

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 will uncover stories, bits of information, maps, and maybe historic photos, all enriching the experience of living in your house. You might also find helpful information to guide a restoration.

In Modesto, the oldest buildings were constructed between 1870 and 1900 but only a few remain. There are many houses built between 1900 and 1925, as well as large numbers of mid 20th century tract homes. Modesto was



also a laboratory in the development of Central Valley Modernism with buildings and houses by nationally known architects and designers.

Over the decades, several Modesto homes and buildings were featured in popular magazines like *House and Garden* and *Architectural Digest* and in professional journals like *Architectural Record*, and *Architectural Forum*.

Landscapes were also important to Modesto residents and many yards and gardens were designed by well known local and national landscape designers.

By following the instructions in this pamphlet and using the resources on the Modesto History Center web site, you will enjoy discovering the history of your building and property.

Look at 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 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 neighborhood around your house or building. Eventually, this information may be important in understanding the history of your property.

3. Search through the documentation you already have, especially the deed and your property tax bill, to find important clues. Take note of the 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?

Architecture and Landscape Tradition

Determine the architecture or landscape tradition or style of your property, building, or house. Is your building Arts and Crafts, mid 20th century tract ranch, California colonial, Central Valley Modernist, or some other style? Architectural style can be a clue to how old your building is and who designed it. Be aware that some buildings have characteristics of more than one style. Landscaping also changed over the years. Victorian era landscape differs from mid-20th century modern landscapes.



Where Are You?

Find your property on historic maps of Modesto on the Modesto History Center web pages or on the Stanislaus County GIS site and gather important clues. In what neighborhood, tract, addition, or colony was your house built? What are the township, range, and section of your neighborhood or development? Is your

building on a Sanborn Fire Insurance map?

It's important to figure out where your property is using the township, range, and section designations. Early documents about your property will use this information to describe exactly where your property is. If you have an old deed, this information might already be on it.

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. Some developments in Modesto in the first half of the 20th century had consulting architects.

Who Lived There?

Use the Modesto city directories in the main Stanislaus County 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. 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 and your house may not have been the first one on your property.

Previous Owners

Trace the ownership of your house or building and the land it sits on as far back as possible. The earliest land patents in the Modesto area are mostly from the 1860s and can be found at the Bureau of Land Management site (See Resources below). 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 main library and at the Stanislaus County Recorder Office.

Finding the first land patent for your property can be especially fulfilling because many were purchased using military script 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.

Many Modesto homes are on property that was either first purchased or granted to a railroad.

Once the initial owner has been established, it will be possible to trace granter and grantee in official county records right to you or the current owner.

“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.”

Allen Hess
Architect
Historian



Modesto Property and Preservation Resources

Modesto History Center:

<https://modestoartmuseum.org/programs/modestohistorycenter/>

Modesto History Resources

<https://modestoartmuseum.org/modesto-history-resources/>

Modesto Architecture, Landscape, and Urban Design Center

<https://modestoartmuseum.org/modesto-architecture-landscape-and-urban-design-center/>

Historic Maps of Modesto:

<https://modestoartmuseum.org/historic-modesto-neighborhoods/>

Bureau of Land Management:

<https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/default.aspx>

Stanislaus County GIS Page:

<http://gis.stancounty.com/giscentral/>

Mailing address only

Modesto Art Museum
1217 J Street
Modesto, CA 95354

modestoartmuseum.org

The oldest house in Modesto still on its original location is probably the Maze House on Maze Road, built in the 1870s. But even mid-20th century tract houses can have interesting histories.

Putting It All Together

Once you have collected the information, photos, and stories about your piece of 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 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 in or used the property by exploring local newspapers. There are online services that have Modesto newspapers from 1870 to the early 1930s. The main library has microfilms of Modesto newspapers back into the late 1800s.

Many Modesto residents are featured in local histories. You can find

links to the histories on the Modesto History Resources page (see Resources page 3).

You may decide that your house or building is worthy of designation as an official Modesto landmark. If so, you can contact the Modesto Landmark Preservation Commission. For California State designation, contact the California Preservation Foundation.



Modesto History Center

The mission of the Modesto History Center is to improve the well-being of the people of Modesto through research, preservation, and education about the city's history and built environments. We do this in a way that builds community relationships, explores contemporary issues, and supports planning for a better future, and is of, by, and for the people of Modesto.

Research: Conduct and facilitate research into the history of Modesto and its built environments.

Preservation: Encourage and facilitate the preservation of history, historic documents, artifacts, heritage buildings, and historic landscapes.

Education: Teach about Modesto's history and built environments, the value of historic preservation, how to do historic research, and how to apply for historic landmark designation status.

Text by Robert Barzan
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