

Researching House and Property History In Thompson, CT

A Guide explaining how to research the history of houses and properties in Thompson, CT, including sources and brief instruction of how to use the sources.

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2024

The most often asked question of the Thompson Historical Society is “I have recently purchased an old home in Thompson and wonder if you can tell me its history...”.

Over the years, in trying to answer the questions, a pattern of research has evolved that we feel is important to share. It is sometimes impossible to determine an exact year that a house/building was built, unless one is lucky enough to have a document that actually notes the date the construction occurred. It is, however, possible to learn much about the house and property and, through the details of numerous sources, a well informed estimate can be derived.

While THS will continue to help answer inquiries as best we can, this document may help home owners with attempting to try doing the research on their own, should they so desire. This list of sources is a good starting point for the research and explanations of use of each of the sources is to follow. While there are many other sources that are not on this list, it is detailed enough to help as a starting point in determining the history of one’s property.

An important detail to keep in mind when researching: Thompson was once part of Killingly, CT and researching homes/property that predate the incorporation of Thompson in 1785 may be described as being in Killingly, Thompson Parish or the North Parish of Killingly.

Contents

- [1: Thompson Land Records \(pg.4\)](#)
- [2: Tax Assessor Property Record Card \(pg.5\)](#)
- [3: 1986 Historical Survey – Inventory by the Connecticut Historical Commission \(pg.5\)](#)
- [4: Thompson Historical Society \(pg.5\)](#)
- [5: Thompson Public Library \(pg.5\)](#)
- [6: Thompson CT Map Geo \(pg.5\)](#)
- [7: Woodford Map of Windham County, CT – 1856 \(pg.6\)](#)
- [8: O.W. Gray Atlas of Windham County CT – 1869 \(pg.6\)](#)
- [9: Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps \(pg.6\)](#)
- [10: Aerial Photographs of Connecticut – 1934 – 1965 \(pg.6\)](#)
- [11: Connecticut Elevation Viewer – LIDAR \(pg.7\)](#)
- [12: History of Windham County CT, 2 vols. – Ellen D. Larned \(pg.7\)](#)
- [13: History of Windham County CT – Richard M. Bayles \(pg.7\)](#)
- [14: A Modern History of Windham County – Allen B. Lincoln \(pg.7\)](#)
- [15: Echoes of Old Thompson, 3 vols. \(pg.7\)](#)
- [16: Ancestry.com \(pg.7\)](#)
- [17: Familysearch.com \(pg.8\)](#)
- [18: Cemetery Records \(pg.8\)](#)
- [19: Probate records \(pg.8\)](#)
- [20: Google and other search engines \(pg.8\)](#)
- [21: Digital newspapers on line \(pg.8\)](#)
- [22: Architectural structure building practices and materials \(pg.8\)](#)
- [23: Historic Barn database \(pg.9\)](#)
- [24: WPA Architectural Survey \(pg.9\)](#)
- [25: Thompson’s First Families](#)

1: Thompson Land Records

The land records for any property in town are the lawful description of the property and its ownership rights. These records will typically, but not always, give description of the property size, specifications and location. Structures on the property are typically noted as “buildings thereon” or some other similar description, but rarely do they denote any specifics about the number of buildings, size, shape or any other detailed description. What can be learned from the document is whether or not a building was on the property at a given time. It must be understood that although buildings may be listed within a land record deed, that does not confirm that the present day building is the same one as is noted within the deed. Some buildings evolve with time - fire, remodeling and tear down/rebuild can occur and these changes will not be noted on the deed, so this must be considered. Do not make the error in thinking that because you have found a deed of an early date which states a building is present, the building must have been constructed at that same date or time frame. The purpose of searching the land records is to determine land ownership lineage, changes to the property size and, possibly, first mention of buildings on that property. Determining the age of the building will be explained further on in this document.

Searching the land records for lineage ownership is similar in researching ones family lineage – start with the present and work backwards in time. The records are recorded in volumes which are numbered. In looking at one’s own deed, you will find a volume number and page number. This is the reference to the location of the original deed description. The deed will typically list the seller, or “Grantor” and buyer, or “Grantee”. There are volumes which are listed by either Grantor or Grantee, the names in alphabetical order and it will give the volume number, page number and date of transaction, sometimes to include minor details. If a deed is not accessible at the start of the research, then these volumes are used as the starting point. Typically, researching one’s own house and property, you have your own deed which will list you as Grantee and will denote the Grantor from whom the property was obtained. To search further, look to the Grantee list book for the name of the Grantor that sold you the property. There may be more than one transaction listed for that person, so each entry will have to be reviewed to determine which one pertains to the property being researched. Sometimes there could be multiple listings for the same property, if subdivided, liens or other actions had occurred. In any case, the volume and page will be listed for each transaction and each will need to be reviewed to determine which the correct record is in order to move on to learn the next Grantor. This process is continued for as far back as is desired.

