

SECTION ONE



I want to
CARE FOR AN OLDER HOME

in my neighborhood.

BACKGROUND

In 2016, the National Trust for Historic Preservation estimated that roughly 92.3% of all the buildings in Philadelphia were constructed before 1967...

Which means that the odds are high that your house is at least 50 years old!¹ The age of our city’s housing stock makes Philadelphia distinctive, but it can also be a challenge to care for all of these older houses and make sure they live to see another 50 years. There are plenty of reasons to maintain and sustain these homes though...

Perhaps you plan to leave the house to your children or grandchildren, or simply ensure that it stays standing and intact for someone else’s children and grandchildren. Even if your family is outgrowing your older home, there are usually ways to expand the building without losing its charm or tearing it down!

Or maybe you’re committed to keeping the culture and character of your neighborhood intact, one house at a time.

Perhaps your house is interesting architecturally, or has a fascinating history (that you may wish to learn more about).

Maybe you value the quality of the materials and construction methods that have lasted for so many years.

There are also environmental reasons to maintain and repair older homes, rather than demolishing them to build new: a huge amount of the debris from construction and demolition ends up in landfills, and every demolished building takes with it all the energy that went into its construction and its demolition. (Research shows that salvaging materials alone does not counteract this environmental impact.)

Concerned about the age of your home and its effect on your health? We offer some resources for that, too, in this section. Issues like lead paint, air quality, and asthma are not unique to Philadelphia’s older homes, but Philadelphia does have some great organizations and agencies working hard to address the relationship between public health and older buildings.

For all of these reasons and more, this section includes a lot of questions you may have about caring for an older house, and resources to help you do so. Ultimately, decisions about the care of one’s older home often come down to one thing: money. Unfortunately, there are limited direct incentives for individual homeowners of older homes, although that could always change based on the budget decisions of policy-makers. (In fact, one of the action steps below is advocating for just that kind of incentive!) In the meantime, the other tools in this toolkit include information about systems repair and bricks-and-mortar maintenance workshops, some resources for researching your house history, as well as some questions/answers/myth-busters about designating your home or neighborhood as historic at the local or national level. (There are a lot of misconceptions about this!) Hopefully this toolkit can clear up some confusion and point you in the right direction for any or all of the above.

1. National Trust for Historic Preservation, *Atlas of ReUrbanism Fact Sheet: Philadelphia, PA* (2016), <https://forum.savingplaces.org/act/research-policy-lab/atlas/atlas-factsheet>



ASK & ANSWER

These questions are adapted from the Philadelphia Historical Commission's frequently asked questions. Additional questions and answers are available below.

Philadelphia Historical Commission

phila.gov/historical/designation/Pages/FAQ.aspx

What is a historic register?

A historic register is an official inventory of significant older places. It can be used either for symbolic reasons (to simply recognize and celebrate older buildings/sites) or for regulatory purposes (to protect a historic place from destruction).

The definition of what is “significant” and what is “old” varies based on the historic register, but properties are generally listed on the register (also called “designated”) after an official nomination process. The federal government maintains the National Register of Historic Places, and here in Philadelphia, the city maintains its own Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Both of these registers generally define “historic” as at least 50 years old (with some exceptions).

What is the difference between the National Register of Historic Places and the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places?

The National Register of Historic Places is a nationwide list of historically significant properties; the list is maintained and administered by the National Park Service. The Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC) in Harrisburg acts as the National Park Service's agent for properties on the National Register in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The Philadelphia Register is unrelated to the National Register; however, properties may be listed on both Registers. The Philadelphia Historical Commission maintains and administers the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

Designation on the National Register does NOT mean the government (local or federal) has control over any changes to your house. (It actually triggers more control of the federal government's actions! It sets limits for any projects that include federal funding or permits and might affect any properties on the National Register.) In most cases, designation on the National Register is symbolic. It does make certain properties/projects eligible for the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit. (See page 32 for more info.)

Designation on the Philadelphia Register is different from the National Register. With this designation (either as an individual property, or within a historic district), the Philadelphia Historical Commission (PHC) has some oversight on changes to the exterior of the building. But! Read on for more on what the PHC does and does not oversee for designated properties.

Why would I want my property designated as historic and listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places?

