How To Research The History of Buildings in Manhattan

THE BLOOMINGDALE NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY GROUP

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Manhattan residents often want to know more about their buildings and neighborhoods. Fortunately, New York City has a wealth of online resources related to the built environment, including digital archives and government and private websites. You can use such resources to identify everything from the architect who designed your home to the ages of the buildings on your block. The Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group (BNHG) recently used those resources to compile a database of the more than 1,000 buildings in the blocks from 96th to 110th Streets between Central Park West and Riverside Drive: https://www.upperwestsidehistory.org/building-database.html.

The BNHG is a local organization whose members conduct research, lead walking tours, and sponsor talks by expert speakers. They also maintain a collection of historical material about the Upper West Side, which was known as Bloomingdale in colonial times. The collection is housed at the Bloomingdale Branch of the New York Public Library.

BNHG has produced this guide to document how it went about researching the area’s buildings. With it, the history of the building where you live or work is just a research session away.

—Robert W. Snyder,
Manhattan Borough Historian
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Introduction

When New York was still a Dutch colony, much of the west side of Manhattan was referred to as Bloemendaal, after a town in the Netherlands. The name, which means vale of flowers, was later anglicized to Bloomingdale.

In the 19th Century, as the West Side became more built up, new locality names came into use such as Hell’s Kitchen, Harsenville, Manhattanville, and Morningside Heights. Since the early 20th Century, the name Bloomingdale has generally meant the area of the West Side between 96th and 110th Streets. It is there that you will find a Bloomingdale branch library, a Bloomingdale public school, and a number of other organizations carrying the name, including our own Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group.

In 2018, we set out to compile a database of all the buildings in the blocks from 96th to 110th Streets between Central Park and Riverside Drive. There turned out to be more than a thousand such buildings, and the project took us three years.

As a historical organization, we wanted to be able to quickly look up when a building was built and who designed it. However, to correctly identify buildings described in old records, the database also includes various characteristics of the existing structures such as height, building type, and whether they have an elevator. Similar data can be compiled for any neighborhood in Manhattan, or for an individual building where you live or work.

In addition to historical organizations like ours, the sources and methods described in the following pages can be used by block associations, business improvement districts, schools, churches and other organizations to compile information on buildings in a defined geographic area.

—Gilbert Tauber, Chair, Database Committee
Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group
We started by creating an Excel spreadsheet of all the buildings in our area, arranged by street and house number. In addition to the street address, our spreadsheet has columns for: the block and lot numbers; building height; number of units (if residential); the year and number of the original building permit; year of completion; Building Department Identification Number (BIN); Department of Finance Building Classification; architect’s name; our reference source for the building date and architect; and additional descriptive information.

Most of this information can be obtained online using the block and lot maps and associated property data on either the Oasis NYC website: http://www.oasisnyc.net/map.aspx or the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT) website: http://maps.nyc.gov/doitt/nycitymap/*.

The sites are similar, both based on City agency files, but you may find one or the other easier to use depending on your device and browser. Note that these sites provide data by tax block and lot. If there is more than one building on a lot, you can click through to the Building Department’s Property Profile Overview for that lot to get information on the individual buildings.

Note also that build years shown on the Oasis and DoITT sites may not be accurate for buildings prior to about 1910.

*If any of the links in the guide do not open, try pasting the URL directly into your browser’s search bar.
In addition to the spreadsheet, you will probably need paper copies of block and lot maps to keep track of buildings for which data is needed. The Oasis and DoITT maps can serve this purpose, but the Department of Finance’s tax maps are more printer-friendly. They also show more detail on lot dimensions. Go to http://gis.nyc.gov/taxmap/ and print out the current tax maps covering your area of interest. As you find data for each lot, mark or shade in those lots on the map.

Note that lot numbers sometimes change, as when a rental building is converted to a condo. Condo lots are given new 4-digit lot numbers. You can search the DOF site for a tax map by that number, but it is not on the tax map itself. Instead, the tax map show the discontinued lot numbers with a line through them, as well as a condo number and the range of unit numbers within the condo.

To fill in our spreadsheet, we started with the low-hanging fruit: landmarked buildings, both individual or within historic districts. Detailed information on each building can be found online in the Designation Reports of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. To identify the individual landmarks and historic districts in your area, go to the Landmarks Preservation Commission’s Discover NYC Landmarks map, https://www.landmarks.nyc.

