

# Researching the History of Your Whittier Home

## About this research guide.

The Whittier Public Library is pleased to offer this guide to assist you in researching the history of your Whittier home. A note before we begin: It is not necessary to access every resource in this guide in order to research the history of your Whittier home. The resources in this guide have been arranged with those most commonly found to be useful first. The resources listed toward the end of the guide are those that are useful in answering specific questions fewer people tend to have.

## I. Steps to take before you begin your research.

### Step 1: Noting what you already know.

Note what you already know about your home, from real estate records and from neighbors. When do you think your home was built? Do you know the names of anyone who lived there before you? Have you heard any stories about the home? Writing this information down before you begin your research will help you keep track of your sources, and will help you determine what questions you have about your home.

### Step 2: Determining how recently your neighborhood became part of the City of Whittier.

When Whittier was incorporated in 1898, it was a geographically small city. Its original boundaries were: Orange Drive to the north; an arbitrary line half a block west of College Ave to the east; Whittier Blvd. (then County Road) to the south, at a southwestern diagonal; and Broadway and El Rancho to the west. The areas surrounding Whittier were unincorporated Los Angeles County – not part of any city.

Over time, various portions of unincorporated Los Angeles County land surrounding Whittier have been annexed (added) to the City.

You can see when – or whether – your neighborhood became part of the City of Whittier by using the website [Los Angeles County Department of Public Works - City Annexations within the County of Los Angeles](#). Enter your address into the search box and click “search,” then click on the map to discover whether the land on which your home sits was annexed to the City of Whittier, and if so, what year that took place.

The longer your neighborhood has been part of the City of Whittier, the more materials the Whittier Public Library is likely to have pertaining to your home and its former occupants.

### Step 3: Determining the year your home was built.

You can use the website [Los Angeles County Office of the Assessor – Property Assessment Information System](#) to view property details of your home, including what year it was built, square footage, and the value of the land and structure at the time it was first developed. This website has information on homes in the City of Whittier as well as Unincorporated Los Angeles County. To do this, click “Find a property by address,” and follow the instructions on the web page. Click “Property details” once you have retrieved a result, and scroll to see information about your home. Some of this information is available on popular real estate websites; however, sometimes these websites are inaccurate, so it is useful to verify the year built with this government resource.

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## II. Researching the building and its former occupants.

### Step 1: Finding the pre-1966 address of your home.

If your home was built within the City of Whittier prior to 1966, the first thing you will need to do is find its former address. In 1966, street numbers throughout Whittier changed, to conform to the Los Angeles County numbering system, in which each address is unique. You can use the digitized book [Street Number Changes](#) to find the former address of your home. It is important to note the directional (north, south, east, west) of the former address, because in many cases they were not unique. For example, there were once two 102 Greenleaf Avenues – 102 North Greenleaf, and 102 South Greenleaf.

### Step 2: Finding your home in city directories or phone books.

#### Whittier City Directories

Once you know the pre-1966 address of your home, you can find it in city directories. City directories can help you discover who lived in your home, what their occupation was, and how your neighborhood grew over time. The library's collection of Whittier City directories spans 1903 to 1977, with some 1-3 year gaps when a directory was not published.

To find your home in city directories beginning in 1920, you will use the Street Guide section, which is generally printed on pink paper and is found near the middle of the book. In this section, homes are listed alphabetically by street name and address, rather than alphabetically by residents' surname, as in the rest of the book.

Whittier City Directories can be retrieved from the History Room at the Central Library by a reference librarian. These may not be checked out; they are library use only, and you will need to leave your ID at the Information Desk in order to access them.

The Whittier Public Library has digitized two of its earliest Whittier City directories: [Whittier City Directory of 1903](#) and [Whittier City Directory of 1911](#). These files are searchable PDFs.

#### Whittier Home Telephone Directories

If your home does not appear in city directories because your neighborhood is in Unincorporated Los Angeles County, or if there is a long gap between when your home was built and when it became part of the City of Whittier, you may have better luck with the Whittier Public Library's collection of digitized [Whittier Home Telephone Directories](#). These are searchable PDFs, and span 1904 to 1948. They cover a wider geographic area than Whittier City directories, including the unincorporated areas surrounding Whittier. However, these directories only include people who owned a telephone, something that was relatively uncommon in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Haines Criss-Cross Directories

To research the history of your home 1972 to the present, you can use Haines Criss-Cross directories, which list names, address and phone numbers of home occupants, and cover a wide geographic area, including Unincorporated Los Angeles County. The library's collection of these directories spans 1972 to the present. These can be retrieved from the History Room at the

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Central Library by a reference librarian. These may not be checked out; they are library use only, and you will need to leave your ID at the Information Desk in order to access them.

