, can do in developing a business."

A continued ProQuest search indicates that 52 West 74th Street was occupied in 1930 by Dr. Arnold J. Gelarie, a Polish-born specialist in rheumatic diseases; the 1930 census listed him as living alone and indicated that the house was worth \$75,000. The census returns make fascinating little studies in social history - for instance, on one side of the Gelarie house, at 50 West 74th, lived a real estate investor, Warren Smadback, with a butler, cook and houseman. But, on the other side, 54 West 74th was by that time an apartment house, and the census lists a smorgasbord of residents, including the Scottish-born superintendent, James Walker; a Czechoslovakian-born sculptor, Mario Korbel; a New York-born athletic instructor, Paul Miller; and a Pennsylvania-born "lingerie operator" -- yup, that's what it says -- Anna Weber.

Another neat feature of the DoB BIS system is the on-line display of C of O's - Certificates of Occupancy. Issued beginning with the first zoning law, in 1916, they document (and regulate) a building's use. The earliest C of O for 52 West 74th Street, #32068, documents that by 1946 the once-elegant house had been turned into furnished rooms.

This is a fair demonstration of how to investigate a building, although it does not show the blind alleys and false leads that often confound a researcher. It touches on the main resources for a late-19th-century house occupied by a family of means; the techniques for recovering information on a tenement family would be much slimmer, and slightly different.

In such cases municipal records -- births, deaths, marriages, naturalization, voting records (the last rarely tapped) -- become very important. These are split up in a crazy quilt among the Office of the City Clerk, the Department of Health, the State Supreme Court, Surrogate's Court and the Municipal Archives, although Archives has most of the ones people want. Many staff members at those locations know how to do this type of research, but anyone will profit from Estelle Guzik's terrific "Genealogical Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area," although the digital age has rendered many parts out of date.

An old photograph? That's notoriously rough. NYPL has digitized [many street views](#), and they also have done stereos and other views. The Library of Congress has digitized [lots of photographs](#). NYHS, the Municipal Archives, and the Museum of the City of New York have more. The easiest method is to go to the website at the [Municipal Archives](#) and order a \$35 print of the "tax photo", a 1939 photo survey of every structure in the five boroughs. You can't examine them on-line, only on the premises - save your time and just send in your money. Although the quality is variable (sometimes infuriating), this is a dependable source.

After 3400 words, we still haven't gotten to commercial buildings; apartment houses and the often troublesome pre-1870 houses. Someone should put up a good concordance of all locally available landmaps, just like someone should prepare a coherent narrative for the typical address changes. It wouldn't hurt for someone to do some comprehensive testing for accuracy in digitized sources - the censuses, and ProQuest, for example. I've never seen a good analysis of voting record sources, and then there are the endlessly complicated outer boroughs.

There is a lot to do.

Adapted from an article in The New York Times, July 2, 1995. A later treatment on the same subject was published in The New York Times on December 5, 2004.