



Local History Guide

House history research



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Investigating a property's history is one of the most popular topics for family and local history researchers. Woollahra Libraries' local history collection has a wide range of resources that can reveal much about a property's origins, its previous inhabitants, and any significant alterations or renovations that may have taken place.

This guide is intended as a brief overview of resources available through Woollahra Libraries for house history researchers. Our 'Sands Directory' and 'rate records' guides provide more detailed descriptions of how to carry out specific aspects of house history research in particular areas.

House history guides

In addition to this guide, there are also a number of general works that cover the basics of researching the history of a property regardless of its location, and reading through these can provide a useful starting point. Some titles held by Woollahra Libraries include *The National Trust research manual: trace the history of your house or other places* and *Local history research and writing: a manual for local history writers*. Other useful books include guides on dating Australian architectural styles and building techniques.

Published suburb and house histories

In some cases, particular houses may have already had histories published about them. Alternatively, library staff may have researched the history of a property and compiled relevant material together as part of a local history research file. These resources can save you considerable time, as somebody has already done some of your work for you. In addition, many areas in Woollahra have their own published suburb histories, which can provide useful background information when researching a property. All of these resources can be searched for using the library catalogue.

Heritage studies

From the early 1980s onwards, numerous heritage studies were undertaken throughout the Woollahra area. These studies involved assessing suburbs for buildings and other features that were of high conservation value, then recording and listing each of these sites along with descriptions of their architectural style and date of construction.

It is often worth reading the studies to see if the property you are researching has been included. Some examples of heritage studies held in the Woollahra Libraries local history collection include *Heritage study for the Municipality of Woollahra*, *Paddington conservation report*, and *Watsons Bay heritage conservation study*.

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Visiting a property

Before undertaking any further research, often visiting the site of a property can itself be a highly useful source of information. Even if the original building was demolished long ago, clues to its history may still be apparent in the surrounding environment. For instance, since the addresses of properties sometimes varied over time, it can be worth noting whether the property you're researching is on a corner site, whether the associated land extends to another street or may have in the past, and if it seems that a site may have been subdivided from a neighbouring property. It can also be useful to note the age and architectural style of nearby buildings, as well as the proximity of fixed reference points such as intersections, parks or prominent buildings.

Speaking to neighbours living close by to the property can also shed light on aspects of its history. Neighbours can sometimes have old photographs of the street or the property itself, and may be able to provide biographical details about past occupants that would not be available elsewhere.

Rate, assessment and valuation books

Woollahra Libraries holds an almost complete series of the Rate, Assessment and Valuation Books of Woollahra Council between 1860-1968. We also hold a substantial (although incomplete) proportion of the same records of Vacluse Council (1895-1948) and Paddington Council (1860-1948), both of which were later absorbed wholly or in part into Woollahra Council.

These listings of land parcels and ratepayers were compiled annually, and they reveal much about the early pattern of land occupation, tenure and subdivision in the Woollahra area. The books provide a guide to the succession of ownership of individual properties, as well as a means of dating early building activity in the area. More detailed information can be found in our 'Rates records' research guide.

Building applications and development applications

Evidence of building work can also be confirmed, and further details obtained, by reference to records of local building applications and development applications. These records are being progressively digitised and will be available through the Woollahra Libraries website.

The architectural plans and other documents associated with building and development applications for a property can also be accessed through Woollahra Council for a fee. For further information on this please visit:

http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/council/access_to_council_information

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Council minutes and newspaper reports

The meeting minutes of Woollahra Council (as well as Vaucluse and Paddington councils prior to 1948) record decisions made concerning subdivisions, large building projects and other developments. Council meeting minutes can also provide insight into particularly controversial developments, particularly as issues of urban conservation become prominent from the 1960s onwards. In addition, contemporary newspaper articles would at times provide commentary about some building projects. Woollahra Libraries is progressively digitising copies of council minutes between 1860-1980. A complete back catalogue of the Wentworth Courier between 1957-2001 is held on microfilm in the local history collection, which can be accessed at Double Bay library.

Maps and photographs

Changes in land use and occupation in the Woollahra area are well illustrated through a range of maps and photographs held within the local history collection, which can support or add to information gathered from other sources.

Sands directory

The Sands Sydney, Suburban and Country Commercial Directory was produced on a yearly basis between 1858-1932, and listed the names and addresses of householders, businesses and institutions throughout the entire Sydney region. It provides one of the most useful resources available for tracing the history of a property and its inhabitants, as well as the changing composition of streets and suburbs over time.

More detailed information about using Sands can be found in our 'Sands Directory' research guide. The Sands Directory has been fully digitised and is available via the City of Sydney Council website:

<http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory>

Information on previous occupants or owners

Resources such as Sands and council rate books can reveal the previous occupants and owners of a property, and these people can then be investigated to reveal more about the property's history. Sites such as the Australian Dictionary of Biography contain biographical information about the lives of over 12,000 Australians, while the Woollahra Libraries catalogue can also be searched for records potentially held about previous residents.

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Resident action groups

Woollahra Libraries holds meeting minutes, newspapers, photographs and other material produced by local resident action groups, including the Paddington Society, Vaucluse Progress Association and the Queen Street and West Woollahra Association. These groups often mobilised residents around contentious development projects and other issues relating to the urban environment, and their records can give information that is often relevant to the history of a property or a particular street.

How we can help

Other research guides produced by library staff, in particular our 'Sands Directory' and 'rate records' guides, can be useful for finding more information on conducting house history research. Library staff are also available to provide advice on how to conduct your research and access library resources. Alternatively, staff are able to undertake research on your behalf for a fee. Fees can be viewed on our 'fees and charges' page.