## Step 3: Searching the newspaper database.

You can use the pre-1966 address of your home and the names of people who lived in it as search terms in the [Whittier Public Library's historical newspaper database](#), which spans 1888 to 1956, with some gaps. It is important to use quotation marks around a phrase (such as "102 N. Greenleaf") so that the database does not retrieve every appearance of 102, N, and Greenleaf. Using quotation marks around a phrase indicates to the database that you are looking for that phrase in particular.

It is also important to try variations of your search term. For instance, if you were searching for 102 North Greenleaf, you would want to try "102 N. Greenleaf," "102 N Greenleaf," "102 North Greenleaf" and "102 Greenleaf" as it may have been styled all of those ways. Similarly, if you were searching for a resident named B. F. Arnold, you would want to try "B.F. Arnold," "B. F. Arnold," "Benjamin Franklin Arnold," "Benjamin F. Arnold," "Benjamin Arnold," "Ben Arnold," as the name may have been styled all of those various ways.

## Step 4: Searching library photograph databases.

### Whittier Public Library's Historical Photograph Collection

The [Whittier Public Library's digital photograph collections](#) does not include many photos of Whittier homes. The photos we do have tend to be of houses located in or near Uptown Whittier, built around the turn of the last century. If your home meets that description, it is worthwhile to browse through photos of Streets and Residences to see if it appears in our collection.

### Los Angeles County Library's Whittier Unincorporated Heritage Project

The [Whittier Unincorporated Heritage Project Digital Collection](#) is a result of the collaboration between the LA County Library, the Los Angeles County CEO's Office of Unincorporated Area Services, and the Office of Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe. Most images in the collection were provided by community residents over the course of two months in the summer of 2016 and represent the rich culture and history of Unincorporated Whittier.

## Step 5: Accessing the vertical files.

The Whittier Public Library retains articles from the *Whittier Daily News* pertaining to Whittier history, and they are organized by subject in file cabinets called the Vertical Files. The folder containing articles on houses is labeled Buildings. These articles are organized alphabetically by street name. We are likeliest to have articles on houses in or near Uptown Whittier that were built earlier than 1950.

If you have compiled a list of former occupants of your home using street and telephone directories, and if you have found newspaper articles indicating that one or more of these former occupants was significant to the community, there may be articles on that person in a Biography folder within the Vertical Files. These articles are organized alphabetically by last name.

In order to access the Vertical Files, you will need to make an appointment with the Local History Librarian, by emailing [historyroom](mailto:historyroom@whittierlibrary.org) at [whittierlibrary.org](http://whittierlibrary.org).

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The Whittier Museum has a similar collection of newspaper articles called the Subject Files, which can be accessed by members of the Whittier Historical Society by emailing info at whittiermuseum dot org for an appointment.

## Step 6: Finding your home on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps.

Sanborn Fire Insurance maps can show you the original “footprint” of your Whittier home, which can be useful in determining whether a section of your home, or a structure on your property, is an addition, or whether it was included in the original build. (These maps do not cover Unincorporated Los Angeles County.)

The microfilm reel containing Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of the City of Whittier includes years 1888, 1891, 1984, 1900, 1907, 1912, plus a 1925 map updated to 1941. It also contains other cities, in alphabetical order, so it is necessary to scroll past these until you see Whittier. This microfilm reel can be requested at the Information Desk at the Central Library, and a reference librarian can show you how to use the microfilm machine.

The Whittier Museum has a book of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, which can be accessed by members of the Whittier Historical Society by emailing info at whittiermuseum dot org for an appointment.

## Step 7: Finding your home in tax assessment ledgers.

City of Whittier tax assessment ledgers are useful in determining former occupants of your home if it was built prior to when the first Whittier City Directory was published, in 1903. These can tell you who owned your property from 1898-1919, and when the property was “improved upon,” meaning, when structures were built. The Whittier Public Library’s collection of tax assessment ledgers are fragile. They are also more difficult to use, and contain less information, than Whittier City Directories. For these reasons, they are only accessed when necessary.

In order to access tax assessment ledgers, you will need to make an appointment with the Local History Librarian, by emailing historyroom at whittierlibrary dot org.

## III. Researching the site of your home.

Researching the site of your home can help you understand who owned the land on which your home sits before the city subdivided this land into a housing development, as well as the original boundaries of your property.

### Finding tract or parcel maps.

A tract or parcel map is a record of a subdivision, in which the City divided a larger plot of land into smaller plots to be sold individually.

You can use [Los Angeles County Department of Public Works - Land Records Viewer](#) to find tract or parcel maps, as well as records related to your home and its neighborhood. First check the boxes for “Parcel map” and “Tract map” in the menu on the left side of the page, then click “Address/Intersection Location Search” and type your address into the search bar below. Once your result appears, click on the map near the blue map pin. On the left side of the screen, a new result will have appeared, under the heading “Search by jurisdiction”. Click the file listed under “PDF/Info,” and your neighborhood’s tract map will appear in a new tab.

