

Tracing Philadelphia Property Ownership Using On-line Registry Office Records

by J.M. Duffin

This guide provides an overview of the on-line Registry Office sources that document property ownership in the City of Philadelphia between 1865 and 1955. The records are held and made available by the City of Philadelphia Department of Records.

In 1865 on the recommendation of the Mayor and Philadelphia City Councils, the Pennsylvania State Legislature passed a law establishing the Registry Office under the Bureau of Surveys for the purpose of creating maps showing the precise location and dimensions of properties and a record of all owners of real estate in the City of Philadelphia.¹ All current property owners were required to bring their deeds to the Registry Office to have the land plotted and registered and all purchasers after 1865 were required to abstract their deeds and have them reviewed by the Registry Office prior to being recorded by the Recorder of Deeds. The law also applied to people who inherited land or were awarded property by a court order, such as an estate partition. Beginning in 1867 the Recorder of Deeds was not allowed to record deeds until they were first registered.²

The main purpose of the Registry Office was to produce accurate lists and plans of current property owners which served as the basis upon which real estates taxes would be assessed. Prior to 1865 there was no way to determine who the current owner of a particular property was without doing extensive searches in the deed records which are indexed only by the name of the buyer and seller (grantee or grantor) not by location. Tax assessors had to rely on older assessment lists and information supplied by the owners to determine who should be taxed.³ The new system allowed the assessors to have an independent source of information which was based directly upon the very records that established an owner's legal property rights. Today the Registry Office records serve as a location index to virtually all property ownership changes in the City of Philadelphia since 1865.

Records Available On-line

There are two sets of records of the Registry Office that are currently available on-line: the Historic Registry Maps and the Registry Ledgers. Using these sources, it is possible to trace the ownership any given property in the City of Philadelphia from 1865 to 1955.

¹ "An Act to promote the more certain and equal assessment of taxes, in Philadelphia," 14 March 1865, P.L. 320. This legislation was drafted by a special commission headed by Eli Kirk Price which had been authorized by a City Ordinance of 26 November 1864 to look into the problems of taxation in Philadelphia.

² 29 March 1867, P.L. 600.

³ The special commission formed to study the problem found instances in which liens were entered and properties sold for back taxes because the name of a former owner was being assessed to a property he or she no longer owned. The new legislation had special provisions protecting property owners from municipal tax cases if they registered their property. For the report of the commission see *Journal of Common Council of the City of Philadelphia for the Year 1865* (Philadelphia: 1865), 1: 280–300.

Historic Registry Maps

<https://ework.phila.gov/parcelexplorerauth/>

The key to using the Registry Office records is the map and parcel number of the property being searched. The entire city of Philadelphia has been mapped and assigned registry map numbers.⁴ These maps can be easily searched using the subscription based system called ParcelExplorer.

The Historical Registry Maps divide the city into sections that are generally two to three city blocks square in order to produce maps at a scale which can clearly show all the distinct property lines. They are designated with a number-letter-number sequence, eg. 2-S-20 or 2S20, in which the letter is either an “N” or an “S” – indicating that the area covered is either north or south of Market Street.

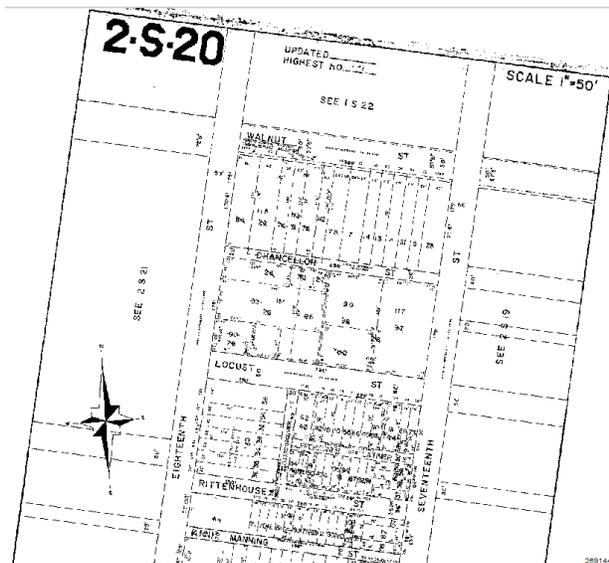


Figure 1. Map 2S20. 18th and Walnut Streets.

