Mobile's Archival Resources
Mobile Municipal Archives
457 Church Street
251-208-7740

Historic Mobile Preservation Society
300 Oakleigh Place
251-432-6161

Mobile Public Library, Local History
and Genealogy Division
753 Government Street
251-208-7093

University of South Alabama Archives
5901 USA Drive North
251-341-3900

Mobile County Probate Court
151 Government Street
251-574-6000

A guide for the Amateur Researcher:
Consulting Primary Research Sources in
Mobile, Alabama
Introduction

One of the most often asked questions about a building is “How old is it?” Although a building is not significant merely because it is old, age does contribute to its importance.

Researching the age of a building can be a fascinating and challenging undertaking. There is no single location in Mobile that has all the information you need for this research: you will have to consult primary resource documents housed at various locations and synthesize the data to establish a construction date. A building may be newer or older than anticipated. Go where the data leads you.

Resources

Primary resources include:

- Maps
- Legal documents such as deeds, mortgages, wills, etc.
- Tax records
- City directories
- Contemporary newspapers
- Building permits
- Historic photographs
- Oral history

Following is a recommended order in which to consult resources. If one source provides no leads, try another. It is unusual for all research paths to be blocked.

A. Consult City maps the largest concentration of which is housed at the Mobile Municipal Archives. Note (1) when the building you are researching first appears on the lot and (2) when subsequent changes in the height or footprint of the building occur.

Among the most useful maps at the Archives are:

- the Pillans Map from 1868;
- the City Atlas from 1878;
- Bird’s eye view maps from 1873 and 1891; and
- Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from 1885, 1891, 1904, 1925, and 1955. Sanborn Maps received regular updates noted at the front of the volumes; however, the map overlays are undated, so some estimation is involved.

- Maps prior to 1904 cover only the portion of the City lying east of Broad Street. After 1904 Sanborn Maps record the rapidly expanding suburbs of Mobile west of Broad. These maps are essential tools when researching twentieth century buildings.
B. Establish the chain of title which is a chronological listing of property ownership.

If you do not already have the correct legal description and name of the current owner of the property, determine it from the records in the County’s Map and Plat Room and Probate Records Division. Knowing the legal description will ensure that the correct property is researched. Identifying a property exclusively by street address can be risky since house numbers may have changed over the years.

Consult the Direct and Reverse Real Property Indexes in Probate Court. These indexes are a compilation of all transactions involving real property from 1813 to the present. They contain the names of the grantee and grantor, the type of transaction, the date on which the instrument was filed (not the date on which the transaction took place), a brief description of the property as well as the book and page number in which the actual transaction is recorded.

Probate Court staff can orient you to their records collection. While this brochure encourages you to do your own research, for a fee, a title company can provide a chain of title to any property in Mobile.

C. Read the deeds, mortgages, wills and other pertinent documents noting information that can help establish a building’s construction date. This could be a reference to a vacant lot of land or to the property being used as a homestead. Each conveyance will indicate a “consideration,” which is the amount paid for the property. Marked changes in value from one legal instrument to the next may indicate building construction.

D. Consult City tax records at the Mobile Municipal Archives. Using the names listed in the chain of title, trace the property through the records, noting the point at which the owner first pays taxes on improvements rather than a vacant lot. Continue tracing forward in time noting: (1) changes in the tax valuation that might indicate alterations or additions to the original building; or, if appropriate, (2) any indication that the original building was replaced with a new structure. Bear in mind the fact that taxes are paid on the previous year’s valuation; for example, taxes paid in 1885 reflect the condition of the property in 1884. Beware of reassessments that can also change a property’s value.
E. Consult City directories located in Local History or at Mobile Municipal Archives. They can provide information on the occupation and residence of a property owner and can help document the year in which a property owner first resided at a specific address. If the property in question was used for rental purposes, using the street index is necessary. The name of the tenant will be indicated. Unfortunately, street indexes do not appear before 1903. Also remember that the present numbering system was adopted in 1924; house numbers listed in pre-1924 directories usually will not match numbers now in use.

F. Consult newspapers especially the Mobile Register's Annual Trade Edition, which generally appeared Labor Day weekend. This yearly business summary contains descriptions of newly constructed buildings, especially large structures built for public use. New subdivisions are often profiled and a sampling of construction permits sold during the year listed. Advertisements may provide documentation of recently completed buildings offered for sale or rent. Newspapers are on microfilm at Local History.

G. Miscellaneous sources can include building permits available at Municipal Archives and historic photographs available at USA Archives or the Historic Mobile Preservation Society. Don't neglect photographs that might be in family albums. The building you are researching might be captured in a family photograph. Research can also include oral history, but corroborate it with documentation.

If the property being researched was built for public or governmental purposes, municipal records may be an invaluable source of information. Municipal records dating from 1814 can be found at Mobile Municipal Archives.

H. Correlate primary resource data such as the year in which the property owner first paid taxes on a building, the year in which the owner first resided at a given address, the year in which a building first appears on a map, etc. Look at the data, as well as the style of the building, to form conclusions. Examining the evidence found in these primary resources should allow a researcher to pinpoint the construction date of any building.