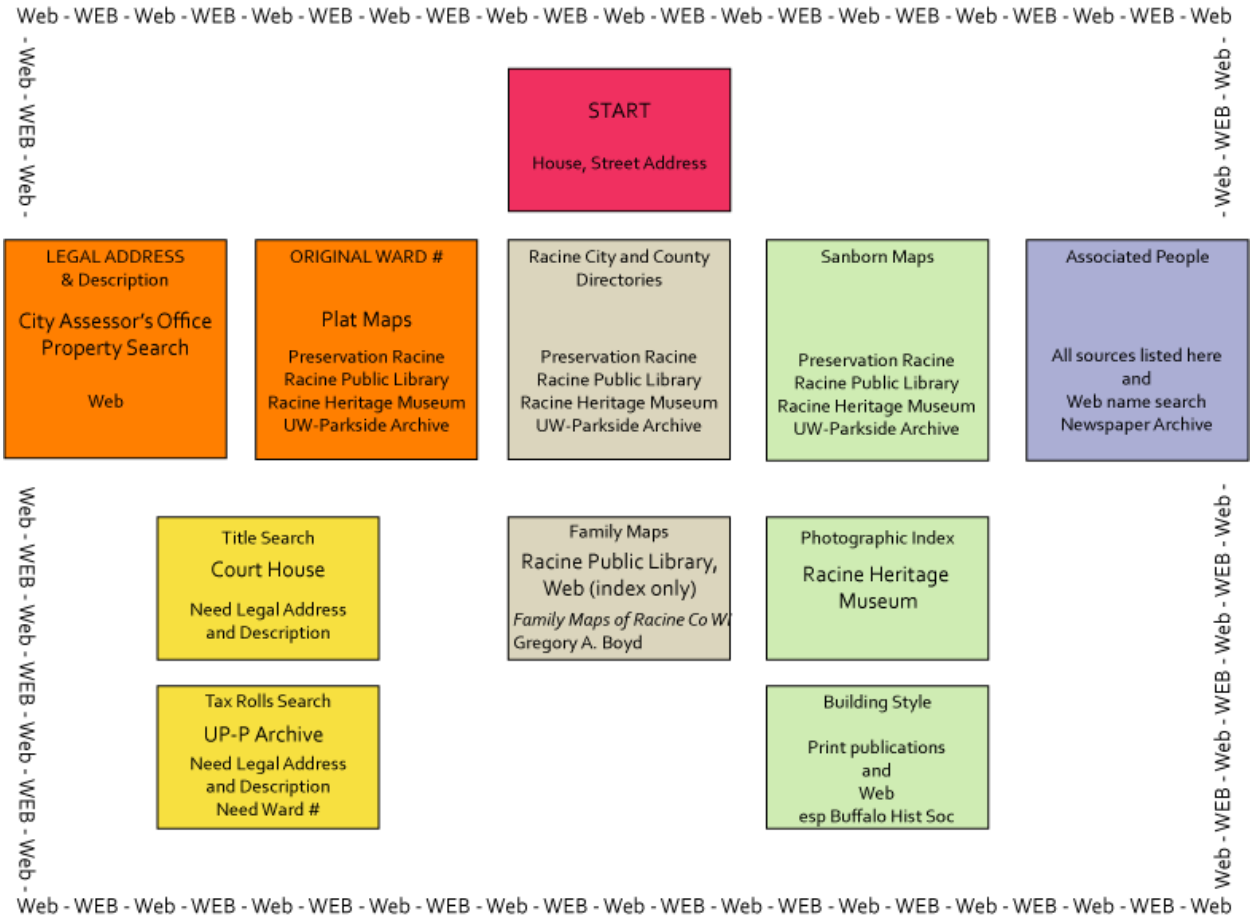
# How to Research your House (getting started)

## Preservation Racine

### A Research Aid by Pippin Michelli



*A Preservation Racine Research Aid*

# House Research Starter's Information Sources

(updated October 2019)

**Assessor's Offices online** (for legal address, parcel id, lot description)

Start page: http://racinecounty.com/government/register-of-deeds/tax-inquiry

Click on My Tax Bill: racinecounty.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html (click OK)

GIS & Maps / Map Book: http://arcgis.racinecounty.com/MapBook/

City of Racine: http://cityofracine.org/Departments/Assessor/Property-Assessments/Main/

For all the above, use search to find street address (number, street name, no "st", "ave" etc.)