You can zoom in and click on individual buildings to get a box with key data, including architects’ names and building construction dates. For building permit numbers, you will have to go to the Landmarks Preservation Commission’s Designation Report. (https://www1.nyc.gov/site/lpc/designations/designation-reports.page)

Once you have shaded in all the landmarked buildings on your current tax map, you can turn to records of buildings that may or may not still exist.
In the 1980s the Office for Metropolitan History, headed by the late Christopher Gray, compiled a database of all new building permits issued by the Buildings Department in Manhattan from 1900 through 1986. The listings include architects’ names and brief descriptions. The OMH database can be accessed at [https://www.metrohistory.com](https://www.metrohistory.com). You can search it by year or street to find the applicable new building permits, and then check whether they correspond to the existing buildings on the site.

Note that in the 19th and early 20th century, building permits identified locations not by house or lot number but by distance and direction from a nearby street intersection. Fortunately, if you zoom in, the tax map will show lot dimensions. This will usually enable you to match a building’s permit description to its current tax lot number. Building frontages are also shown on the Oasis and DoITT websites.

The next step is to verify that the building described in the new building permit is still on its lot. In most cases you can verify buildings online, using Google Maps and Street View to see the building’s façade and footprint.

Some listed buildings will have been demolished and a few projects that received building permits may have been abandoned before they even broke ground. If you are searching the Office for Metropolitan History database by street name, it is a good idea to start with the latest permit and work backwards.

Even outside of landmark districts, a large proportion of New York City’s buildings date from the 19th Century. In researching non-landmarked buildings prior to 1900, we would recommend that you start with a review of old maps and real estate atlases. You can find relevant period maps of your neighborhood by searching on the New York Public Library web page: https://spacetime.nypl.org/maps-by-decade/#/

Footprints of existing buildings can be identified on maps going as far back as the 1850s. However, most of Manhattan Island north of 59th Street was rural until the 1870s, which is about the time when the City started to require building permits.

These old maps can help you narrow the search for permits in a particular area. As an example, if your target blocks were shown as vacant in 1891 but built up in 1897, you would search for new building permits for that range of years.

One way to do this is to look through the microfilmed Building Permit Docket Books for those years at the Municipal Archives, which is at 31 Chambers Street. But this can be a tedious process, since the permits for all of Manhattan and what is now the West Bronx are in a single numerical series, and many pages are either missing or illegible.

Fortunately, a trade journal called the Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide published weekly reports of new building permits starting in 1868. A nearly complete run of the Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide through 1922 has been digitized by the Columbia University Libraries: (http://rerecord.cul.columbia.edu/)
If you’ve kept track of post-1900 buildings on your block and lot map, you will very quickly be able to identify which pre-1900 buildings are definitely no longer standing. For others, some simple calculations will be needed to match building-permit descriptions with current lot numbers. This is where the detailed lot dimensions on the tax maps become important.

If you find more than one permit number recorded for the same location, you may need to look at the microfilmed Building Department Docket Books mentioned above. Assuming the docket page is not missing, the permits will be easy to find, since they are listed in numerical order within each year. The docket book will sometimes show that a permit has been superseded or that a project has been abandoned.

Finally, it is important to verify that each permit description on your list matches the existing building on the site. To some extent, this can be determined just by going out and looking, but it is also important to check the current building footprint against older maps. Building footprints can be viewed on both the Oasis and DoITT websites, as well as on the satellite imagery in www.google.com/maps.

Many buildings have been given new facades or otherwise renovated to the point that they appear to be modern structures. However, if an existing footprint matches that on a 19th century real-estate map, and no later building permit has been found for that site, it is more than likely to be the same structure.

If you are not sure about whether a new-looking building is actually new or is in fact an old building with a new façade, it is often helpful to compare it with the Municipal Archives’ digitized 1940 and/or 1980 tax photos of the site. These can be easily searched through Julian Boilen’s website https://1940s.nyc. For the older parts of Manhattan, the Municipal Archives also has folders with copies of documents, newspaper clippings, etc. on individual buildings, filed by block and lot number.

There are many more wrinkles to searching a building’s history, but by following the above steps, we were able to find information, including architects’ names and at least approximate construction dates, for more than 95 percent of the buildings in our study area.

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