

Carolina? There's a bounty of resources

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Robert Gurley, director of preservation at the Preservation Society of Charleston, says that even a Bird's Eye View map of 1872 can provide striking details of individual properties in Charleston and are valuable to researchers. David Quick/Staff

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The revolution in technology and genetics testing has made tracing family history easier than ever.

And in South Carolina, thanks to public records that go back more than 300 years, the potential for researching a building's history, and the lives of those who lived or worked there, is possible, too.

"Researching property is something near and dear to us at the Preservation Society (of Charleston)," says the nonprofit's executive director Kristopher King, noting the society's decades-long program to place historic markers on homes downtown.

As a result of those markers, the society often is a first stop for novices in Charleston embarking on a journey of discovery, and King says the organization tries to start people on the right track. Many other communities also have historical or preservation groups that could be a good place to start.

"We're really fortunate in Charleston. A lot of people think that Charleston is an incredibly well-researched city, and it is, to a certain degree," King says, "but we're always amazed at how much more information there really is to be found out there."

"When an individual homeowner is willing to take on that task, we get excited about it because it adds to the collective story of Charleston."

Getting started



Robert Gurley, director of preservation at the Preservation Society of Charleston, looks over one of the Sanborn fire insurance maps from 1941 at the nonprofit's office. The maps give details of properties in specific times. David Quick/Staff

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While Charleston and other communities have resources, it can be intimidating to figure out where to begin a search.

In the Lowcountry, records are available at a wide array of places, including the Preservation Society, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston County Library, Historic Charleston Foundation, S.C. Department of Archives and History, Charleston Library Society, Avery Research Institute, Charleston Museum and the University of South Carolina.

Cooperative efforts continue to make resources available online at the Lowcountry Digital Library at the College of Charleston.

“It’s amazing that we have these records,” says Doreen Larimer, a real estate abstractor who has 35 years of experience researching historic properties in the Lowcountry, including those that date back to when Carolina was a royal colony.

“When you think about all the things that happened in Charleston, between the hurricanes, earthquakes and wars, that these records still exist, it’s amazing. And they can be accessed by anyone,” she says. “They are public records and you are more than welcome to see them.”

Both King and Larimer say the first place to start is by establishing “a chain of title” of ownership, starting with the current owner and working back.

In South Carolina, such searches begin in the county Register of Mesne Conveyance office, more commonly referred to a more modern, simplified term “Register of Deeds” in other places.

The title leads to names of people and places, which Larimer says can change over time. As an example, Rivertowne subdivision in Mount Pleasant used to be known as Wando Plantation and land where the new S8 skateboard park in the Charleston Neck used to be called the “Rat Trap.”

Long ago, Charleston County used to be Berkeley County, which was originally established in 1682 and named for lords William and John Berkeley.