

Some tips on house research at the Cook County Recorder of Deeds

Where you need to go

Cook County Recorder of Deeds
118 N. Clark Street
Room 120
Chicago, Illinois 60602

Office Hours: 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. M-F

Phone: (312) 603-5050
Fax: (312) 603-5063
Website: cookrecorder.com

The nearest CTA stop is State/Washington, on the Red Line. Walk two blocks west down Washington to Clark and turn right. The building you want is directly across from the Daley Center.

What you need to bring with you

Just the street address of the house will not do. To find anything at the Recorder's office, you'll need to have either the **"legal description"** of the property in question or a **PIN Number**. The legal description gives the property's Township, Range, and Section number as well as the Block and Lot number. If you are the current owner of the property, this description may appear on some of your own documents. If not, you may be able to locate the legal description on the plat books in the museum's research room or in the plats of survey for particular pieces of property.

Alternatively, you can use the current **Property Identification Number (PIN)**. If you are the current owner, the 14-digit PIN will be on your property tax receipts. Otherwise, you can find the PIN at the website of the Cook County Assessor's office: www.cookcountyassessor.com/. (Click on "Don't know your PIN?") Here you just type in your address. Once you have the PIN, you can go to the Recorder of Deeds website to get a list of financial transactions going back to go to 1985, but that's not much help with the house history. Instead, go to 434, give them the number, and they will print out a form for you (featuring a punch-card) for which you'll pay \$5 per property. Take this form to the Tract Room.

In the Tract Room

As you enter the Recorder of Deeds Office ask the person at the info desk where the **tract room** is. You will be directed to go straight back and take the stairs to your left down to the basement and Room 120. As you enter the tract room you will see a customer service counter to your right and, behind that, rows of low shelving with large white books inserted flat, each on a shelf fitted with steel rollers. The area in the middle has the **"tract books."** These give lists of all transactions and other legal documents concerning any given property, beginning as far back as 1871. The tract books covering different areas of Wilmette are those numbered **252, 252A through 253D, 253, and 253A through 253D**. To find out which of these is the book you need, hand the person at the customer service desk your legal description or PIN and ask for the number of the relevant tract book. He or she will then consult the Tract Book Index and tell you which is your tract book number, and point you to its location.

The tract books are arranged by subdivision, then by block and lot number, and consist of photocopies of ledger-sized pages of handwritten lists. (To have copies made of a tract book page, you must go upstairs to the FOIA office and fill out a form; copies are 25 cents apiece.) Looking at the page about your lot, you will see a chronological listing of transactions. In the far left column of each line of this list is the **Document Number**, normally seven digits long. (We'll come back to the Document Number in a moment.) Each line then gives the Grantor, Grantee, type of document ("TD" for Trust Deed, for example), the date it was signed, and the date it was filed. The handwriting may be a little hard to read, but from this information you can get a general idea of who has owned the property, to whom it has been leased, who has borrowed money against it, and so on, and the dates of all of these activities. It helps to read up on what terms like "warranty deed" mean; there's a helpful list on the website's FAQ page. Be careful drawing conclusions: what may look like at first sight like the sale of a property, for instance, may merely be a loan taken out by the same owner. For that matter, you often can't be sure if the house involved is yours or an earlier one on the same lot, or even if there's yet a house on the lot at all. To get a more detailed idea of what's going on in the tract book, you'll need to see the more detailed records that were made of the documents themselves when they were first filed, records that are available on microfiche.

Here's where the Document Number comes in. You might think that you could just make a list of the numbers of the document records you want to look at, take them to a clerk, and get the microfilm. Alas, not so for the older (pre-1985) records – there's one more step in between, and it will remind you of playing secret agent and using your special decoder ring. What you need is not simply the Document Number, but the Book and Page number for that document, too. For this you must take your list of Document Numbers over to the **Page Index Books**. (As you face the back of the Tract Room, these books are in tall shelves to your right.) The Document Number itself tells you which particular volume of Page Index Book you need, and where to find what you need there. It works this way: the first two digits of the Document Number give you the volume number of the Page Index Book, the next two tell you what page to turn to in it, and the last three tell you what line on that page to go to. So, for example, Document Number 1843886 tells you to go to Page Index Book volume 18, turn to page 43, and scan down the list until you come to line 886. On that line you will find a **Book and a Page number** – in this case, Book 4106 and Page 305. Write down both of these numbers from the Page Index Book for every document that you wish to see.

The Microfilm

Now that you have your list of numbers, leave the Tract Room and go across the hallway to the tiny foyer of the **Microfilm Vault**. Grab an order form, and fill it out using your numbers. (In the future, carry a few of these blank forms with you on your excursions to the Tract Room so you don't have to write everything down twice; you can print them off from the website.) Hand your list to the attendant, who will come back in a few minutes with your microfilm. Properly speaking, this is "microfiche," and comes, not in reels, but in 5" x 7" sheets of plastic encasing little squares of film. Each of these squares is a page. From here, go to the Microfilm Library, sit at any available fiche machine, and take notes. The machines themselves do not make copies, but you can request copies, which are 10 cents a page, payable in advance. You can pick up your copies upstairs.

When you're all done, plan a visit to the Museum! We may well be able to help you find out something about the people whose names turned up in your Recorder of Deeds research.