

Historic Staunton Foundation Preservation Brown Bag Talk 6 February 2015

Researching Your Staunton Historic House 101 Katharine L. Brown

This quick workshop will consider the FOUR principal sources you can use to research your historic house in Staunton.

1. Deeds—how to do a chain of title search on your land.
2. Land tax records—how to use the land books to find the assessments on your lot over the years.
3. Sanborn maps—how to use this resource to assist in dating your house, changes to it and to your neighborhood.
4. Public Library resources—to find biographical and family information about who lived in your house in decades past and maybe loved the place as much as you do.

Some of this will apply to a house in the county, but not all of it.

There are four principal places you will do your research:

1. **Staunton Clerk of Court offices on 3rd floor of the George M. Cochran Justice Center** on East Beverley Street. The research in deeds, wills, land tax records takes place here.
2. Some may need to continue their title and tax research in the similar records at **Augusta County Court House**. This will be true if your house is located in a part of town that was not annexed to Staunton until 1860, or the next annexation in 1905. In some cases, there are older houses in the mainly modern house areas annexed in 1948, 1956, and 1987. Deeds and wills go back to 1746 here.
3. **Historic Staunton Foundation at the R.R. Smith Center**. HSF owns an exceptional collection of large bound volumes of the Sanborn insurance maps for the period roughly 1885-1929. The T.J. Collins & Sons architectural collection is also housed here.
4. **Staunton Public Library**. Two vital resources for researching previous owners of your house are housed here: the microfilm reels of Staunton's various newspapers from the 1940s to the 1990s and city directories dating back to the 1890s.

Finding Your Way in the Clerk of Court's domain.

Please read this carefully and do your own research in these public records. The clerk's staff is friendly and helpful, can answer some questions, and will help you make photocopies of documents for 50 cents a page. BUT, it is NOT their job to do research for the general public.

DEED & WILL RESEARCH

You start your deed research for the chain of title by finding your own deed for the purchase of your land. Remember that a deed focuses on the piece of land changing hand—the house on it is somewhat incidental.

Look on the chart here and find the computers. If you bought your land (and house) after 1984, this is where you must start. (Purchases from 10 June 1992 and before start in the bound indexes)

Click on RMS in the database options available on the home page.

Highlight “Deeds and Land Records”; put your name in the blank: Brown, Katharine L.

Bingo: a digital image of your instrument (deed) will come up.

Skim it to find the reference to the purchase deed of the previous owner (party of the first part in your deed). This should give you a deed book number and page number.

Find that book and page, read that deed, take down parties' names and date, and find the reference to the previous deed. Retrieve that book, find page number, do as above. Sometimes property passes within a family by will. The will book number and page will be referenced in the deed. Find that will. You then may have to look up a deed to the recently deceased person in the grantee index to learn from whom that person acquired your property.

Sometimes property is in the hands of trustees (often attorneys) because of foreclosure, or sometimes it is sold on the courthouse steps by the sheriff. Situations like this can complicate your research, but can be overcome with patience.

Using the **bound indexes to deeds** to find sellers (grantors) and buyers (grantees) of property. These are on the alley (north) side of the FIRST flat-top bank of shelves on the right side of the large room. There are THREE sets of indexes. Volumes of Grantors have BLACK letters and dates on the spines. Grantees have RED letters.

1802-Dec. 31, 1951

1 Jan. 1952-30 June 1985

1 July 1985-30 June 1992

Bound indexes to wills are on the alley (north) side of the fourth bank of shelves. Will books themselves are also there. The will index is a little bit trickier to figure out.

PROPERTY TAX RECORD RESEARCH [LAND BOOKS]

Staunton is fortunate to have excellent land records. These will be especially useful after you have completed your deed research and know the owner of the lot who probably built the house on it. Then you can look him up in the land books near the date of the deed.

The two oldest books are the Listing of Houses & Lots in the City of Staunton. One volume covers 1787-1827 and the other 1828-1849. These are in the second bank of shelves on the Beverley Street (south) side at the far right.

The Land Books from 1850-1898 have recently been preserved and are in bound volumes found on top of the brown filing cabinets on the Beverley Street (south) wall of the large room. They are in large format and very heavy, so be careful lifting them down to a large flat surface to look through them. They are alphabetical by surname of property owner.

If you have a vacant lot, then there will be no figure given for value of buildings. If the tax for the next year shows a building of some value, then you can fairly well date the year the house was constructed. Sometimes there will be a comment to that effect in the far right margin. A major addition in later years would change the value upward suddenly, and this might also be noted in the margin.

SANBORN MAPS

These maps were prepared by a national firm to assist insurance companies writing fire policies on buildings. Historic Staunton Foundation has these books at the Smith Center. They also have much of the material in digital format. Make an appointment to see them.

Maps will cover a neighborhood of several blocks. They show footprints of buildings and are color coded. There are various symbols or numbers on each footprint. The key will explain what

these are. They will indicate such items as number of stories, building materials, and roofing material.

Staunton's maps are bound volumes. They are taken about every 5 or 6 years from about 1885 to 1929. These can help indicate the date of construction of your house and also any additions made to it, such as an ell, porches, a garage. They do not always cover every neighborhood in town, but they can be very helpful when taken together with evidence from deeds and land records.

FAMILY INFORMATION—SOCIAL HISTORY

Your house may not have been built by a governor or senator, but perhaps the builder or some subsequent owner was a mayor of Staunton, or a leading merchant, or proprietor of the biggest saloon in town. You can find this stuff out! How??

Thornrose Cemetery. If you are lucky, the owner died in Staunton and was buried at Thornrose. The cemetery office can look up the burial date and tell you how to find the grave. This might give you the graves of spouse and some children. Some local churches such as Tinkling Spring and Augusta Stone have large cemeteries with burial information. With a burial date, you can then find an obituary. You can also try websites such as Find-a-Grave

Staunton newspapers. The local papers, especially the *Spectator* and the *Vindicator* in the 19th century and the many variations of the *Leader* in the 20th century are on microfilm at Staunton Public Library. An obituary can give you lots of biographical info.

City Directories. You can look your address up in any given year after about 1900 and see who was living in your house. You can look the person up by name to find if they owned or rented the house, name of spouse, name of adult children living there, and occupation of householder and wife, and often their phone number, if they had a phone.

Will Books. Even if you did not need to use a will book in your title search, you may want to see if the builder or some former occupants of your house, male and female, left a will. That often tells a great deal about the family and its wealth.

Online research. You can access the federal census records online in the Genealogy Room of the Staunton Public Library through ancestry.com. Census records are detailed and include the name of every member in a household, starting in 1850. The 1890 census burned, but all others are there through 1940. A transcription of the listing comes up, but it is also possible to access the original handwritten image and print it. You can learn everyone's age, what in-laws or boarders or servants are in the household, occupations, sometimes property values.

T.J. Collins Collection

If you know or think that your house was designed by the Collins firm, please make an appointment with Historic Staunton Foundation 885-7676 to discuss this and learn what additional information may be in the collection there.