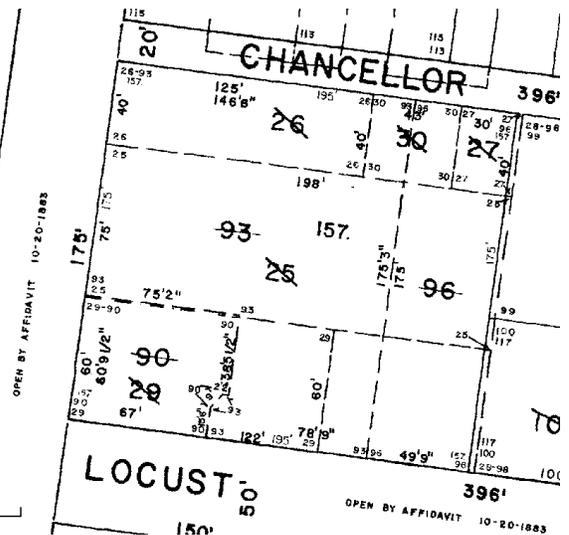


Figure 2. Detail of Map 2S20. Parcel consolidation in which older lot numbers are crossed out.

The Historical Registry Maps document the evolution of property lines from the late nineteenth century to the present. The parcel numbers were assigned in chronological order as the transfers in ownership were submitted to the Registry Office for recording. The lower the number, the older the specific property is. The higher the number, the more recent the property creation or subdivision is. When older parcels were consolidated or reconfigured into new plots, the old plot numbers were left on the maps and sometimes crossed out (see Figure 2). The resulting maps display multiple layers of property lines that cover more than a century of changes on the urban landscape.

⁴ The only notable exception is for some areas of Fairmount Park, particularly East and West Park, which were acquired by the City while the registry maps were being created in the 1860s, 70s and 80s. Because these park properties would not be taxed, the Registry Office probably saw no need to map the original properties lines. The Fairmount Park Archives as well as the City Archives have plans for many of the original property lines for these missing areas.

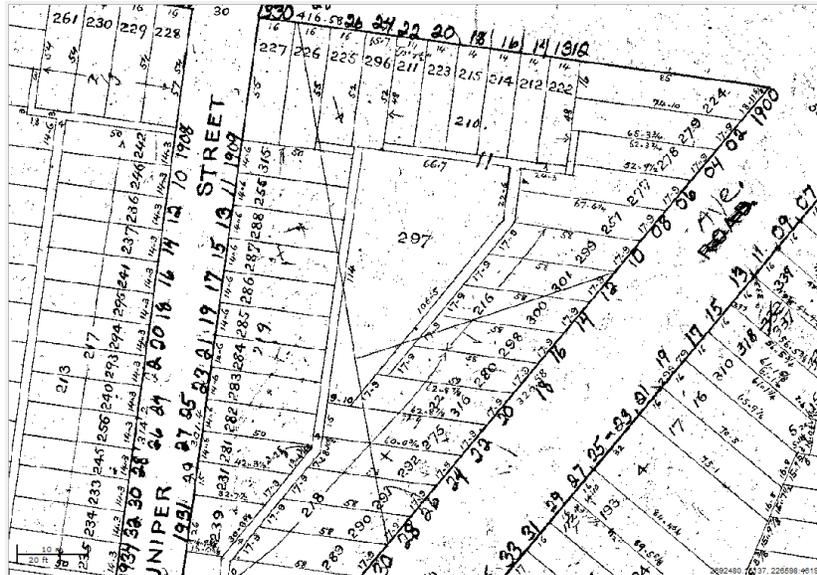


Figure 3. Detail of Map 15S10. Passyunk Avenue and Mifflin Street. Older numbers not crossed out.

Carefully examining the parcel numbers on the maps from the highest to the lowest can provide clues to how and when blocks were divided or consolidated.



Figure 4. Map 135N15. School House Lane to Midvale Avenue at Henry Avenue. The numbers 74-N-20, 74-N-22, etc., refer to new Registry maps that were created for the subdivisions.

A variety of insights into the development and subdivisions of different sections of the city can be observed from these maps. The map for a part of the East Falls shown in Figure 4 provides an example of how the Registry Office was required to create new maps when the original small-scale plan for this area had to be broken done into several new large-scale maps in order to show new lot subdivision distinctly.