Designation provides some benefits. In addition to the satisfaction that comes with owning a historic landmark, and the community pride fostered by the recognition of a historic district, the Historical Commission provides free historical and technical assistance to the owners of designated properties.

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More information on page 91.



Does designation lower my property value?

Recent studies in Philadelphia have actually shown that property values in historic districts fluctuate less and increase more than those of comparable properties outside historic districts. This is partly because historic districts ensure that every property is protected from the impact of inappropriate alterations on neighboring properties.

Would I be forced to restore my property if it is designated?

No. The Historical Commission cannot unilaterally force a property owner to undertake work, except in the very rare case that neglect threatens the survival of the historic building or structure. The Historical Commission's review authority only kicks in based on the work that you, the property owner, want to do and need a permit to do. For example, if you decide to replace the windows on your designated home, the Philadelphia Historical Commission would have a say in the type of replacement windows you could install. But the Commission cannot force you to make upgrades just because your property is designated. The Commission does not have any say in the alterations you make on the interior of your home, unless they affect the exterior.

Does historic designation affect my property tax assessment?

No. Historic designation is not a factor in the assessment of property by the City of Philadelphia, and will not result in higher property taxes.



TRY IT OUT

How much do you know about your house's history?

A house built in the mid-nineteenth century is often constructed differently than one built in the mid-twentieth century: different materials, different style, different construction methods, etc.—all of which can affect what you would find if you opened up the walls and floors of the house, and how you can repair it in a way that helps, not hurts, the building. If the house has been altered since its original construction—for instance, if vinyl siding has been added or stucco has been applied—it is important to understand how and when these changes were made, not simply as anecdotes, but in order to understand the ways that these alterations may be affecting the structure and character of your house.

Compiling a simple house history can also help you learn from the other houses on your block or in your neighborhood, as you compare and contrast house histories. For instance, if your house was built in the mid-nineteenth century by the same builder who constructed all of the houses on your block, what can you learn from other homeowners or renters about the structural issues that they've encountered, and how they've fixed them? Or, as another example, if you all share similar tiled foyers that are distinctive to your area, what can you learn from each other about the artisans who designed those tiles? Can you compare notes about the best ways to repair those foyers?



ALL ABOUT YOUR HOUSE'S HISTORY

Record your
answers here



- 1 How much do you know about your house's history?
- 2 Do you know what was there before your house was constructed?
- 3 Do you know when it was built? (Note: Official property records are not always the most reliable source for this information.)
- 4 Who built it? What was their job?
- 5 Do you know who has lived where you now live? (If your family has lived in the house for multiple generations, then you're off to a great start!)
- 5 What makes your house distinctive in your community...or what makes it fit right in with its neighbors?

Information is power, and a house history can be a powerful tool. So try it out, either on your own or with a friend or family member (young or old) to see what you each notice. Bring a notebook and camera to take note.

1

WHAT OTHER TYPES OF BUILDINGS ARE ON YOUR BLOCK?

Start on the outside of your house, looking up and down your block. What other types of buildings are on your block? Are they all houses? Is it a mix of residential and commercial buildings? Is there a distinctive building on your block or nearby, like a church or synagogue or factory?

If yes... This could say something about who lived in your house originally. For example, if there are clusters of similar-looking houses near an old factory building, maybe your house was built as worker housing for that particular factory? (In which case, who worked in the factory? Native-born Philadelphians? Immigrants from a particular country or era? If so, did they build or alter their houses at all to reflect their own traditions?)

Make a quick sketch of your house. Don't forget to highlight your favorite parts!

2

HOW DOES YOUR HOUSE RELATE TO THE STREET?

Is it in the middle of a large lot? Is it set back with a yard? Does it come right up to the sidewalk?

This may say something about when your house or neighborhood was built, and by whom: were they building in a rapidly-growing neighborhood, where competition for land was steep? Were they intentionally building outside the contemporary city limits, in order to have green space? Did the area become denser over time?

3

HOW DOES YOUR HOUSE COMPARE TO THE OTHER HOUSES ON THE BLOCK AND/OR NEARBY?

Is it built using the same material? How is your house similar to the other houses?

