



Become a house detective: Learn the history of your old home

By Tiffany Dziurman

It's called the loo, can, potty, water closet, john, lavatory, and a dozen other names. But did you know a toilet can also be called a historical clue?

A toilet can be one of the best resources for determining the age and history of your house. Once you find the clue hidden there, you are on your way to discovering all sorts of information about the origins of your abode – who built it, who owned it, and who used to live in it.



You do not need chocolates and roses to date your house

House history is a mixture of genealogy and archaeology and is made up of two parts – a physical history and a social history. The physical history includes a home's architectural style, building materials, adornments, and additions and renovations which may provide information about its age, architecture and purpose. The social history reveals information about who built the home and why, as well as the people who lived in it.

A toilet is part of a home's physical history and if it is original to the house, it can provide you with the year the house was built. Simply lift off the lid from the tank, turn it over and look for an indented date stamped underneath showing the month, day and year the toilet was manufactured. With that, you can make an educated guess that the toilet was installed in the house a few months after it was made.

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

*Linda Schwartz
Terry Wyza*

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The President's Message

A new year may have begun, but we are still coping with the trials and tribulations first experienced nearly two years ago. History teaches us that all things pass – maybe not easily – but crises do end, and happier times return. I am sure we all hope to see those happier times return in 2022.

This year still presents some program challenges for RAHS. We will continue in-person programming as much as possible at Rochester Hills Public Library and Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm. As you know, RAHS does not host programs in January. But programming returns in February (see the events list in this newsletter).

As we review programs for 2022, RAHS would like to know if members want to continue with the current schedule of two programs early in the month (sometimes the same week) – Brown Bag and Thursday evening lectures – or if members would like RAHS to consider scheduling Brown Bag programs for later in the month, or alternate between an evening program one month followed by an afternoon program the next month. You can let us know by sending an email to: rahsupdates@gmail.com. We know it may be difficult to attend two programs scheduled close together, so suggestions or insights from you, our members, are appreciated. RAHS is committed to providing excellent programming.



Tiffany Dziurman
RAHS President

In other programming news, be sure to check out Smart Towns, a lifelong learning program series for everyone in the community and led by educational organizations in the area. RAHS is a part of Smart Towns and will host a few programs during the year. For more information, visit smarttowns.rhpl.org.

There is a bit of news to share with you all. On February 9 at 7 p.m. on Zoom, I will be presenting on the Haven Sanitarium for the Historical Society of Michigan's History Hounds series. This series is free for members of the Historical Society of Michigan (HSM) and members of HSM's member organizations like RAHS. To register for the program, visit hsmichigan.org/programs/history-hounds-lecture-series and click on the H.H. Registration Member button at the top of the page. Fill out the registration form and list Rochester-Avon Historical Society as the historical organization. Fill in our mailing address (located in this newsletter), too.

Also, an article I wrote about the Haven Sanitarium will be published in the March/April issue of *Michigan History Magazine*. The magazine will be on newsstands on or about February 15 but mailed to subscribers earlier.

There are more announcements, programs, and events to come as we emerge from the pandemic to a, hopefully, happier, and healthier New Year.

We hope to see you all in 2022!

RCS Legacy Committee Update

By Tiffany Dziurman

On December 16, the RCS Legacy Committee met at the RCS Administration Building at 4 p.m. to continue discussing the future of the site. The committee met in August, September, October, and December. The August and September meetings were introductory and research-oriented -- taking a tour of the site; reviewing the formal building assessment; creating a list of possible site uses; refreshers/primers on zoning, local ordinances, preservation architecture, state and national register listings; etc.

In October, the committee listened to presentations from Ron Campbell, AIA, an historic preservation specialist/architect with Oakland County; John Bry, Main Street Oakland County; and Bill Finnicum, an architect with Finnicum Brownie Architects specializing in historic preservation. Sometimes it takes a bit of time to get people to present at these meetings due to scheduling conflicts, etc. At this meeting, the Legacy Committee discussed developing an RFP for project/purchasing bids. That RFP was discussed yesterday with committee input. Details of that RFP cannot yet be discussed in accordance with fair practices.