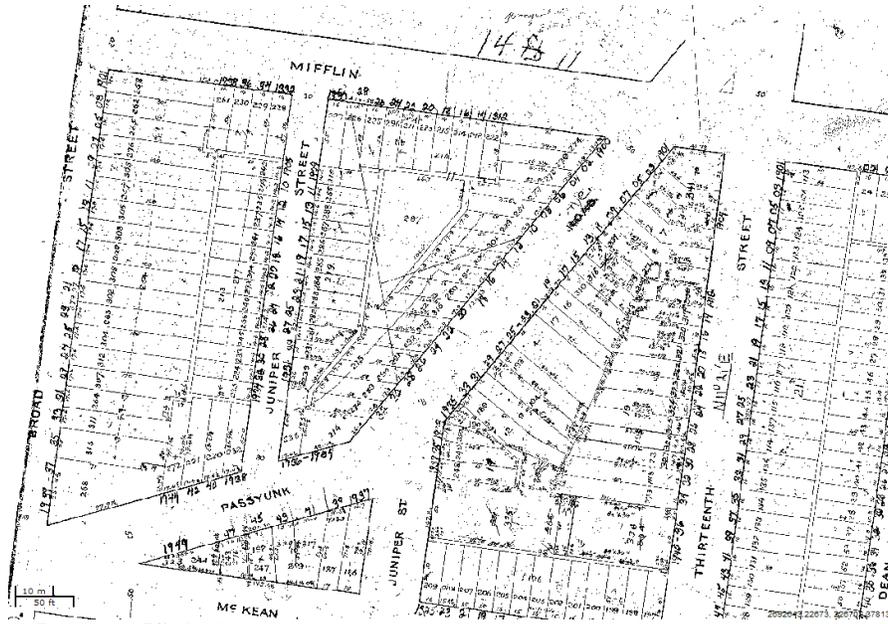


Figure 5. Map 15S10. Example of older property lines which do not follow the grid pattern.

The maps also record old property lines that were obliterated when the grid pattern of center city was extended over the entire city. The scale of the Registry Maps often allows one to reconstruct quite accurately these lost property lines relative to modern landmarks. In Figure 5, one sees a number of diagonal lines that do not match the grid. In this particular case the angled line passing through the block between Passyunk Avenue and Juniper Street is the remnant of the original division line of the early Swedish settlers' tracts known as Passyunk and Moyamensing and of the later townships of the same names.

Registry Ledgers

<http://philadox.phila.gov/phillyhistoricalindex/index.html>

The Registry Ledgers document property transfers beginning in 1865 and ending in 1955. The ledgers were created from the property transfer forms every new owner of real estate was required to fill out prior to having his or her deed recorded or after receiving the property as the result of the probate of a will or a court order.⁵ The ledgers served the purpose of providing a quick method to determine the name of the current owner of a parcel. Images of the pages can be viewed for free on the PhilaDox website.

The 1865 enabling act required the Registry Office to prepare books which “show the situation and dimensions of each property therein with the city numbers thereof, and who are the owners, with such succession of blank columns as will permit the names of future owners to be entered

⁵ These original property transfer forms still survive and are available at the City Archives. They sometimes contain more detailed information and notes than can be found in the ledgers. These sheets were microfilmed and inserted into microfilm jackets that were maintained by the Records Department into the 1990s before the introduction of the PhilaDox system.

therein, with the dates of transfer ...”⁶ The books that were created now form the set of Registry Ledgers available on-line.⁷

The ledgers are organized by Registry Map Number, such as 2S20, with sheets that list 75 lots per page and read from left to right chronologically and continuously, often over several pages, until the last transfer of ownership before 1955 is recorded. There are two types of standard forms found in the books: original entry pages and continuing entry or transfer pages.

Original Entry Pages

Lists the date the plot was created and the ownership registered, the name of the owner, the date of the deed, address of the house (rarely filled out on the forms), the street the lot fronted, the frontage of the lot in feet, the name of the person from whom the first registered owner acquired the property. These pages contain two sets of columns marked “Original Entry” on the right and “Transfers” on the left. The “Transfers” columns list the subsequent ownership after the original entry.