Houses that look similar—whether rowhouses, twins, or stand-alone houses—may indicate that they were constructed by the same builder, or selected from similar patternbooks (a kind of catalogue for houses that was popular in the 19th century), or designed by architects around the same time.

Look in the Glossary to
learn architectural terms

4

HOW DOES YOUR HOME DIFFER FROM THE OTHER HOUSES?

Look closely. Are the rooflines/decoration different? Are the doors or windows designed differently? What details make your house, or your block, distinctive?

You can compare these details against some of the resources listed in the “Learn More” part of this section to learn about different architectural styles—everything from very simple facades to elaborate exterior details can tell you something about when and how and by whom and for whom a house was constructed.

How does your house blend into your block?

5

ON THE INSIDE OF YOUR HOUSE, GO THROUGH THE HOUSE ROOM BY ROOM.

Do you have a mental or physical list of the changes that you’ve made while living in the house? For example, have you changed any doors, windows, or walls? Have you ripped out any features like fixtures or wall finishes? Do you know what changes previous owners made?

Houses become a blend of multiple owners over time; their different styles, priorities, family sizes, and investments. It is important to clarify these changes and understand how they have affected the original building, since these alterations may affect the quality or structural integrity of the house over time.

With this informal house history in hand, you can ask and answer the questions that arise, move forward to take action, explore more of the resources to learn more, and ultimately, care for your older house.



DEED RESEARCH

Another way to learn about your house (and neighborhood) history is by doing deed research on your home, learning more about when and how the property has changed hands over time. You can start by visiting the City of Philadelphia's Atlas website (see below) for recent information about property ownership and some building permits. There are other ways to do deed research online, including:

City of Philadelphia's Atlas

atlas.phila.gov

"How to Research the History of a House" (Free Library of Philadelphia)

libwww.freelibrary.org/faq/guides/HouseHistory.pdf

Philadelphia Deed Indices, 1682-1979

philadox.phila.gov/phillyhistoricalindex/index.html

Note: This website requires registration and has fees. You can visit the Archives in person, though, to avoid these fees. (See below.)

Deeper information requires a visit to the Philadelphia City Archives, located at 456 N. 5th Street starting in September 2018. Archivists there can help you find older deeds for your property/tax parcel. If you're interested in digging deep, here's a helpful and thorough guide about researching Philadelphia deeds dated between 1669 to 1974.

Philadelphia City Archives

bit.ly/2CmBEeQ





TAKE ACTION

Reduce, Reuse, and Repair

Save and reuse building materials whenever possible, and repair/replace with compatible older materials rather than starting new. In addition to aesthetic reasons for selecting compatible materials, using salvaged materials can be good for the environment (diverting more debris from landfills) and for your wallet. For example, many windows can be repaired/re-sealed rather than replaced, saving materials from the landfill and making sure your house stays intact. For compatible materials for your repair or rehab project, check out architectural salvage stores in the Philadelphia area.

Attend a Workshop

Attend a Hands-On Workshop hosted by the Fairmount Park Conservancy. Workshops are led by the Conservancy's conservators and typically include a brief history of the topic; information relating to historic building material technology, terminology, and construction techniques; and hands-on demonstrations. You can keep an eye out for upcoming workshops by checking the Fairmount Park Conservancy's website.

Fairmount Park Conservancy

myphillypark.org/what-we-do/architectural-conservation/workshops

Hire Experienced Professionals

When hiring professionals to do work on your house, make sure to select someone with experience specific to older and historic houses; everything from electrical systems to masonry to structural systems to wall finishes can differ between older and new construction, and your professionals should know what to expect and how to respond. Ask about the other older houses that they have worked on and the unique challenges they encountered on those projects; and make sure to check references from those homeowners. If you're looking for names of professionals who have worked on older properties, you can talk to the staff at the Philadelphia Historical Commission and check out the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia's Marketplace Directory (see below.)