Please know that there are no truths to rumors about the admin building already being sold or a developer waiting in the wings. Rumors potentially damage the work of the Legacy Committee. Additionally, rumors could possibly hurt any chance of a viable developer with historic preservation experience from bidding on the building in the future.

Additionally, there is an RCS staff member who is a former archivist tasked with creating an inventory of the historical items within the complex of buildings. There are many items to catalog. These include items in storage and items that can be seen throughout the buildings. The historical society has offered assistance in reviewing such items and taking inventory. In addition, the society is working with the General Services Administration (GSA) of the federal government to find additional information related to the Beerbohm mural and the Jungwirth bas relief -- both WPA projects completed during the FDR Administration. The GSA has managed WPA projects since 1947.

Per the committee's discussions, the Rochester-Avon Historical Society has submitted the first application for National Register status. This is a two-part process and a long one. The application nominates the entire complex. There are no guarantees, but the process has begun. National Register status, if granted, does not save a site from being razed. It does, however, provide incentives in the form of federal tax credits, etc. to owners and potential developers. A portion of the building, the Harrison Building, has been listed on the State Register of Historic Places since 1987. So, there are state historic preservation tax credits available if applied for by a potential new owner/developer who wishes to preserve or adaptively reuse the site in its entirety or only the Harrison Building.

Please feel free to contact the historical society with additional questions.



Cover story continued –

When I lived in a 1941 bungalow in downtown Rochester, the city tax rolls indicated that the house was built in 1941. But those records are often an estimate for when a house was constructed. To be sure, I checked under the lid of the first-floor bathroom toilet, which I was told was original to the house, and found a stamp with the date October 5, 1941. Bingo. The built year on the tax rolls and the year on the toilet lid matched.

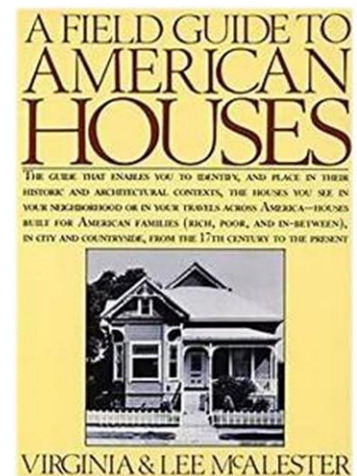
But if the toilet will not “talk,” there are other ways to determine the year your house was built.

Talking to neighbors can help tremendously. My former house, for example, resembled the one next door. When I asked my neighbor, who had lived in the neighborhood for decades, why our houses were so similar and who built them, I was told the houses were built by the same builder and I was given the builder’s name right down to the exact spelling. I then searched old newspapers online (Oakland County Historic Resources site) for information and advertisements about the builder. Oftentimes, the building of new homes was big news in small towns and reported in the local papers.

Resources

With some basic background information about your home, such as the year it was built, you can begin conducting serious research. Consider gathering some tools to help you along the way: a notebook, pencil, library card, and cell phone or camera. You will be using both primary sources (original documents) and secondary sources (books and materials written after the fact).

For some general ideas about your home’s architectural style, consider reviewing these two reference books: *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia and Lee McAlester (Knopf, 1984), available at Rochester Hills Public Library, and *Identifying American Architecture* by John J.G. Blumenson (American Association



Look around your house and take note of room sizes, storage space, doorknobs, window frames, locks – all things that can indicate the age of a house. Glass doorknobs, for example, are typical of homes built in the 1920s through the 1940s. If you do renovations, keep things you find such as scraps of old wallpaper, newspapers in the wall boards (once used for insulation), holes in the walls for pot-bellied stoves, etc. Check out the attic and roof space for older features such as barn wood -- commonly used to frame houses in Rochester.

Now you are ready to roll up your sleeves and dive into the record books for more precise information. What follows is a list of just some of the public and private resources that can tell you things you never knew about your house. There are even more types of records that can help you research. Just do an Internet search to see what I mean.