**Ward Maps** (for Ward #s – note these can change over time – some tax searches need them)

City of Racine: https://www.cityofracine.org/CityAldermen/

**Plat Maps** (for tracking property changes)

Preservation Racine, 936 Main St, Racine, WI 53403 (262) 634 5748

Racine Public Library, 75 7th St, Racine, WI 53403 (262) 636 9217

Racine Heritage Museum, 701 Main St, Racine, WI 53403 (262) 636-3926

UW-Parkside Area Research Center ("Archive", D2 level, Library in Wyllie Hall), 900 Wood Road, Kenosha, WI 53141-2000 (262) 595 2411

Court House, Register of Deeds Office, 730 Wisconsin Ave, Racine, WI 53403 (262) 636-3208

**Title Search**

Court House, Register of Deeds Office

**Tax Rolls** (for tracking undocumented changes)

UW-Parkside Area Research Center ("Archive")

**Racine City and County Directories** (for tracking ownership & residence changes plus family info)

Preservation Racine

Racine Public Library

Racine Heritage Museum

UW-Parkside Area Research Center ("Archive")

**Family Maps**

Racine Public Library

also online (index only)

**Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps** (for property changes)

Preservation Racine

Racine Public Library

Racine Heritage Museum

UW-Parkside Area Research Center ("Archive")

**Photographs**

Racine Heritage Museum Archive (photographic index)

State Historical Society, Madison, 816 State Street, Madison, WI 53706 Archive: (608) 264 6460

https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2834 (scroll to "Browse all AHI property records")

Historic Map Works: http://www.historicmapworks.com/

**Building Style** (often politically, socially, or functionally definitive)

*A Field Guide to American Houses*, Virginia Savage McAlester, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2013 (good start but not enough, style names, dates and identifications vary by authority, check several!)

Buffalo Historical Society, Architects http://www.buffaloah.com/a/bamar.html

Buffalo Historical Society, Styles http://www.buffaloah.com/a/archsty/index.html

Buffalo Historical Society, Dictionary (illustrated architectural dictionary) http://www.buffaloah.com/a/DCTNRY/vocab.html

**Associated people, dates of changes and developments, building activities, etc**

Newspaper Archive: https://newspaperarchive.com/login/ (needs paid subscription)

Historic Map Works: http://www.historicmapworks.com/Buildings/index.php?state=WI (free)

Ancestry: http://www.ancestry.com/ (needs paid subscription)

# How to do a Title Search in Racine

(assuming you have no existing info apart from the street address)

**County or City Assessor's Website**

Look up record by street address (for street name LEAVE OUT "St", "Ave" etc)
Print out record if possible. Otherwise note down:

**From page 1**

1. Legal Description (also known as Legal Address)
2. Legal Reference (this shows the relevant volume number or letter followed by the page number)
3. District Code (this is the current ward – it may have changed if the property is very old)

**From page 2**

4. Parcel ID
5. Current Owner

**County Court House, Register of Deeds** (ground floor)

You want to work backwards from current owner's acquisition (the document cited in the legal reference on Assessor's website, above) to the original owner's acquisition of the land.

There are several ways of doing this. The easiest is generally through the Grantee Index, but that does not work very well for Racine, and it is easier to do it through the **Tract Index** instead.

At the Register of Deeds office, ask to make a **title search**. The counter clerk will set you up on computer, log you in, and leave you to it. The computer contains records from 1985 to present. The rest are in the large tomes around the office.

At the computer, you can search in several ways. Parcel ID does not currently produce results but you can use also use street address or legal reference. Legal reference will produce the document cited on the Assessor's website. Click on the **Grantor** to go through that person's property records until you find the one that matches the **legal description** and his or her acquisition of it. Then see the **grantor** of that transaction and do the same again. In theory, you can work backwards until the land was first acquired. In practice the records have not been fully digitized yet.

For each record, click on its link and look for the "**image**" link at top right. That will open a pop-up window with a scan of the document. You can print it ($1) or note the relevant information. In any case, for each record you find, list it and its information on the **Tract Index Record** sheet, and the **Title Abstract** sheet, as you go. You are going to make your own index.

When the computer info runs out, go to the **Tract Indexes** in the tall unit, south east of the room. These contain the records from 1945 to 1985. They are large red files, and they are organized alphabetically by **subdivision/section**, which is listed on the spine. From your **legal description** you know the **subdivision/section** and **block**. Look for the tract index that names your section on its spine, and scan through it to find the page with the records for your block.

Also from your **legal description** you know the **lot number(s)** of the property. Now scan the page for all the records that include any or all of your lot numbers. Note that the pages are divided into three vertical sections. Be sure to scan all three sections. They are more or less in date order but were not filled in as logically as we might like. Be sure also to turn the page and check any further entries on the other side and possibly on the next page. Again, for each record you find, list it and its information on your **Tract Index Record** sheet as you go.

When that information runs out, turn to the **index cards** at the centre of the room. Look for the drawer marked **Tract Index File**. Again look for your **section** and **block**. The card will tell you the relevant **early tract index** and page. The early tract indexes contain the records from the founding of Racine to 1945. They are large white files on the inside of the range near the door of the office.

Find the relevant tract index and repeat the process used for the more recent tract indexes. Again, for each record you find, list it and its information on your **Tract Index Record** sheet as you go.