Figure 6. Original Entry Page for Map 2S20

ORIGINAL ENTRY							
NO.	ENTERED	OWNER	DATE OF DEED	NO. OF HOUSE	STREET	FEET FRONT	FORMER OWNER
1	July 19, 1865	Andrew D. Cash	Feb, 12, 1864		17 th	47	William R. Nister An
2	Aug, 7, 1865	C. Ferdinand Slotte	Jan, 10, 1849		Rittenhouse	16	Ann Schaffer Wal
3	Oct, 20, 1865	J. B. Thompson	May 30, 1858		Spruce	17	William R. Hanson Em
4	Oct, 27, 1865	Mary F. Fisher	Apr, 16, 1850		Walnut	23	Oliver C. Feisvire Bli
5	Nov, 7, 1865	Elwood Wilson	Nov, 6, 1865		Walnut	20	Moses Thomas Red
6	Nov, 9, 1865	Mary L. King	Oct, 30, 1865		Spruce	21	Annsey R. Govett Jos
7	Nov, 18, 1865	Rathmell Wilson	Nov, 14, 1865		Walnut	36 + 1/2	Julie B. Barrell Ste
8	Dec, 8, 1865	Alfred D. Jessup	Sept, 5, 1856		Rittenhouse	32	Samuel W. Cattell Cla
9	Dec, 8, 1865	Edward A. Jessup	Aug, 14, 1858		Walnut	23	Bloomfield H. Moore Cla
10	Dec, 15, 1865	James E. Biddle	Sept, 9, 1854		Locust	18	George Cadwalader Mi
11	Jan, 13, 1866	Rebecca Emalie et al	May 23, 1864		Spruce	25	Susan F. Baird Hil
12	Feb, 2, 1866	Lewis Tawr	Dec, 3, 1852		Rittenhouse	16	Park H. Cassidy Hen
13	May 7, 1866	Wm. H. Ashurst	May 7, 1864		Walnut	22	Richard Ashurst H,
14	May 7, 1866	Catharine H. Bowie	Mar, 17, 1864		Walnut	22	Richard Ashurst R,
15	Apr, 16, 1866	George Junkin Jr	Apr, 10, 1866		Spruce	20	Mary C. Smith LD,
16	May 3, 1866	Henry Jungerich	May 2, 1866		Spruce	18	Richard M. Lea Fox
17	May 5, 1866	Thomas Anderson	Apr, 13, 1855		Spruce	20	Jonathan Thomas et al Edward

Figure 7. Detail of Original Entry Page for Map 2S20.

⁶ Section 2, P.L. 321

⁷ The ledgers that were microfilmed are almost entirely copies dating from the 1920s and 30s from the original ledgers which were probably in poor condition due to heavy use. These later copies show signs of great wear and tear. Some of them survive in the holdings of the Department of Records at the City’s Record Center.

Though the Registry Office began recording ownership in 1865, it is not uncommon to find entries for property transfers that pre-date 1865 because the ledgers record when the first owner acquired the property. The Original Entry is the only place in which the name of the former owner, also known as the grantor in the deed parlance, is recorded in the ledgers.

Continuing Entry or Transfers Pages

Lists the lot number, the name of the new owner and the date of acquisition or deed. Unlike the Original Entry pages, the name of the former owner is not noted but implied by the entries in the columns to the left. All the Transfers Pages and sections read from left to right and are arranged chronologically. There are as many Transfers Pages for each 75 parcel list as are needed to list the changes in property ownership up to 1955.