But be careful. Researching the history of your house can become fun and addicting!

Going Public

Public records are generally held by government agencies and can be found online and in county courthouses, state archives, libraries and city offices.

Deeds provide a record of property ownership and can also reveal land values. Find deeds at the county courthouse and state archives.

Cover Story continued –

Grantor/Grantee and Mortgage Indexes can also provide a list of owners and can be found at the county courthouse or state archives.

Vital records such as birth, marriage and death certificates and the U.S. census can give you biographical information about former owners such as names, ages, occupations and ethnicity of the people who lived in the house. Vital records are located at the county clerk's office, the library and online (an easier way to research, but a bit more costly).

Get a membership to ancestry.com (or use the free library edition at Rochester Hills Public Library) or sign up with any of the many online genealogy sites out there and research census records and other vital records. Census records are available from 1940 and before.

Many counties now offer a free online search for vital records but charge a fee to make copies and mail them to you. The fees are usually nominal in exchange for not having travel to the courthouse. (You will need to call county courthouses to learn about any COVID-19 restrictions and open hours.)

Building permits can provide names of contractors, architects, and the dates of construction. These records can be found in city or township offices. You may find, however, that the addition to your house was done without a permit – an unfortunate, but often true situation. Check with city offices, county courthouses, and state archives. Note: some public buildings still do not allow researchers/visitors to come in due to COVID-19. Call first.

Architectural drawings can also give you original construction dates, names of builders, materials used, and other general construction information. Ask previous owners for architectural drawings or search through newspapers, tax records or, if you know the name of the architect, contact the architectural office if it is still open.

Tax records must be used with care. As mentioned above, most dates/years on tax rolls are approximate. However, check them to find out if there was an increase in the tax paid for a given year – that will indicate that construction took place on the property. But remember -- buildings were often torn down and replaced due to storms, fires, and the like. Check the county clerk's office or city offices for tax records.

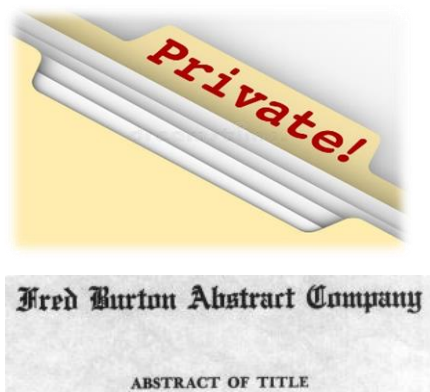


Photo compliments milfordhistory.org

Privacy Please!

Private records can be found in libraries, museums, family records, books, bibles, etc. They are not as easily available as public records but can provide a wealth of information about your home.

Abstract of Titles are perhaps the best historical resources for finding information about your home. Although rare, property abstracts provide all sorts of information including land ownership, sale history, legal boundaries, and more.

Many of the abstracts for properties around Rochester were distributed by the Fred Burton Abstract Co. The company does not exist anymore. Sometimes former owners of the home have the abstract or copies of the abstract. Ask! These records may also be in museum archives or with local historical societies, but they are hard to find.

Cover Story Continued -

Fire maps are useful for finding the dates of when homes or buildings were built. The Sanborn Company created fire maps from 1867 until 1961 and was one of the most popular map companies around. Fire maps were usually published in five- or 10-year increments and can provide information about building footprints, building materials, height or number of stories, location of doors and windows, street names, and the location of water pipes. Use Google to locate online map files. Most Sanborn maps reside with the Library of Congress, but you might find ones locally within community repositories (or at least links to them online).

Bird's eye view maps were drawn by artists in the 19th century and depict a view of cities from above – as if a bird was flying over and looking down at the structure and landscape. Look for these maps in printed books, such as John Cumming's *A Preliminary Checklist of 19th Century Lithographs of Michigan Cities and Towns*, as well as local and regional libraries, university and college libraries, and the Library of Congress.

Cemetery records along with obituaries and family documents will provide biographical information about former residents. Look for these records in libraries, museums, and the state archives and check their websites for online links.