The Thompson Town Clerk website allows access to land records and other documents at no charge, however, there is a fee if a copy is desired. The digital copies are limited in how far back in time they cover, to about the 1940’s.

2: Tax Assessor Property Record Card

This record will give present day details of the property assessment. This will include buildings present, building sizes, value, age and sometimes a photo. Use caution in accepting the age date listed on the record. While it may be accurate, especially for mid 20th century and later properties, those that are of an earlier date may not be 100% accurate. Several listings have been found that were incorrect. Use the listed date as a starting point, but always use other sources as well, comparing all for a better informed date.

3: 1986 Historical Survey – Inventory by the Connecticut Historical Commission

This document is available in several places, Thompson Historical Society have both a hard copy and a digital copy, the latter accessible on our website. There is also a copy at the Thompson Public Library. A third location is through the Thompson MapGeo website, which will be explained in another section of that subject.

This survey lists approximately 396 buildings, or slightly less, which were researched in 1986. Each document gives a description of ownership, location, architectural details and other known historical information. It is a good tool, however, as with the Assessors cards, there have been mistakes found. Any reference to details from this document should be further researched from primary sources to confirm accuracy. Several buildings have been found to be earlier than the listing indicates.

4: Thompson Historical Society

We have many of the resources listed in this document available either in our archives, on our web page, or both. Our collections include both hard copies as well as a large digital database of both documents and photos.

5: Thompson Public Library

Our library has the typical sources that most Connecticut libraries have, but prior to the formation of the Thompson Historical Society (1968), the Thompson Public Library was the repository for historical items and it has a collection of historical documents, photos, newspapers and more that were collected or donated from the time of its incorporation in 1902 to present day. Access to the collection is not available to the public, but the library staff will do their best to help with inquiries.

6: Thompson CT Map Geo

This is a website that shows a present day map of Thompson, CT. On the map, all property bounds and buildings are shown. Each property can be clicked on to show the property bounds as well as minor details of current property ownership. There are links to Google Maps, the Thompson web page and the Tax Assessors property record card. Also, for some of the properties, there is a link noted as “Historic Property”. This link will take you to the THS website and will allow access to a document which gives

historic details of the property, should that document exist. In some cases, it is the 1986 Historic Survey document mentioned above. In other cases, it may be a more recent document, to include the 1986 document, which gives details of research we have performed for that property/ This may include photos and such as well.

7: Woodford Map of Windham County, CT – 1856

This map shows all the towns of Windham County. It also includes a village map of Thompson. This map is important in that it shows the road layout of that time as well as locations of homes and businesses to include the names of the owners. This is helpful in being able to confirm following deed research in the land records. It is available on the web in digital form and we have the link on the THS website.

8: O.W. Gray Atlas of Windham County CT – 1869

Basically, the same as the 1856 map, however, this atlas was produced in book form and each town is an individual page. The atlas has two maps for Thompson, a town wide page as well as a page that shows 5 villages: Thompson, Quaddick, New Boston, Wilsonville and West Thompson. This map is unique in that it shows the 15 district divisions of the town at that time. This map is digitized and available on the THS website.

9: Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

Two maps have been found available on the web. They only show small areas of North Grosvenordale in good detail of the buildings with sizes and description. One is dated 1897 and the other is 1917.

10: Aerial Photographs of Connecticut – 1934 – 1965

Available on the web, these aerial photos cover the entire State of Connecticut for both 1934 and 1965. There are other years that only show small areas of the state. There is a statewide grid listing individual images that, when chosen, will open up the photo of that section of the state. The image can be zoomed in to show fairly good detail. The 1934 is important in that it was prior to the 1936 flood and 1958 hurricane which were responsible for changing the landscape, both natural and manmade shows many early discontinued roads which were still visible at that time, is prior to much tree and vegetation growth occurring, so other land details are visible and prior to the housing boom that occurred after WWII. The 1965 images show the change that occurred within the 31 year gap, to include the building of the West Thompson Dam. The images of the buildings are good enough in that changes to their layout/size/shape are sometimes discernible and can help determine time frame of those changes.

11: Connecticut Elevation Viewer – LIDAR

This statewide imagery is designed to show natural topography in detail, eliminating building and vegetation. It is a helpful tool with seeing the layout of stone walls, hills and more which, when compared to early maps and deed details, might be used to determine property boundaries. This is available on the web. The website also has a hi-resolution satellite image of Connecticut taken when there were no leaves on the trees. This is another good source for viewing land and building layout.

12: History of Windham County CT, 2 vols. – Ellen D. Larned

Vol. 1, Copyright 1874, covers the period of 1600 to 1760. Vol. , copyright 1880, covers the period of 1760 to 1880. Available in both hard copy and digital on the web, link on THS website, these two volumes are the go to source for any and all Thompson history. Many people are listed in the two volumes with their connection to Thompson and these details can be tied to properties, helping to understand the background of previous owners.

