

How to Search Deeds

About Deeds



[See Rev. Foster's deeds in the Archive.](#)

Deeds are records of land ownership and transactions. They can date back to before the American Revolution. They reveal much more than ownership, however. They may also give information about relative land values, about who could hold land, and about relationships between people. Deeds are useful to genealogists, those buying and selling land, and those wishing to find information about particular times or events. To find out the history of a piece of real estate, the researcher can work backward or forward from one deed to the next. Each deed tells who conveyed the right of possession of the land to whom. The list of owners in succession is called the chain of title. Trying to reconstruct the chain of title by searching through the deeds is called a title search.

Deeds were recorded in a central place, according to law. This location differed from state to state. For example, in Massachusetts and Maine, deed registries are found in the courthouses of the counties in which the transaction took place. Counties changed over time, so information about deeds for one piece of land might be found in two or more locations. In some other states such as Connecticut and Rhode Island, towns recorded deeds. This was not always the case in the American West. Furthermore, very early deeds might be found in central state archives. Deeds, probate records, and court decrees--three kinds of records that can show property changing hands --are usually found in the same location.

Some registries of deeds have posted information, indexes, and all or part of their holdings on their Web sites, available through the internet. This saves traveling for researchers and wear and tear on the original documents. Some sites require fees for access while others do not. If you do not know the registry's Web address, start by looking for the official state site and work from there.

Deed Research Steps



Note-taking Form

for Deed

Research

- Note the names of the buyer (grantee) and/or seller (grantor) of the land in which you are interested.
- Find out where deeds are recorded and stored for the time and place in which you are interested.
- Check to see if any of the information is available online and use it if it is.
- At the registry of deeds, look in the grantee index for an index of buyers. Look in the grantor index for an index of sellers.
- Look in the body of the deed for variations on these kinds of information:
 - name of grantor
 - type of covenant (warranty, quit claim, mortgage)
 - name of grantee
 - description of the property conveyed. This usually starts by naming the town and county (or their equivalent) and then a detailed description follows. Descriptions take many forms. They may describe metes and bounds (boundary line distances, compass bearings, and boundaries that end the line), they may name abutters, they may contain survey section designations, or they may be very imprecise and vague.
 - a "meaning and intending" clause stating the intent of the deed
 - the volume where the deed is recorded
 - in some deeds, the price of the transaction
 - in some deeds, the chain of title. This might be confusing if some of the occupants were renters and not owners.
- Look for a tax stamp. This indicates a fee assessed according to the value of the transaction. Knowing the value of the stamp and the rate of the tax (for example, \$1.10 per \$1000 of the transaction), one can estimate the selling price.
- Look for a release of spousal rights. A release of the right of dower meant that a wife agreed to the sale of the property. A release of courtesy rights meant the husband agreed to the sale of the property. Release of homestead rights meant that the person was living on the property at the time. This information can be used to establish genealogical relationships between family members.
- The acknowledgment indicates that the release was given before a Justice of the Peace and was of the person's own free will.
- Look for the date and time of recording to establish chronology.
- Take notes or use the Deed Research Notes form to keep a file of

information. Make notes of all the information. What makes no sense or seems unnecessary at the time may be just the piece needed later.

- Make photocopies of originals if you want to or need to. Archives charge for making copies.
- Look at other sources to verify or fill in missing information: tax maps, aerial photos, insurance maps, town atlases, historical wall maps, letters, wills, court records.

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