City and telephone directories provide biographical information about previous homeowners. You might find the occupation of a former owner or tenant and how many people lived in the residence. Search for them online.

Newspapers can be invaluable resources. While you cannot believe everything written in old newspapers, they can provide biographical information and may include historical photos. You can sometimes find the date or approximate date of construction in newspapers since most local activity – such as the building of a new home -- was reported by local papers. Look for advertisements for builders and architects. Find

newspapers at oaklandcountyhistory.org or michmemories.org.

Historical photos and postcards can be helpful in documenting a building or a structure's original appearance. But be careful since some postcard creators superimposed images or added things to the image that were not real. Find them online or in libraries, historical societies, museums and online. Lots of postcards are up for auction on eBay and can be found in local antique shops.

Historical societies and commissions may have records that can help you. Generally, a property is considered historical if it is representative of a certain period, associated with a known historical figure or event, and is over 50 years old.

Determining the age and history of your home is good old-fashioned detective work. No one document will tell you everything. You must look at all the available information and refer to documents throughout the researching process. You will be finding information and building a story that no one else knows.

Contributing sources: Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan (<http://clarke.cmich.edu>), Michael John Neill at Ancestry.com; John R. Hébert and Patrick E. Dempsey, *Panoramic Maps of Cities in the United States and Canada*; National Register Bulletin: Researching a Historic Property.

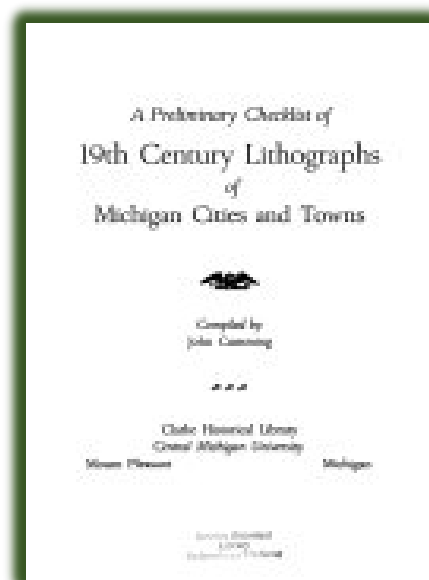


Photo compliments www.susinpom.com

Presidents Day Wordsearch

Instructions: Try to find all of the hidden Presidents' Day words in the word search puzzle below.

(Words can be spelled forwards, backwards, diagonally, up, or down.)



Word List

CELEBRATE	FEDERAL	NATIONAL
CITIZEN	FLAG	PRESIDENT
CONSTITUTION	LEADER	STATE
EAGLE	LIBERTY	VOTE
ELECT	MONUMENT	WASHINGTON

Mark Your Calendars UPCOMING EVENTS

There will be no RAHS programs in January due to our program dates being so close to the new year celebrations. We'll see you in February!

Local History Resources at Rochester Hills Public Library

Tuesday, February 1, 2022, 12 p.m.

Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm, Calf Barn.

Join Hilary Maurin, adult services librarian for Rochester Hills Public Library, to learn about what materials and resources are available at the library to research local history and how you can utilize them to explore the history of Rochester, Rochester Hills, and Oakland Township.

This program is free and open to the public. Refreshments will not be served, but registrants are welcome to bring a lunch. Register with the Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm.

Register: <https://bit.ly/3eaygW9>

19th Century Commercial Architecture of Rochester

Thursday, February 3, 2022, 7 p.m.

Rochester Hills Public Library, Multipurpose Room.

Rochester-Avon Historical Society president and historian Tiffany Dziurman will discuss Rochester's nineteenth-century commercial architecture in a new local history presentation at Rochester Hills Public Library on Thursday, February 3 at 7 p.m. Rochester's downtown business district contains multiple surviving examples of nineteenth-century commercial architecture. The oldest surviving example is the Rollin Sprague/Old Stone Store, built of coursed cobblestone in 1849 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The last building erected in the business district in the nineteenth century was the Masonic Block at Fourth and Main, designed by Pontiac architect E.R. Prall in 1899 and registered as a Michigan Historic Site.