13: History of Windham County CT – Richard M. Bayles

Copyright 1889, the same detailed description as that of Ellen D. Larned, some may suspect that M. Bayles stole Ellen's work and published as his own. Actually, Mr. Bayles visited with and consulted of Ellen and she granted him used of her information to help write his own book. There is some newer information that the volumes of Ellen as well as biographies of many people of Thompson residents during the time the book was written. Hard copies are in THS collection and digital link on our website.

14: A Modern History of Windham County – Allen B. Lincoln

Even more details of Thompson at both the 1920 time frame of the copyright as well as stories told by early residents of Thompson. Hard copies are in THS collection and digital link on our website.

15: Echoes of Old Thompson, 3 vols.

Edited by Joe lamartino of the Thompson Historical Society, these three volumes are filled with photos of Thompson showing people, places and things. Images of many of the early houses in Thompson can be found in these volumes. History of the town is noted, both during the time frame of the above mentioned books and in present day, many details of property can be learned from these volumes. Volumes are only available in hard copy and can be found in the THS collection or for sale in the THS Holiday Museum Shop.

16: Ancestry.com

This website has access to thousands of documents pertaining to genealogy which will help to tell the story of the property owners. Census records in particular will help value property ownership, indicate occupants of a property and more. Access requires a membership fee.

17: Familysearch.com

Similar to Ancestry.com, this website is accessible without membership fee.

18: Cemetery research

Cemetery information can be helpful as part of the genealogy aspect of the property ownership. Both the Charles R. Hale collection of Connecticut cemetery inscriptions (ca.1933/34) and Find -a-Grave website are good resources. THS has on its website several links to cemetery resources.

19: Probate records

Found in the town clerk office, these records are excellent for learning what possessions were owned at the time a person was probated. Inventories of the estate were listed in detail, especially the earlier dated copies, giving a written picture of how the house may have been furnished. The documents will list heirs and dispersal of the estate, to include the real estate. To search, start with the volume of master list of names. The list will indicate one or more documents for the estate probate, indicating the volume and page of the document.

20: Google and other search engines

Searching the names of property owners can sometimes produce detailed information about that person, especially in the books tab where many out of copyright books are available for full viewing. Many family genealogies were written in the late 1800's to early 1900's and in these books, details of where a person lived, their property and other info is sometimes found.

21: Digital newspapers on line

Many newspapers have been digitized and are available for viewing on the web. Some site have a fee and others are no charge. For Thompson, ChroniclingAmerica.com has the Putnam Patriot, Windham County Observer and Norwich Bulletin. The Webster Times is available through the Gladys Kelly Library of Webster MA. There is also the historic Harford Courant at <https://researchitct.org> – a Connecticut library card number is required for access. These newspapers are searchable with the search engine and word or phrase query.

22: Architectural structure building practices and materials

As noted above in the Land Records section, remodeling and tear down of buildings is not recorded in deeds, so knowing if the present day house is the same as that of the deed of the earlier times cannot be determined from just the deed. Investigation of the construction of the house will give the clues needed to help identify the range of years the building was built. Architectural style, materials used, tool marks on the framing and sheathing, hardware used and construction methods are all important to determining a time frame. Even so, all this will still only give an estimated range of time. Sometimes there are dates written or carved into parts of the structure, but even that can sometimes be suspect.

There are many websites that can explain and educate how to date all of the above and doing this sort of review is an important step in understanding the age of the building.

23: Historic Barns of Connecticut

Between 2006 and 2010, a survey of barns was taken throughout Connecticut. The database of information and photos can be found at <https://connecticutbarns.org/>.

24: WPA Architectural Survey

Between 1934 and 1937 a WPA backed survey, or census, was taken listing old buildings throughout Connecticut. Thompson has about 40 buildings on this list. This survey includes photos taken at the time of the survey as well as data that was known at that time. Some of the data in the notes may have been obtained from the then home owner so, as with any other research, care must be taken in accepting the data specifically dictated by the homeowner – further research should be presenting that info as fact.

The survey is accessible through the Connecticut State Library website:

<https://cslib.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4005coll7>.

25: Thompson's First Families

Between 1895 and 1900, the Thompson Congregational Church issued a magazine titled "The Monthly Record". Included in the magazine was a series of 45 articles written by Ellen Larned under the title of "Thompson's First Families", the "First" referring to the earliest settlers in Thompson. The Thompson Historical Society has extracted the articles and compiled them into a single document which is accessible on the THS website. These articles give important details about the early settlers in Thompson, their family genealogy and the interactions and contributions these settlers and families contributed to Thompson. They are an excellent source for determining the location of some of Thompson's earliest homes and families.