TRANSFERS							
NO.	OWNER	DATE OF DEED	OWNER	DATE OF DEED	OWNER	DATE OF DEED	OWNER
1.	Sub dee Mar 27, 88						
2.	Jubiana Wood Study	June 13, 1894	Walter Worr	By Will	American Philosophical Socy	By Will	Sime R. Spilling & Isabelle
3.	Boxwood Corporation	Aug 27, 1925					
4.	John R. Yost	Mar 3, 1927	David Mirenborg	Mar 25, 1927	George A. Julian	Feb 9, 1928	East Penn Realty Co
5.	Carl A. Belmont	Aug 19, 1921	Jerome Black	Feb 27, 1925	James J. Clifford	Feb 27, 1925	Joseph Sternhard
6.	Lidia F. Warner	June 25, 1920	Erving S. Post	Apr 1, 1921	Marion B. Solomon	Feb 21, 1920	University of Pa
7.	Maurice, duibel	June 2, 1911	Guard Trust Co. Trust for Leahy	Mar 23, 1936	Ergebnice, White	Nov 27, 1944	Fidelity - Phila. Tr. Co
9.	William M. Bunn	Apr 27, 1899	Edward J. Stolesbury	Apr 18, 1904	John R. Spilling	Apr 23, 1946	Frances K. Sturges
10.	Edward Rowen Stokes	Jan 8, 1937	Henry Cor Stone	Mar 7, 1937	Charles H. Sharpley	Nov 3, 1924	Boxwood Cor'
11.	Mary Taylor Wilson	By Will	Morris W. Johnson & Morris	By Will	Barclay M. Fadden	Nov 3, 1924	Boxwood Cor'
12.	The Philadelphia Dist	Sept 18, 1926					
13.	The Philadelphia Dist	By Will	The Real Estate Guaranty Co	Mar 6, 1926	Jacob G. Kahn	Mar 7, 1927	Jacques Furber
14.	Walter E. Schwab	July 7, 1922	Lina E. Linton and Edgar R.	July 7, 1922	Fidelity Trust Co Trust By	Aug 17, 1926	Grace G. Long
15.	William L. Marvin	June 8, 1894	Thomas B. Manamaker	June 8, 1894	Edith R. M. Harton	July 13, 1895	Matthew Stinson
16.	Lee Sawyer	Apr 24, 1923	Joseph Caplan	May 2, 1923	Cordelia W. Langstaff	Apr 1, 1926	Samuel Stern
17.	George J. Muehlischoen	Mar 29, 1922	Katharine W. Muehlischoen	Apr 23, 1923	Hein Louis Birch	Apr 29, 1935	Henry G. Muehlischoen
18.	Florance Alice Ferry all int	July 11, 1921					
19.	Annie H. Oberlyffer et al	Mar 3, 1897	Stanley S. Hagg	July 25, 1904	Thomas Klun	Aug 15, 1923	Roswell C. Storer
20.	Anna F. King et al of	Apr 8, 1875	J. King Maimwright et al	Nov 15, 1934	Franklin Lamp	Nov 27, 1945	William R. B. Johnson
21.	William Carey	Apr 19, 1883	Emily M. Harrison	Mar 27, 1890	Harry Richardson	Nov 26, 1890	George M. Northrup
22.	United Security Life Assn & Co	Mar 13, 1897	United Security Life Assn & Co	Mar 1, 1899	Harry Richardson	Aug 24, 1906	Lambert B. Oudwin & Harry
23.	Paul M. Meyer	July 23, 1922	Jerome Black	Feb 27, 1925	James J. Clifford	Feb 28, 1925	1100 Walnut Corp Trust
24.	William M. Collins et al of Garban	July 16, 1898	Henry S. Coffey	William H. Coffey	July 3, 1929	William C. Graham	Oct 15, 1946

Figure 8. Continuing Entry or Transfers Page for Map 2S20.

TRANSFERS							
NO.	OWNER	DATE OF DEED	OWNER	DATE OF DEED	OWNER	DATE OF DEED	OWNER
1.	Sub dee Mar 27, 88						
2.	Jubiana Wood Study	June 13, 1894	Walter Worr	By Will	American Philosophical Socy	By Will	Sime R. Spilling & Isabelle
3.	Boxwood Corporation	Aug 27, 1925					
4.	John R. Yost	Mar 3, 1927	David Mirenborg	Mar 25, 1927	George A. Julian	Feb 9, 1928	East Penn Realty Co
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11.	Mary Taylor Wilson	By Will	Morris W. Johnson & Morris	By Will	Barclay M. Fadden	Nov 3, 1924	Boxwood Cor'
12.	The Philadelphia Dist	Sept 18, 1926					
13.	The Philadelphia Dist	By Will	The Real Estate Guaranty Co	Mar 6, 1926	Jacob G. Kahn	Mar 7, 1927	Jacques Furber
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21.	William Carey	Apr 19, 1883	Emily M. Harrison	Mar 27, 1890	Harry Richardson	Nov 26, 1890	George M. Northrup
22.	United Security Life Assn & Co	Mar 13, 1897	United Security Life Assn & Co	Mar 1, 1899	Harry Richardson	Aug 24, 1906	Lambert B. Oudwin & Harry
23.	Paul M. Meyer	July 23, 1922	Jerome Black	Feb 27, 1925	James J. Clifford	Feb 28, 1925	1100 Walnut Corp Trust
24.	William M. Collins et al of Garban	July 16, 1898	Henry S. Coffey	William H. Coffey	July 3, 1929	William C. Graham	Oct 15, 1946

Figure 9. Detail of Continuing Entry or Transfers Page for Map 2S20.

