

Researching Your Modesto Property

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The Joy of Discovery

Have you ever wondered who designed your house or landscape? Have you thought about who owned your property before you or who lived there? Do you know what year your house was built?

Researching the history of your house, building, or property can be a fun and engaging project. You might uncover stories, bits of information, maps, and historic photos that will enrich the experience of living in your house.

By completing the tasks in this pamphlet, you will uncover much of your property's history using resources easily available online or in town.

Research and answer as many questions as you can in each of the following sections. It is best to complete each section in the order it



appears, but you may find answers to questions in one section while researching a different section. Read through the entire booklet before you begin so you are prepared for what you might find.

The Modesto Heritage web pages on the Modesto Art Museum web site have many helpful resources for your research. There you will

find historic maps of the city and county, digital copies of local history books, the museum's architecture guides, resources to help you identify your house style, and links to offsite resources including the city's historic building survey.

<https://modestoartmuseum.org/programs/modesto-heritage/>.

Describe What You Have

Examine and describe your building or house. What materials were used? Were there additions or changes? Was a garage converted to a family room? Was the original brick covered in stucco or aluminum

siding? Are there any mysterious elements such as a chimney with no fireplace or a foundation that goes beyond the outer walls of the current building? Write a detailed description of your

building using the proper names for the architectural elements. Illustrate your description with drawings, floor plans, or photos. Do the same for the landscape. Make a map of your property.

Helpful Suggestions:

1. When you find important clues or bits of information about your house or building, be sure to document where you found them.
2. Save information you find about the houses or buildings around your house or building. Eventually, this information may be important in understanding the history of your property and neighborhood.
3. Search through the documentation you already have, especially the deed, title papers, and escrow papers to find important clues. Take note of the legal description of your property, parcel number, and the property description that uses township, range, and section.
4. Ask around. Talk to long time residents in your neighborhood about your house and who lived there. Do neighbors have old photos of your house or of the neighborhood?

Architectural Style

Determine the architectural style of your building or house. Is it Arts and Crafts, California Colonial, Central Valley Modernist, or some other style? Identifying the architectural style can be a clue in how old your building is. Be aware that some buildings have characteristics of more than one style.

Use the resources on the Modesto Heritage Links

and Resources page <https://modestoartmuseum.org/modesto-heritage-links-and-resources/>.

Explore the Historic Resources Survey for information on pre-1943 buildings in Modesto, <https://www.modestogov.com/2028/Historic-Resources-Survey>.

There are many resources online to help you determine your building or

house's architectural style.

If you think your house is a Sears, Aladdin, Montgomery Ward, or other kit house, you can find their catalogues on the Modesto Heritage Links and Resources page <https://modestoartmuseum.org/modesto-heritage-links-and-resources/>.

Where Are You?

Find your property on historic maps of Modesto or Stanislaus County on the Modesto Art Museum web site <https://modestoartmuseum.org/historic-modesto-neighborhoods/>) or the county GIS site <http://gis.stancounty.com/giscentral/> and gather important clues. The early maps are often full of valuable information. In what neighborhood, tract,

addition, subdivision, or colony was your house built? What are the parcel, lot, and block numbers? Is your building on a Sanborn Fire Insurance map?

It's important to figure out where your property is using the old township, range, and section designations. Early documents will use this information to describe exactly where your

property is. Also finding the original name of the subdivision or tract can help you discover when it was recorded in county records.

When you know the name of your original tract, colony, or development, you can search for additional information in local newspapers. You may even find out who designed the houses in your area.

Who Lived There?

Use the Modesto city directories available at the Reference Desk in the Modesto Library or online to determine who lived in or used your house or building over the years. You might also get an idea of when your building was built by when people first started living there or first opened a business

there. Keep in mind that an earlier house or building with the same address may have been on the site before your house was built.

The directories start about 1910 and go into the 1960s. Remember, the people who lived in the house may have been renters and not the

owners. A business owner may not have been the property owner.

Be aware that street names changed and in the early 1950s so did the numbering system for some streets in Modesto. Buildings and houses were also moved to different locations.

Previous Owners

Uncover previous owners of your land. The earliest land patents in the Modesto area are from the 1850s when this was part of Tuolumne County and can be found at the Bureau of Land Management site <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx> . You will need to know your township, range, and section to find the patent that covers your lot.

Additional records can be found at the Stanislaus County Recorder and in Special Collections at the Modesto Library.

Finding the land patent for your property can be fulfilling because many were purchased using bounty land warrants given to veterans of the War of 1812, the wars against the Native Americans, or the Mexican War of 1848.

