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RESEARCHING YOUR HOME'S HISTORY

1. Contact your local historical society or library for research that has already been done. Who knows? Someone might have started — or finished — your research.

2. Much of a home's history is told through the families who have lived there. Trace the home's chain of ownership from the abstract of title; copy the names of each previous owner. Note each transaction the property has been involved in. Abstracts also sometimes include lawsuits involving the property, which can be helpful. (The sale date listed in the abstract is often later than when the family moved in; this often indicates when the family paid off the mortgage. In the early 1900s, most mortgages were five years.)

3. Do you see any changes in ownership from one family member to another? Schneider did. That might mean a homeowner died. Check the local library for the obituary; that might yield clues about the house.

4. If there is no abstract, photocopy the property deeds at the office of the county recorder.

5. Check the county assessor's Web site, noting that older dates for home construction aren't always accurate due to shoddy record-keeping.

6. Check the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, available online to members of Des Moines Public Library, to see if — and when — your house shows up. "This is one of the most important tools for us in Des Moines, given the limited resources we have," James said. These maps show the footprint of the house, how many stories tall it was and any outbuildings, such as an outhouse. They sometimes show materials used in construction. Sanborn maps were produced every 10 to 20 years. Compare maps from different years to learn when additions were made and when street names and numbers were changed.

7. Cross-reference the list of owners with old city directories, similar to the Yellow Pages in the days before telephones. Old city directories are available at local libraries. Land was often subdivided and changed hands several times before a house was built. Starting in 1908, city directories included the standard alphabetical list and also a street address listing for cross-reference.

8. Note the occupation listed next to homeowners in the city directories. One

Living in the lap of history

If those walls could talk . . . but they can't. Do a little research to find the details of your home's rich past.

REID FORGRAVE
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

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There's a story behind every house.

Who built it and when. Who lived there over the years. What drama — a baby? a death? a wedding? — occurred there.

Two women in the Drake neighborhood are the area's Woodward and Bernstein on researching the history of homes.

Teresa Schneider and Jennifer James are two local historical preservationists who live and breathe the historic Drake neighborhood.

James salvaged a circa-1887 home and spent \$100,000 to restore it. Along with her husband and two others, she recently opened Mars Cafe in a historic block of Dogtown.

Schneider, recently researched the history of her Forestdale home, and she's doing graduate studies in historic preservation and architecture.

She believes the stories behind the houses in the Forestdale section of the Drake area warrant the neighborhood's inclusion in the National Register of Historic Districts — and she hopes to accomplish that during her studies.

Along with local historical consultant Jim Jacobsen, they arranged a recent seminar on the history of the Drake neighborhood, giving a how-to session on researching your home's history.

"There's a little bit of a treasure hunt aspect to research," James said. "A lot of times people start with a little goal, like finding the builder of the house, then get hooked on it. It's fun to be able to tell your kids, to have an understanding of what lives have been lived here. To know the birthday of your house and who the parents of your house were."

Most older houses have changed over the years: a new furnace, new windows, a huge addition that masked the original construction. Street names have changed. Porches have been added or removed.

In researching a house, you're likely to find conflicting pieces of information. Part of the joy of this treasure hunt is evaluating the facts.

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of Schneider's former homeowners was a surgical chiropodist; another was a contractor engineer for a steel company.

9. Also note any other people listed living there. Sometimes families took in boarders. Also, it's possible the owner did not live at the address, so checking city directories is important to find who actually did live there.

10. Check with the State Historical Building library and the Downtown Public Library to see if any records or photographs are on file of the previous owners you've now identified by name. Also search for neighborhood photographs: parades, public works projects, anything that might show a glimpse of your home.

11. Use Internet search engines such as Google to find documents in libraries or private collections throughout the world. "The Internet, more and more, is opening up records," James said.

12. Write letters to previous owners or family members of previous owners requesting information and copies of photographs.

13. Check with neighbors who have lived in the neighborhood for decades. They might have old pictures from the house or stories about former owners. A neighbor of Schneider's was essential in revealing clues about her home.

The end result could be a number of things.

Perhaps you'll satisfy your curiosity about the home's past. Perhaps you'll find a vintage photograph. Or maybe you'll formally nominate your property for the National Register of Historic Places — or, like Schneider, nominate your entire neighborhood to the National Register of Historic Districts.

One plea from James: Be sure to pass on the information to the next homeowners, and donate copies to the local historical society or library.

Others use Schneider's expertise as a guide to research their home's past.

Schneider spent \$142,000 more than two years ago for her 1922 Tudor revival house on Germania Drive.

She fell in love with the deceptively large 1,250-square-foot house, with a steep roof, a massive chimney and wooden arched doorways.

Almost immediately, she began her research.

"People are interested in being part of a larger story," James said. "History does have value."

Being able to say, 'My house is special because of the architecture and history,' that does have value."

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These are some of the clues Teresa Schneider has uncovered about her 1922 Tudor revival home.



GARY FANDEL/THE REGISTER

Teresa Schneider's 1922 Tudor revival home on Germania Drive in Des Moines.



GARY FANDEL/THE REGISTER

Teresa Schneider has been researching the history of her home in the Forestdale neighborhood. She wants to see the neighborhood included on the National Register of Historic Districts.

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