Philadelphia Historical Commission

phila.gov/historical/Pages/default.aspx

Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia's Marketplace Directory

preservationalliance.com/marketplace-directory

Apply for Homeowner Assistance Programs

If you meet the eligibility requirements, apply to be part of the City of Philadelphia's Basic Systems Repair program (BSRP), Habitat for Humanity's Home Repair Program, or Rebuilding Together Philadelphia's repairs program. The BSRP provides free repairs to correct electrical, plumbing, heating, structural, and roofing emergencies in eligible owner-occupied homes in Philadelphia. Habitat for Humanity's Home Repair

Program builds on Habitat’s traditional homeownership model using affordable payment options, sweat equity, and volunteer labor to serve current low-income homeowners. Rebuilding Together Philadelphia works with organized blocks that have at least 10 homeowners who all need repairs. (The organization no longer accepts applications for the repair of individual homes.)

More information is available at these resources:

The Division of Housing and Community Development (for BSRP)

ohcdphila.org/home-repair/bsrp

Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia

habitatphiladelphia.org/home-repair-program

Rebuilding Together Philadelphia

rebuildingphilly.org/eligibility

Check the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

If you don’t already know, check to see whether your home is included on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, which generally ensures that it remains standing long into the future. The Philadelphia Register of Historic Places is the comprehensive inventory of buildings, structures, sites, objects (e.g. significant public art), interiors, and districts that the Philadelphia Historical Commission has designated as historic. You can look up your property on the map via the Philadelphia Historical Commission website.

The Philadelphia Historical Commission

phila.gov/historical/register/Pages/default.aspx

Apply for a Neighborhood-Level Designation

If you feel that other properties in your neighborhood deserve designation, consider joining with neighbors to apply for a neighborhood-level designation as a historic district. Districts can include properties that are geographically related (e.g. in the same neighborhood) and/or properties that are culturally/thematically related (e.g. the Historic Street Paving Thematic District Inventory, which recognizes the most intact old streets in Philadelphia). Find more information about designation (as either an individual property or as a historic district) on pages 12-13.

Donate an Easement

Donate a historic easement to the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia or another holding entity, to ensure that your house stays protected for future generations. Historic easements are a voluntary legal agreement (usually via deed) to permanently protect a significant historic property. In exchange, easements generally (but not always) qualify as charitable contributions. Additional general information about easements is available from the National Park Service.

National Park Service (Easements)

nps.gov/tps/tax-incentives/taxdocs/easements-historic-properties.pdf



LEARN MORE

For researching your house history, and care and maintenance

If you live in a rowhouse, then the Philadelphia Rowhouse Manual (2003, National Trust for Historic Preservation/Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development/Philadelphia City Planning Commission) is a great place to start. This practical guide can help you learn more about your house's architecture (for that house history!), and learn the basics of interior and exterior care and maintenance. The manual is available online.

The Philadelphia Rowhouse Manual

phila.gov/CityPlanning/resources/Publications/RowhouseManual_Final.pdf

For researching your house history

Philadelphia is lucky to have many great places and websites to research the history of old buildings, including the Free Library of Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania's Architectural Archives, PhilaGeoHistory.org, PhillyHistory.org, PhiladelphiaBuildings.org, and more. These research opportunities and many more are listed on the PHL Preservation website and in the "Who's Who?" section at the end of this toolkit.

Philadelphia Preservation

phlpreservation.org/copy-of-resources

For care and maintenance

The National Park Service has published 50 Technical Preservation Briefs to provide guidance on preserving, rehabilitating, and restoring older buildings—offering guidance on everything from repointing mortar joints to improving energy efficiency to repairing historic wood windows. The briefs are free and available online.

National Park Service Technical Preservation Briefs

nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm

For submitting a nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

In addition to the information available on the Philadelphia Historical Commission's website, you can learn more by reading the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia's guide, *How to Nominate an Individual Building, Structure, Site, or Object to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places*. The guide is available online.

Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia's Nomination Guide

preservationalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PA_Nominations_Online.pdf

For owners of a property that is listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia published a booklet called *How to Navigate the Historical Review Process in Philadelphia*. The guide is a useful resource for property owners whose house (or other property) is listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, explaining how that designation

affects construction and alterations on their property. The guide is available online.

How to Navigate the Historical Review Process in Philadelphia

preservationalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CitizensGuide_updated.pdf

For related job opportunities

If you're interested in learning more about the job opportunities of architectural salvage, check out Philadelphia Community Corps, which offers job training and career development opportunities for entry-level and re-entry job candidates who face barriers to employment. The Corps' trainees learn about sustainable maintenance, reclamation, and up-cycling of architectural salvage. Information about the training program is available online.