Often the veteran’s unit and commanding officer are mentioned making it possible to research details of the soldier’s life.

Once the initial owner has been identified, it will be possible to trace grantor and grantee in official county records.

Also check old county property maps. They often recorded the names of property owners directly on the maps.

“One of the things that distinguishes Modesto, really makes it important for us to look at again today, is that not only did these architects solve the practical problems of making a house comfortable in a fairly extreme climate, they did it with good architecture as well, beautiful architecture, something that was not just functional but had an aesthetic life of its own.”

Alan Hess
Architect , Historian



The Modesto Historic Resources Survey is available in print at the Modesto Library and online at <https://www.modestogov.com/2028/Historic-Resources-Survey> .

The survey covers buildings constructed before 1943 downtown and in the areas surrounding downtown.

The original city streets were laid out parallel to the railroad tracks. After about 1906, the streets were laid out on a north south grid resulting in a mismatch in the street pattern.

Checklist

Be sure you have the following information:

- 1. Current Address
- 2. Possible previous addresses
- 3. Parcel, lot, and block number
- 4. Name of subdivision or tract
- 5. Township, range, and section
- 6. Was the house built in the city limits or in the county?
- 7. When was your property annexed into the city?
- 8. Who was the developer of your subdivision?
- 9. What year was the subdivision recorded in county records?
- 10. Is your property on a Sanborn Fire Insurance Map or part of the historic Modesto building survey?

Modesto Art Museum
1720 G Street
Modesto, CA 95354
(Mailing address only)

modestoartmuseum.org



The Modesto Art Museum has a growing list of more than 85 Modernist buildings and landscapes from 1939 to 1972 by noted mid-20th century designers including John Funk, Frank Lloyd Wright, Gardner Dailey, Anshen and Allan, William Turnbull, Brian Green, Joseph Esherick, William Wurster, Milton Pflueger, SOM, Thomas Church, Lawrence Halprin, and many more.

Several Modesto houses were featured in popular magazines like *House and Garden* and *Architectural Digest* and in professional journals like *Architectural Record* and *Architectural Forum*.

Text by Robert Barzan
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Putting It All Together

Once you have collected the information, photos, and stories about your property you can put them all together in several different formats. The easiest is probably a basic timeline or chronological list of events starting with the the Yokut tribe that lived here before the Spanish arrived.

You can also do a narrative, particularly if you have a number of stories and especially if the stories are long.

If all you have are names and dates, you might be able to find stories about

your property or about the people who lived on or used the property by exploring local newspapers. If you have access to Ancestry.com, you can search Modesto newspapers from 1910 to the early 1930s. The main library has microfilms of Modesto newspapers back into the late 1800s.

Many Modesto residents, some who may have lived in your house, are featured in local history books. You can find links to the histories on the Modesto Heritage Links and Resources page

<https://modestoartmuseum.org/modesto-heritage-links-and-resources/> .

You may decide that your house or building is worthy of designation as an official Modesto landmark. If so, contact the Modesto Landmark Preservation Program <https://www.modestogov.com/1939/Landmark-Preservation-Program> .

For California State designation, contact the California Preservation Foundation, <http://www.californiapreservation.org/main.html> .

Building a Better Modesto

This booklet is part of the Modesto Art Museum's program, *Building a Better Modesto*, a series of events and activities for people to learn about, discuss, and research art, architecture, landscape, and urban design specifically to understand their role in creating a more livable city. The program includes talks, workshops, discussions, online resources, activities for area teachers and students, movies, tours, exhibits, and hosting the Modesto Architecture Festival with the American Institute of Architects Sierra Valley Chapter and other local community partners.

The program was developed by the museum in response to Modesto's quality of life ranking. According to the American Institute of Architects' *10 Principles for Livable Communities*, architecture and urban design offer a powerful perspective for exploring and finding remedies for a city's livability issues. The program embodies the museum's guiding philosophy that the arts play a vital role in creative placemaking and quality of life for a city. Building a Better Modesto is the museum's contribution to creating a more livable Modesto.

Modesto Art Museum was founded in 2005 and is a 501c3 nonprofit corporation. The mission of the Modesto Art Museum is to provide quality visual arts experiences and to help people develop their aesthetic understanding so they can enjoy and find meaning in the visual arts. To accomplish this mission, the museum sponsors exhibitions, workshops, classes, lectures, publications, performances, readings, tours, movies, and symposia. Check the museum web site for details <https://modestoartmuseum.org/> .