Space is limited. Registration for the program is recommended. Visit rochesteravonhistoricalsociety.org to register and for more information.

Registration: <https://bit.ly/30ztKxa>



Thomas H. Hacker block, west elevation, 1897

Upcoming Events

Golden Age of Theaters & Pipe Organs

April 7, 2022 at 7:00 PM.

Rochester Hills Public Library, Multipurpose Room

Richard Dengate retired high school teacher and university lecturer takes us back in time to relive the brief period of these marvelous entertainment venues. While economics and history were the areas of his professional life, he became interested in the theater pipe organ fifty years ago and began studying the "king of instruments." He is a member of the American, Detroit and Motor City Theater Organ Societies. The program will explore the growth and development of

the movie palaces and their pipe organs through stills and films which will recreate the thunderous sounds which reverberated throughout these cavernous temples of architectural wonder.



Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm Member and Volunteer Appreciation Night Friday, December 10, 2021 A Look Back

Museum Website:

https://www.rochesterhills.org/departments/parks_and_natural_resources/museum/index.php



Coming Soon



RAHS is excited to announce our new month and venue, for this year's Appraisal Day! We are back and thrilled! This year's event will be held in the beginning of April 2022 at Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm, 1005 Van Hoosen Rd., Rochester Hills. Stay tuned for further details!

Show us your antiques and vintage items! Learn more about the relics and their value.

Remember your RAHS membership provides free access to the museum. Special events and exhibits are excluded. Be sure to take advantage of this RAHS member perk!



Community Involvement

Festival of Trees



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MEETING
HOUSE

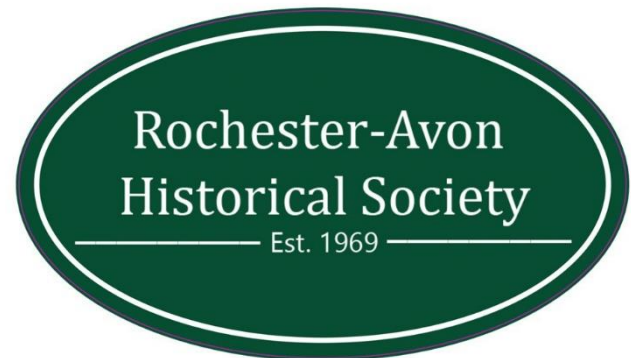


RAHS Merchandise



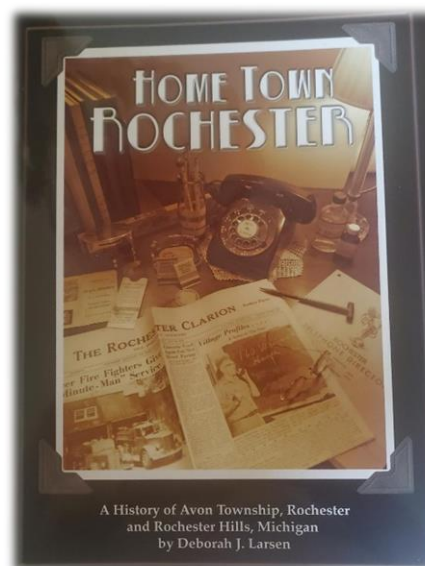
History in the Heart of the Hills: A
Rochester Area Heritage Tour (Book)

\$10.00



RAHS Car Decal

\$6.00



Hometown Rochester (book)

\$10.00

Items can be purchased at:

<https://www.rochesteravonhistoricalsociety.org/store/>



To contact us, call (248) 656-5440 or email to rahsupdates@gmail.com

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Membership Application

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| | <input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Business/Sponsor Designed for community businesses and individuals with a desire to promote the restoration and promotion of local history. |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Annual Picnic | <input type="checkbox"/> Historic Walking Tour Guide/Assistant |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Antique Appraisal Day | <input type="checkbox"/> Photography/Videography |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historic Research | <input type="checkbox"/> Refreshments at Meetings |
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