

Researching Your Old House in Baraboo

There are many resources available to ascertain information about an historic structure. Fortunately many of these records are readily available here in Baraboo. Through the careful study of **deeds, Sanborn maps, bird's eye views, newspaper clippings, photographs, census records**, and the documents housed at the Sauk County Historical Society and the Baraboo Public Library the history of your house can be ascertained.

As the history of a house is intertwined with the history of the people who built, maintained and lived in it, a study of those people is also useful. This can be done through the use of **obituaries, wedding announcements, cemetery records, city directories, county histories, biographies** and other resources.

Your abstract / Courthouse deed records

Your property abstract, if you have it, is a list of all the property owners of your piece of property from the time it was platted up until you bought it. The parcel of land that you now own may have been larger to begin with and was later subdivided, so it is important to read the description of the property carefully. The abstract is useful in that it gives a list of names of people who owned the property, however, it does not list improvements, such as houses, outright. It can be used as a starting point in looking up names to determine if one of the property owners listed built your house. The list can be narrowed down by assessing the style of your house to come up with a probably range of years. For example if it is a Gothic Revival house it was probably built between 1855-1875, so we would look at those years and start a search there.

If you do not have your abstract you can obtain the same information by using the records at the Sauk County Register of Deeds office. Using the grantor and grantee indexes it is possible to trace when and for how long a particular individual owned your piece of property. To help start the search we would again assess the style of the house to come up with a probable range of years and use the city directories to locate names of people who lived in the house.

Sanborn Maps

The Sanborn Fire Insurance Company mapped the City of Baraboo in the following years: **1885, 1892, 1898, 1904, 1913, 1927 and 1933**. The earlier maps only cover the downtown and southside commercial districts showing only a few residences bordering these areas. If your house is close enough to be included, than these maps can be very useful. The later maps can be useful for those in strictly residential districts in determining when additions might have been built and can be useful in dating post-Victorian homes.

All of the maps are located on a microfilm roll which is kept at the Baraboo Public Library. Copies can be made from the microfilm reader there for a fee. (It is important to note that the microfilm is not colored like the original paper copies as it is in black and white. This would negate the color code which indicated what a building was constructed of) In addition, the Historical Museum has a paper copy of the 1927 map, with 1933 corrections. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin has a complete set of colored originals for use in the archives reading room in Madison.

Baraboo Bird's Eye Drawings

Bird's eye drawings of Baraboo were made in 1870 and 1887 showing the location, size and development of most buildings in and around Baraboo. Looking at the drawings can help confirm the existence of a building or additions but must be used carefully with the understanding that they were drawn from ground level (not in a plane or even hot air balloon.) This meant the artist had to draw each block as he or she thought it would look from high in the air, therefore some flaws in exact building placement may have occurred. However, they are highly useful. The 1870 drawing is the only visual record of many early Baraboo buildings and the 1885 used in conjunction with the 1885 Sanborn map can be very informative.

City and County Directories

The earliest directory for the City of Baraboo is 1890 and is located in Bensell's Sauk County Directory of 1890. Although this early directory does not have street numbers for the houses, it still records their location in reference to streets and street corners. Other directories for the City of Baraboo cover the following years 1895-96, 1898-99, 1903-04, 1905-06, 1910-11, 1915-16, 1917-18 and 1924. These directories are an invaluable resource but one must keep in mind that some street names changed throughout the years as did some numbering systems. The earliest directory to be cross-referenced by street address is the 1915-1916 edition. Using this, one can often trace backwards to see if a family was living at a particular address in previous years, often discovering the original builders.

Baraboo Newspapers

The "Baraboo Republic" is the oldest paper in continuous publication in Baraboo and Sauk County. It was founded by D.K. and Silas Noyes with the first Baraboo printing in January of 1855. The "Baraboo News" which included daily and weekly subscriptions was started in 1894. In 1929 the "Baraboo Republic" and the "Baraboo Daily News" merged to form the "Baraboo News-Republic." Through the use of the newspapers on microfilm at the Baraboo Public Library information can often be found about the date a house was built and its builder. By using other clues to "bookend" possible years of construction it is possible to comb through the local sections of the newspaper and find out if a particular building project is mentioned. Through the use of **cemetery books and the obituary, wedding and anniversary indices**, we can also learn something about the people who lived in a particular house.