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The first page is typically a legal document, with signatures of people who owned the land before it was subdivided. It will also typically include the name of the rancho that originally made up the land. The second page will be a map of that tract. You can save the PDF if you find this information interesting, or notate the name of the person who owned the land.

## IV. Exploring other resources.

### Whittier Public Library

#### *Books with photographs of Whittier homes.*

- *Founders and Friends*. Phyllis M. Pearce, Claire G. Radford and Mary Ann Rummel. 1977. Call number 979.493 PEA.
- *Old Whittier, 1904*. Harry A. Williams. 1904, 1987. Call number 979.493 WHI.
- *Pioneer Families of Whittier*. Virginia Mathony. 1998. Call number 979.493092 MAT.
- *Pioneer Families of Whittier II*. Virginia Mathony. 2004. Call number 979.493092 MAT.
- *Whittier: A picture postcard history*. Rudy Valdez. 1987. Call number 979.493 WHI.
- *Whittier (Images of America)*. Mike Garabedian and Becky Ruud. 2016. 979.493 GAR.
- *Whittier Revisited*. Virginia Mathony. 1991. 979.494 MAT.

#### *Books on architectural styles common in Whittier.*

- *Beyond the Bungalow: Grand homes in the Arts & Crafts tradition*. Paul Duchscherer. 2005. Call number 728 DUC.
- *The California House: Adobe, Craftsman, Victorian, Spanish colonial revival*. Kathryn Masson. 2011. Call number 747 MAS.
- *Craftsman Style*. Robert Winter. 2004. Call number 720.973 WIN.
- *Gustav Stickley's Craftsman Homes and Bungalows*. Gustav Stickley. 2009. Call number 728.37 STI.
- *Spanish Revival Architecture*. S.F. Cook. 2005. Call number 728.37 COO.
- *Victorian Architectural Details: Designs for over 700 stairs, mantels, doors, windows, cornices, porches, and other decorative elements*. A.J. Bicknell. 2005. 729 BIC.

#### *Books with general reference information on History of Home research.*

- *The Abrams Guide to American House Styles*. William Morgan. 2004. Call number 728.37 ABR.
- *American Houses: A field guide to the architecture of the home*. Gerald Foster. 2004. Call number 728.37 FOS.
- *A Field Guide to American Houses*. Virginia McAlester. 1984. Call number 728.83 MCA.
- *A Guide to Old American Houses, 1700-1900*. H.L. Williams. 1962. Call number R 728 W. (Library use only.)
- *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Homes Through American History, Vol. IV: 1946-Present*. Thomas W. Paradis. 2008. Call number 728.0973 GRE V.4.
- *House Histories: A guide to tracing the genealogy of your home*. Sally Light. 1989. Call number R 728.37 LIG. (Library use only.)
- *The Vintage House Book: Classic American homes 1880-1980*. 2003. Call number 728.37 BUR.
- *If Walls Could Talk: An intimate history of the home*. Lucy Worsley. 2012. Call number 306.85 WOR.

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## Whittier City Hall

- [Building and Safety](#)  
Building permit records are sometimes available here. These can help with ascertaining the date of construction, as well as alterations made to your home.
- [Historic Preservation \(Planning Services, Community Development\)](#)  
Before beginning alterations or rehabilitation on your historic home, it is important to find out which City planning ordinances apply to your home and how to obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness, if one is required. On this website, you can also view maps of historic districts in Whittier.
- [Whittier Residential Historic Resources Survey \(2013\)](#)  
This comprehensive survey of historic residential architecture in Whittier includes information on individual houses, organized by time period and architectural style.

## Los Angeles County

- [Registrar Recorder Real Estate Records](#)  
The Real Estate Records section of the Registrar-Recorder's office maintains records of all real estate transactions in Los Angeles County from 1850 to the present. If you know the title of and names on the document, as well as the year of range of years to be searched, you may obtain a copy of a historical real estate record.

## Miscellaneous sources

- [Whittier Historical Society and Museum](#)  
The Whittier Museum, a private, nonprofit institution owned and operated by the Whittier Historical Society, maintains collections of historical photographs, Name Files (collections of clippings similar in character to the library's Vertical Files), maps, and local history books. Archives research is available by appointment, and free for Museum members.
- [National Geologic Map Database](#)  
This website allows users to search or click on a map of the United States to view historic maps created by the United States Geological Survey (USGS). As of 2018, searching by location for "Whittier, California" yields 42 maps that cover the Whittier area, ranging from 1896-1981. These maps can be useful in understanding the historical context of a house or building's surrounding neighborhood and town.
- [Mapping Inequality](#)  
*Mapping Inequality* is a project of the University of Richmond, the University of Maryland, Virginia Tech, and Johns Hopkins University that provides access to more than 150 interactive maps and thousands of "area descriptions" produced by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation during the Great Depression. These maps and descriptions were used to determine whether a home loan would be approved, based on the racial and ethnic makeup of the neighborhood in which the home resided. Coverage includes Whittier and the surrounding areas.