

## **History Detective: What's Your Story?**

All around us are clues to the history of our neighborhoods and our homes. Use your powers of observation, some cool tech tools and your imagination to see what evidence you can find to reconstruct the story of where you live.

When was your house built? What was your old address? Who lived there? How has it changed over the years? Gather up some facts about your house and neighborhood, read what people remember from growing up here, and then imagine the story of your house and neighborhood.

### **Food for Thought**

History seems like a long time ago, but the kids and families who've lived here were people just like us, running their lives, school, jobs, taking care of their dogs and cats, doing chores, hanging around with friends and family, looking for something fun to do.

Back in 1910, most northeast Portland neighborhoods were just getting started: newly-built streets, fresh sidewalks and curbs ([thanks Elwood!](#)). Home construction got rolling in those years—more than a hundred years ago—with more houses built each year until about 1935 when most of the lots in our neighborhoods were built-up.

Just like today, builders back then had to get a permit from the city to build a house. Some of those original documents are easy to look up on-line, and give clues to the year your house was built, who the first owner was and your old address.

That's right: if your house is older than 1931 (and most of them are in northeast), you used to have a different house number, and your street had a slightly different name too.

Do you have a favorite place in your house? Maybe it's where the sun shines in, or a good place for hide-and-seek, or a place that is always cool in summer or warm in winter. Chances are the kids who grew up in your house thought it was a neat spot too.

Over the years, families changed their houses, building on new rooms, moving walls, removing columns and bookcases, and lots of other big changes. Have a good look around for the oldest thing about your house you can find, and the newest thing.

The clues you find help make up the story of your home. What's your story?

## Activity Suggestions & Curiosities

1. Check around your house for the oldest-looking thing you can find. What is it and why do you think it's old? If it's in the basement, what do you think it might have been used for? Make a list of the old things you find.
2. What is your favorite place in your house and why? Do you think the kids who grew up there felt the same? Imagine a young person who lived in your house—make up their name—and write them a letter: what do you want to tell them about their house today? About the neighborhood? About being stuck at home for two months in a pandemic?
3. [Here are some stories](#) about local people who lived in the same houses where they grew up remembering when they were kids, and things they've changed. If you were a grown-up living in your house, what would you change? Why?
4. Did you know many of our houses used to be heated with sawdust? Seriously! Big rooms in the basement held tons (literally) of sawdust and machines called augers or conveyors brought sawdust to a burner that produced heat. Some burned firewood. Other houses burned coal. How does your house make its heat today? Draw a map of how the heat gets from your basement to your room.
5. What clues can you find that something has changed in your house from when it was first built? Sometimes the pattern of wood on the floor looks different. The trim around doors or windows might look different. New doors might be a clue of a new room or wall. Windows with wavy glass are old; ones with metal frames are newer. What do you think has changed in your house over the years and why?
6. If you can go on-line with a parent or helper, let's go find the original plumbing permit for your house from long ago.
  - A. Go to [portlandmaps.com](http://portlandmaps.com) and enter your current address in the upper right-hand corner.
  - B. Scroll down to "permits and zoning" and click on "permits."
  - C. Scroll down to "Historic Plumbing" and click on the number permit type "PLUMBING PERMIT." Most houses have this, but a few don't.
  - D. This will take you to the early plumbing permits for your house. The oldest one is at the bottom of the stack.
  - E. Look for: your old address; names of early owners; a sketch of your basement; the total number of plumbing fixtures in your house way back when. Lots to see here.
7. With this old document, you can start a list of the names of people who lived in your house and when; the date your house was built (listed as "date of inspection" on the oldest inspection card). So, when was your house built? What was the first owner's last name?

8. While you're on-line, here's another way to find out the address and name of your street from before 1931: go to [pastportland.com](http://pastportland.com) and type in your address. The site will tell you your old address and show you other nearby addresses. [Read this article](#) about how Portland was completely renumbered in the early 1930s. Not everyone was happy about the change, especially [these residents on Vernon Avenue](#), which doesn't exist anymore. What was your old address? Was your street name different?
9. Since we're on-line, here's another window into the past worth opening: If you have a library card, you can go on-line to the Multnomah County Library and [search The Oregonian newspaper](#) all the way back to 1866. Type your old address into the search bar and see what you can find. Look for news from the year your house was built, what do you find?
10. If you haven't already found Beverly Cleary and her Ramona Quimby books, this would be a great time to look them up. Beverly grew up in the neighborhood in the 1920s and 1930s and many of the places she wrote about can still be found today, plus the stories are just fun and engaging to read. [Here's an article](#) we've written that explores those places and links her imaginary places with the neighborhood we know.
11. Just over a hundred years ago, [Portland lived through a pandemic](#) very similar to what we're seeing today. Look at any front-page news story between October and January 1918 and you'll see lots of news about the "Spanish Flu" as it was called then. If you do this, what news surprises you?

**We're glad to see what you come up with or respond to a question or idea.**

*Home History School is a collection of activities for kids of all ages to experience and connect with neighborhood history in Northeast Portland, Oregon. This is one of a dozen "lesson plans" on a variety of local topics. The collection—which we're adding to each Monday this spring—can be found at [www.alamedahistory.org](http://www.alamedahistory.org). For more information or other ideas, contact Doug Decker, [doug@alamedahistory.org](mailto:doug@alamedahistory.org) / 503-901-5510.*