

## PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION FOR A PLAQUE (HISTORIC HOUSE MARKER)

It's fun to learn the history of your house. It takes some time, effort, patience, and ingenuity to do it, but it's worth it. Markers may be awarded on the basis of a building's age (100 years or more), its architectural significance, or its local historical importance. Here are some suggestions for sources of information and explanation of a few unfamiliar terms you may encounter in the process:

First, look carefully at your house – its construction, kinds of windows, the basement, eaves, chimneys, etc. Sometimes builders and other workmen scratched their names and dates into woodwork in cellars, attics, or porches. Sometimes, penciled information is found on plastered walls when wallpaper is removed. Always note these carefully, exactly as found; photograph them if possible and preserve them if you can after making a good record of them. Sometimes old newspapers or invoices are found stuffed behind shelves or window frames – their dates help to establish owners or events taking place at a period of the house's history.

The most important source for dating a house will be found in deeds, which are in the County Clerk's office in Mt. Holly. Start with your own deed. In it, you will find noted the book/page/date whereby the person who sold you the property – the GRANTOR – obtained it. When HE purchased the property, he was the GRANT-EE. Indexes to deeds are available under both Grantee and Grantor headings and a guide to using them is inside the front cover of every book.

Always note the source of information found: the title of book or newspaper, page(s), names of parties involved in the transaction, price, and dates of transaction and of record. Note also the location of the property. Remember that when Riverton was founded, it was listed under "Chester" and then as "Cinnaminson" – both earlier and larger townships than Riverton Village in its early years. Newer deeds are brief and typed and use tax record lot and house numbers. Older ones are hand-written, usually without punctuation, and are lengthy. Locations are given in rods, chains, links, and directions by degrees and minutes. However, the location is usually summed up by a lot number on a particular map (most of which are also found in the Clerk's office). You may want to copy the original description one time – it can be interesting to have.

Be aware that unless a dwelling is specifically mentioned, the transaction might have been for land only – old deeds tend to list everything that might possibly be on a piece of land. A "plantation" usually included a homestead; a "messuage" indicated a dwelling house together with numerous outbuildings, a "tenement" indicated the owner had erected a simple house for rental purposes. "Moiety" indicates a half-interest, or share, in the property. "Fee simple" is most desirable, as it means there is clear and full title to the property.

The sale price gives some indication of when a residence was erected. If, for example, a particular piece of ground was purchased for \$250 in 1865 and in 1870 that same property was sold for \$1500, one may assume that an improvement, most likely a dwelling, had been erected in the interval. Thus one could say the house was built circa 1867 – indicating its age as within two or three years either side of that date. Checking Census records might confirm a family living there – they are on microfilm at the County library.

When a sale price is listed as \$1 plus other good and valuable consideration, that could indicate a transaction between father and son (or daughter), but more often indicates a mortgage was part of the transaction. Mortgage records, also in the Clerk's Office near the Deeds records, often tell why the mortgage was taken out (i.e., to acquire additional land, to erect a building, etc.). Insurance plats, where available, also provide some information. They indicate location and shape of buildings on specific lots, and usually also indicate their use, i.e., dwelling, butcher shop, post office, etc. A note of caution here – an empty lot, or a building on one, at the date the plat was prepared, does not necessarily indicate it was YOUR house. In the past, houses were surprisingly frequently moved from one location to another. Also, some were burned to the ground, and a new house built on the old foundation or close to it. Also, particularly during the Depression years, many old homes were razed, properties sub-divided, and newer houses erected. Always find more than one source for dating a house. There are many possibilities and it is rare (usually with a very old one, before Riverton's founding) that only

one can be found.

Newspapers, on film at the County library (Mt. Holly Herald, New Jersey Mirror, and incomplete runs of local papers The New Era and The Palmyra News) carried notices of Sheriff sales, realtor notices and, under columns headed by a town's name, mention was often made of a new house being erected, of fires, of alterations, etc. In the New Jersey room of the County library are also some Directories and, if a listing is found there, it will give you some clues as to residents/owners of your property at that time.

Other sources for learning a house's history are found when talking to former owners or older residents in your neighborhood, in old photographs (hopefully, dated ones), letters and various memorabilia.

Architectural information may be found at both Riverton library and the County library, which have some fine books, many written for "amateurs". One that is helpful is "A Field Guide to American Houses", by Virginia and Lee McAlester. Magazines, such as The Old House Journal, are also helpful.

For recognition of local historical significance, such as a building in which a newly formed church held its earliest meetings, at least two sources of proof should be presented. Church records, newspaper articles/pictures, oral histories, souvenirs or artifacts, photographs, diaries, letters, etc. are all possible sources for such information. Get print outs or copies made and label them with source, date, etc.

In filling out an application, briefly include any major changes made in your building (i.e., ells added, porch removed, old windows or glass replaced with modern ones, change in roofline, etc.) and dates, if known. Also any special features such as plasterwork ceilings, particularly fine woodwork, floor-length windows, original fixtures or other hardware, etc.

Once your information has been gathered for a Marker, you may find yourself adding to your records, as something here or there comes to light. You also want to record changes you make over the years to pass on to a future owner.

Happy hunting!

Betty B. Hahle