Philadelphia Community Corps Training & Career Development

philadelphiacommunitycorps.org/job-training-and-career-development-in-construction-trades

For research and advocacy about the relationship between public health and rowhouses

Check out the work of the Healthy Rowhouse Project, an initiative of the Center for Architecture and Design. The Project is dedicated to improving substandard conditions and health in rowhouses occupied by low- and moderate-income Philadelphians. You can read more about the organization online.

Healthy Rowhouse Project

healthyrowhouse.org

For technical information and policy research

If you're interested in the benefits of saving older homes (and other historic buildings), you can read up on the findings of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Research and Policy Lab. For the past several years, the lab has researched the environmental sustainability of reusing older buildings, and they've also investigated the economic and social benefits of saving these places. The lab is headquartered online.

National Trust for Historic Preservation's Research and Policy Lab

bit.ly/2MQ7x50

For information about Philadelphia tax-aid programs for homeowners

PlanPhilly recently did a helpful review of the city's tax-aid programs for homeowners, including

- » Longtime Owner-Occupants Program
- » Owner Occupied Payment Agreement
- » Homestead Exemption
- » Low-Income Senior Citizen Tax Freeze
- » Real Estate Tax Deferral
- » Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program

You can read PlanPhilly's rundown online.

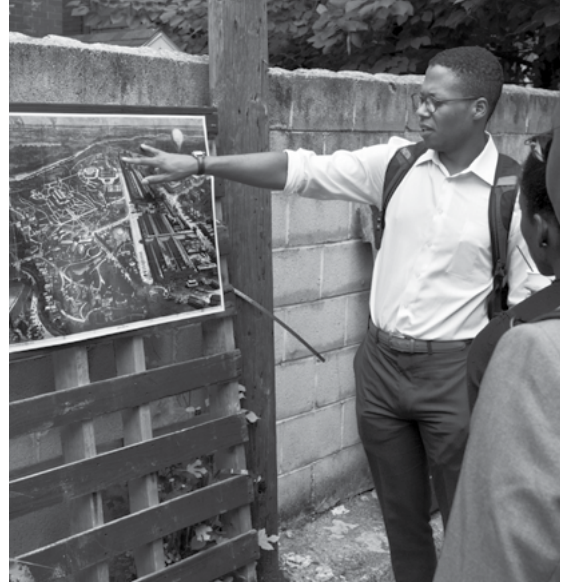
planphilly.com/articles/2018/07/26/a-fresh-look-at-the-city-s-tax-aid-programs-for-its-many-homeowners



VIOLA STREET, EAST PARKSIDE

JUST BEHIND PARKSIDE AVENUE, running along the southern end of West Fairmount Park and widely recognized for its stately late-nineteenth century ornate twin rowhomes facing the park, is Viola Street, a slightly lower-scale street lined with rowhomes from the same time period. The street is home to a welcoming and active group of residents, and the Viola Street Residents Association (VSRA) is led by neighbors that live on the street. VSRA has been active in everything from creating a community garden, to initiating a neighborhood plan, to organizing events to activate the street and alley in order to build community bonds and pride.

VSRA recognized long ago that keeping the neighborhood stable and thriving, and curbing the vacancy and blight from previous decades, would enable residents to stay in their homes. The group realized the importance of finding resources for home repair to achieve this, as many homes were older and required a significant amount of upkeep. So VSRA connected with Habitat for Humanity, which needed a neighborhood partner for one of its volunteer programs. The work required a lot of outreach, as residents had to prove their long-term residency and/or ownership in order to participate. As the committed neighborhood organization,



VSRA was able to connect with its neighbors, and build relationships along the way. Habitat in turn repaired 15 homes during the summer of 2014, focusing primarily on exterior elements such as windows, banisters, and porches. Because some properties were designated as historic on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, the project's partners got advice from the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia and a local preservationist to make sure that repairs were done according to appropriate historic standards. Simple repairs were free for residents, while others were done at highly discounted rates, or with a reasonable payment plan.

THE
SCHUYLKILL
RIVER

CENTENNIAL
COMMONS

PARKSIDE
AVENUE

VIOLA
STREET

TO CENTER CITY
PHILADELPHIA