

## Checklist— Research for Interpretive Planning

It's all about getting to know the inhabitants in your house so you can develop a rich interpretive plan to discuss them, what's important to them, and how their lives reflected important local, regional, and national issues.

### 1. What do you know about your house's inhabitants from archival sources?

- a. When were they born? (census information)
- b. Where were they born? (census information)
- c. What cultural group did they belong to? (census information, oral history)
- d. Were they an important part of the community, and a part of a majority group in town?
- e. What did they do for a living? (census records)
- f. Did they own their own house? Was it a family house? (deeds)
- g. What was the valuation on the property at the time of its purchase? If it changed hands again, was the value disproportionately more, indicating that the house was significantly improved?
- h. Any inventory associated with any of your inhabitants? If so, what does it reveal about how the family lived?
  - Any tools relating to their job? By the listing, can you tell where the activities occurred?
  - Any clothing noted? If so, what does it reveal about the kinds of clothes they wore? (low valuation—modest? Just a few things? Lots of petticoats?) Can you surmise about how they might have looked?
  - Are rooms noted as associated with members of the household? If so, what are some of the interesting things in the room that illuminate the inhabitants?
  - Can you get a sense of how “fancy” or high-style the house was compared to others who passed away in the area who were of similar age? Any objects included in your inventory—not seen in other inventories—that suggest something about your inhabitants?
- i. Any special relationships revealed in the will? What important objects were handed down to others—what might it say about what this person or family holds dear?

### 2. Other sources in town—can you find out about them through town histories? Photos? Tax records? Oral histories?

### 3. What can you learn from your structure?

- a. Why did they settle in this spot? What does the siting “say” about what was important to them? (being in the city near family, having a large plot of land to farm, tough land to farm—but it was theirs, a minority among a majority, et)
- b. What style did they choose to build? Why do you think it appealed to them?
- c. What's the floorplan? What rooms are included, and what activities did they accommodate?

- d. Was presentation-of-self important to these folks? Big parlor? Big dining room? Or just a big kitchen that everyone relaxed in, ate in, and enjoyed?
- e. What do the materials of the house “say”—frugal family? Ostentacious? Thought this house was impermanent and didn’t care what it was made out of.....but they never moved?
- f. Is your “house type” similar to other house types popular with other neighbors? Members of their cultural group? Region?
- g. How did the house change over time?
  - What rooms were created? Why?
  - If a room was changed or obliterated, why were the old rooms no longer necessary?
  - Any new outbuildings? Old outbuildings that were demolished or re-purposed?
- h. As you look at the house, what do you think was important to them as they lived in the house?

**4. What kind of information can you learn from the furnishings?**

- a. How old is the furniture?
- b. What style are they? Are there different generations of furnishings? If you don’t know about style and time period, can you find someone who can help you?
- c. Can you “tell” something about your inhabitants from how they presented themselves using this furniture? Worried about how they looked to others? Didn’t care—shelled peas on the haircloth settee?
- d. What household activities are reflected in these furnishings? Is there:
  - A quilt frame or a sewing machine?
  - Specialized cooking equipment?
  - Mottoes, books, or prints in foreign languages?
  - Religious paraphernalia?
  - Sports equipment?
  - “Useless? decorative items and gewgaws?
  - Souvenirs from travels?
  - Lots of toys?
  - Musical instruments and sheet music?
  - Scientific instruments such as telescopes or microscopes, etc)?
- e. What do they books (or lack thereof) tell you about their interests? Hobbies?

**5. Have you or can you conduct any interviews with townspeople or family members who knew the family?**

**6. Pull together all that you know about them. Write a short paragraph that describes each of the house’s characters. How religious are they? Had they acculturated and were “real Americans” now? What issues and activities were important to them? How did they relate to others in their community, family?**

- 7. Knowing what you know about them, can you find other people “like them” whose histories are well documented that may be able to shed light on your inhabitants’ lives, challenges, opportunities, and aspirations? (see the bibliography for some of these books)**
  
- 8. What stories can you share about these folks that illuminate important and interesting stories that can connect with your visitors? Think about:**
  - Cultural group (including foodways)
  - Religion
  - Employment
  - Family relationships
  - Hobbies and activities
  - Trials and tribulations
  - Relationships with community, church, and extended family
  
- 9. Beyond your basic furnishings, what kind of vignettes can you create in the house to tell these stories? (this is what I call the “story layer”)**
  - **Articulate the stories**
  - **List the kinds of objects (perhaps not owned by the family but like things they had, or would have had) that help you tell the story**
  - **Create a scene that helps your visitor understand activity, relationships, character**

**See: Nancy Villa Bryk’s article for more information on building the furnishings plan:**

“I Wish You Could Take a Peek at Us at the Present Moment’: Infusing the Historic House with Characters and Activity,” in *Interpreting the Historic House*, ed. by Jessica Foy Donnelly. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002.