At this point, you have searched three lists of records and we hope your index is now complete and more or less in chronological order, starting with the most recent and ending with the oldest record.

Now you can check all or some of the records as you need. Your index will tell you the relevant document type, volume number and page to find the record you need. For each of these, be sure to fill out an entry in your **Title Abstract**. There are two forms per page and you can cut them apart and sort them into the correct order when you're ready.

With this info, you can look at the **tax rolls** more purposefully.

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## Tax Record Search

**Area Research Center (University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Archive)**
Basement of the library

**Bring your Title Abstract with you to the Area Research Center**, as it has the info needed by the archivist to find the correct tax rolls for you. You need to be ready to say which **years** you want to examine, as the archivist will bring the massive tax records out to you.

These will give you hints about when the house was built, demolished, rebuilt, extended, and so forth. The taxable value of the property will rise and fall accordingly. Be sure to keep an eye on the values of the neighboring properties, because the city commonly raises the value of entire streets in order to increase taxes. That does not produce a relevant value change for your purposes. You want to see the change happening to the researched property alone (ok, it can happen for another property on the street, too, but not for the entire street).

For each record you find, list it and its information on your **Tax Roll Extract** sheet as you go.

> **Note**, it is always cold in the archive and you will be there for a while, so take something warm to slip on (even in the summer).

# City of Racine Tract Index Record

**Street Address** .....

**Legal Description** .....

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| Lot(s) | Vol # or Ltr | Class (type) | Page | Grantor(s) | Grantee(s) | Doc # | Dated | Received |
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(Legal Ref is Vol-Page)
(i.e. xxx-xxx)

# Racine County Tract Index Record

**Street Address** .....

**Legal Description** .....

**Vol types** Deed, Warranty Deed, Special Deed, Sheriff's Deed, Land Contract, Mortgage, Quit Claim, Affadavit, Misc
**D WD SpD ShD LC M QC A Mi**

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| **Block & Lot(s)** | **Vol No/ltr & page** | **Type** D, M, QC | **Grantor(s)** | **Grantee(s)** | **Doc #** | **Dated** | **Received** |
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# Tax Roll Extract

**Street Address** .....

**Legal Description** .....

**District/Ward** ..... **Current** ..... **Year Built** .....

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| Year | Owner | Blk | Lot | Description | Neighbor 1 | | Owner | | Neighbor 2 | |
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# City Directories

**Street Address** .....

| Year | Street Directory address | Name | (h/o) | Profession | Name Directory, Family/household members | Business Directory |
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# Historic Building Research

House Styles

# Simplified Classification of Architectural Styles
# Approximate Date-Spans and General Significance

**Typically Wood**
**Stylistic tendency "picturesque"**
**Pattern books**

- **Decorative trim styles**
  Italianate 1840-85, Gothic Revival 1840-80 – reaction vs classicizing [political] styles, lost popularity post financial panic 1873 ff ; Queen Anne 1870s/80s-1900/1910s, more gingerbread more expensive – trade, wealth, conservatism, intro c.1875 after financial panic 1873, dominated thereafter; Shingle 1880s (classier version)
- **Exposed Wood styles**
  Prairie 1900-1920, Arts and Crafts/ Bungalow 1905-30, rejected historic ornament, modernized it, progressive politics
  Tudor 1920s-30s, consciously modern and convenient

  GREAT DEPRESSION 1929-39

  Contemporary c1945-65 emphasized structure, natural materials – about enhancing human experience

**Typically Wood, metal, synthetics**
**Stylistic tendency "minimal"**
**Catalogue kits, prefab, FHA**

- **Unstyled Folk**
  Folk (log) styles pre-railroad to 1920s, National (frame) styles 1850s to 1930s – owner-built, local materials until railroad, then used transported precut lumber

- **Affordable styles**
  Catalogue kit houses 1900s-40s, affordable, traditional, modern, convenient; Manufactured/trailers 1930s to present
  Bankers Modern, c.1935-1960/70s – two styles to meet FHA guidelines enforced by price capping, mortgage and insurance requirements: materials uniform in color, minimal style elements
  —Minimal Traditional avoided modern look, emphasized shutters & planters
  —Ranch modern feel thru picture windows, patios, sliding doors, rearward orientation

**Typically Stone, Concrete**
**Stylistic tendency "austere"**
**Individually architect designed**

- **Classicizing styles**
  Classical Revival 1820-60 – American support for Greek rebellion vs Ottoman empire (1821-30), Dutch Colonial; Colonial 1870-1920/60)
- Beaux Arts Classical 1885-1930, NeoClassical 1895-1950s

- **Modernizing styles**
  Beaux Arts Minimal/Commercial 1890s-1920s, Art Deco 1930-50
  International 1925-present, emphasized structure, concrete, steel, glass – crusading, rejection tradition & war-inducing regionalism, espousal machine, about changing the world, also reformist/ revolution