

Archival Research

(with Judith Marvin)

Many types of historic-period cultural resources are documented in written records. These records can be found in public libraries, government offices, company archives, university libraries, and published state or local histories. Often they provide useful information on such things as who owned a particular parcel of land, or what family lived in a particular house. This information can be very helpful in our understanding of historic-era remains still visible on the landscape.

Who lived here?

Deed books, *Land Claim Entry books*, and *Homestead Records* on file at the County Recorder's office all provide information about who owned a particular piece of land, and when. Other sources are the old *Assessor's Parcel Maps* and *Tax-Assessment books* at the County Assessor's office. Sometimes land owners or residents are noted on the old *General Land Office (GLO) plats* (e.g., "Johnson's House" or "Greene's Orchard") available from the Bureau of Land Management in Sacramento and at county surveyors' offices.

What kind of structure was this?

Deed books at the County Recorder's office also may describe particular structures on a property, such as "brick and stone building used as saloon." Tax-Assessment books and old Assessor's Parcel Maps on file at the County Assessor's office also may provide detailed descriptions of property improvements: "stone house, barn, sheds, fence"; or "frame house located on land of Acme Mining Company." Old GLO plats depict houses, barns, vineyards, orchards, and other features by township, range, and section.

How old is this road?

It can be difficult to tell a 1950s dirt logging road from an 1870s travel route. One good way to know if a road is "historic" in age is by finding it on old maps. The best sources are found at the offices of the County Surveyor or the Department of Public Works, or from the State Department of Transportation (Caltrans). County offices may have *Road Petition* books and maps from as early as the 1850s, with locations, routes, and uses of old roads. Old Caltrans *As-Built* plans depict road alignments, bridges, and related features, though only from the 1920s and later. Also very useful are older USGS topographic quads, which may be available from the US Geological Survey, map stores, universities, county offices, or Caltrans.

Pre-Field versus Post-Field Research

It's usually not appropriate to carry out intensive archival study before you do a field survey. Instead, you may want to review published state, county, or local histories; old USGS maps or GLO plats; and records search results from the local Information Center, to get an idea of the kinds of historic-era sites you might expect to find in your survey area. Once you find something in the field, that is the time to do more in-depth research to help you identify and date it. See [Suggestions for Prefield and Postfield Research](#) for more information.

Other Useful Sources of Information

Company Records

Many private companies (for instance, Pacific Gas & Electric and the Southern Pacific Railroad) have extensive archives of company history, including old maps, engineering plans, and labor records. Often these can give you locations for old construction camps or grade alignments, among other things.

State and Federal Census Records

Federal census information for each decade from 1850 to 1880, and from 1900 to 1930, are available on microfilm from the National Archives in San Bruno, for use at local libraries throughout California. These include names, ages, occupations, property ownership, and places of birth for all adult US citizens, plus the names and ages of their children and others residing in their households at the time of the census. State Census records for 1852 are on file at the State Library (Sacramento) and the California Historical Society. Some are also available on the web at Ancestry.com and other sites, sometimes for a fee.

California Division of Mines and Geology (State Department of Conservation)

This agency has numerous publications dating from the 1850s on mines and mineral resources throughout the state. They provide data on particular mines' years of operation, methods of mineral recovery, underground workings, buildings, ownership, management, and numbers of employees.

County Offices

Depending on the county, historical records may reside in the office of the Recorder, Assessor, or Surveyor, and/or in the County Archives. Most of these records have already been mentioned; others may include the *Great Register of Voters* (1866), *Mining Claim Entry books*, *Townsite maps* (ca. 1870s), *Maps of Swamp and Overflow Lands* (1850s; for Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta counties), and *Land Patent Maps*.

Old Newspapers

The California State Library, the California Historical Society, and local newspapers and libraries keep files of newspaper editions, sometimes going back as early as 1848. These can provide information on major local events, construction or alteration of buildings, mine openings and closings, important members of the community, and many other kinds of data.

Map Resources

In addition to the old GLO plats and USGS quadrangles, there are the following:

- *Mineral Survey Plat Maps* from the 1870s available from the Bureau of Land Management (mining and milling features, roads, etc.)
- *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps* from the 1880s (structures, including uses, building materials, outbuildings, ethnic ownership, etc.) available from the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., or locally from some historians, historical societies, or historical-consulting firms
- *US Department of Agriculture Maps* from the 1930s (roads, crops, structures, bodies of water, etc.), on file in county surveyors' offices
- *Aerial Survey Maps* (from the 1930s), showing roads, trees, structures, building foundations, bodies of water, fencelines, and other features of the landscape; usually available from county surveyors' offices