Cemetery Books

If your house was built before the turn of the century, chances are that the people that built it probably died in Baraboo, or at least Sauk County. With the help of the Sauk County Cemetery Books, it is often possible to find the death date for a particular individual and then check the paper for an obituary. A death date can also be obtained through the records at the Register of Deeds office.

Sauk County Histories

Several county histories were written before the turn of the century and shortly after. These extensive works often give biographies of prominent individuals as well as provide other clues useful in house hunting. The histories have been indexed thus making a quick search possible when looking for a specific person. The three largest county histories are:

Historical Sketches of Sauk County, Wisconsin by W. H. Canfield, 1871

The History of Sauk County, Wisconsin by C.W. Butterfield, 1880

A Standard History of Sauk County, Wisconsin, edited by Harry E. Cole, 1918

Census Records

The federal census was taken every ten years and began in Sauk County in 1850. A state census was also taken every ten years although five years staggered from the federal census (1855, 1865 etc.) Census records can be invaluable in giving us clues about particular people, (i.e. age, occupation, nationality etc.) but they can also tell us about households. Were there servants or boarders? Were any of the children still living at home? Was the house turned into apartments? One of the most helpful records is the 1900 federal census which listed households by street address and gives more personal information than previous censuses. It also, important to note that the 1890 federal census was lost due to fire.

Federal census records for Sauk County for the years 1850, 1860, and 1870 are contained on microfilm at the Baraboo Public Library. The entire census records for Sauk County can be found at the Reedsburg Public Library or at the State Historical Society.

Tax Assessment Rolls (19th Century)

Property evaluation for tax assessment can lead to clues as to whether a site contains a structure or not, as the assessment will include the value of improvements. If a lot does not have a house on it, it may be valued at only a couple of hundred dollars and taxed accordingly. However, if a structure exists the value and taxes will be higher. Tax records can be very useful if a number of consecutive years exists where comparisons between values can be made.

Unfortunately, Baraboo's tax records were not preserved very well, or there whereabouts is unknown. The State Historical Society has three Baraboo tax assessment books covering the following years: 1884, 1893, and 1898. Although incomplete, these records can help in research. They can often be used as bookmarks giving clues where to search. For example, if there is a low assessment in 1884 and high ones in 1893 and 1898, one would look between 1884 and 1893. Also of interest is that the 1898 tax assessment also lists personal property inventories and taxes.

Historic Building Research Checklist for Baraboo

It is important to document your work and avoid covering the same ground twice.
Use the following checklist to make sure you have covered all the bases.

The following abbreviations have been used:

BPL - Baraboo Public Library , 230 Fourth Avenue

SCHM - Sauk County Historical Museum, 531 Fourth Avenue

WSE - West Square Annex

CH - Sauk County Courthouse

Have you checked the following?

Your property abstract or deeds (CH) ☐

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps (SCHM) ☐

Baraboo Bird's Eye Drawings (SCHM)
1870 ☐
1887 ☐

City and County Directories

1890 Bensell's Sauk County Directory
(BPL) (SCHM) ☐

1895-96 Angell's City of Baraboo Directory
(BPL) (SCHM) ☐

1898-99 Sauk County Directory
(SCHM) ☐

1903-1904 City of Baraboo Directory
(BPL) (SCHM) ☐

1905-1906 Sauk County Directory
(BPL) (SCHM) ☐

1910-1911 City of Baraboo Directory
(SCHM) ☐

1915-1916 City of Baraboo Directory
(BPL) ☐

1917-1918 City of Baraboo Directory
(SCHM) ☐

Baraboo Newspapers (BPL) ☐

Sauk County Cemetery Inscriptions
(BPL & SCHM) ☐

Sauk County Histories

(BPL & SCHM)

W. H. Canfield, 1871

C.W. Butterfield, 1880

Harry E. Cole, 1918

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Federal and State Census Records (BPL & RPL)

Federal

1870

1880

1900

1910

others

☐☐☐☐☐

State

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Tax Assessment Records (State Historical)

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Sauk County Historical Museum Archives

Individual Files on a Particular Family

"Baraboo Homes" File

File Card Index

Architecture Room

Tax Assessment Records(limited)

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BARABOO PUBLIC
230 Fourth Street
Baraboo, WI 53913