The Transfers Pages often include information on subdivisions. When the entries for a particular parcel ends and the lot was subdivided, the clerks often noted the parcel numbers of the subdivisions (see line for Parcel 1 in Figure 9). This can be confirmed by referring to the Registry Map as well as looking for the name of the former owner in the Original Entry page listing for the new subdivided parcel numbers. Transfers in ownership which were the result of sheriff sales often have the note “by Shf” or something similar noted by the name of the new owner and those which were the result of devise in a will often have the note “by Will.”

CAVEAT

The images of Registry Ledgers pages that are available on-line were scanned from microfilm. Though the overall quality of the images is good it is dependant on how well the ledgers were filmed and the condition of the original pages. A common problem one encounters is reading parcel number entries at the top and bottom of the pages where the original page was worn or torn or the ink faded. One can work around these problems by looking for later Transfers Pages for the same lot number and tracing the title backwards using the on-line deed records or by looking at the original Transfer Sheets at the City Archives.

If the lot number does not appear in the sheets but does on the Historical Registry Maps, it generally means that the lot was created after 1955. The Registry records of ownership from 1955 to 1976 are available in the microfilm jackets arranged by Map and Parcel number maintained by the Department of Records in City Hall. Records after 1976 are available through the subscription-based component of PhilaDox. Records of property ownership prior to 1865 are found in the deed records on microfilm and in original form at the Philadelphia City Archives and on-line with Philadelphia Historical Land and Vital Records. There is no location index for the pre-1865 deed records. One must know the name of the property owner to trace the title.

For further information on using City records for property and building research see:
<http://www.phila.gov/phils/Docs/Inventor/deeds.htm>

and Jefferson M. Moak, *Architectural Research In Philadelphia: A Guide to the Resources Available throughout Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2002).

Searching Properties

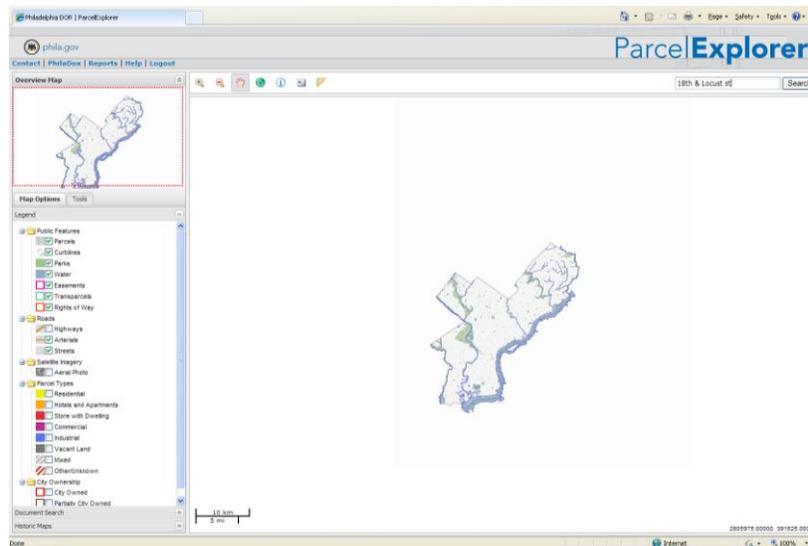
To begin a property search, a person must have an established account and subscription to ParcelExplorer. There are a variety of subscription options available on the web site (see subscription section).

<https://ework.phila.gov/parcelexplorerauth/>

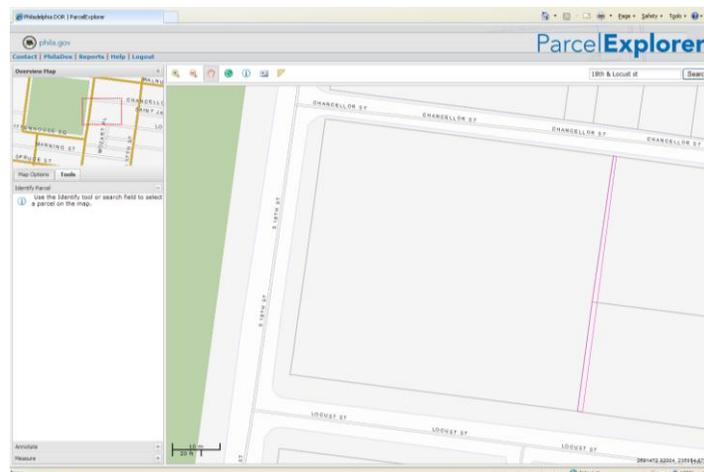
Locating the Registry Map and Parcel Number

The key to tracing the history of a particular property is to locate the registry plan and plot number.

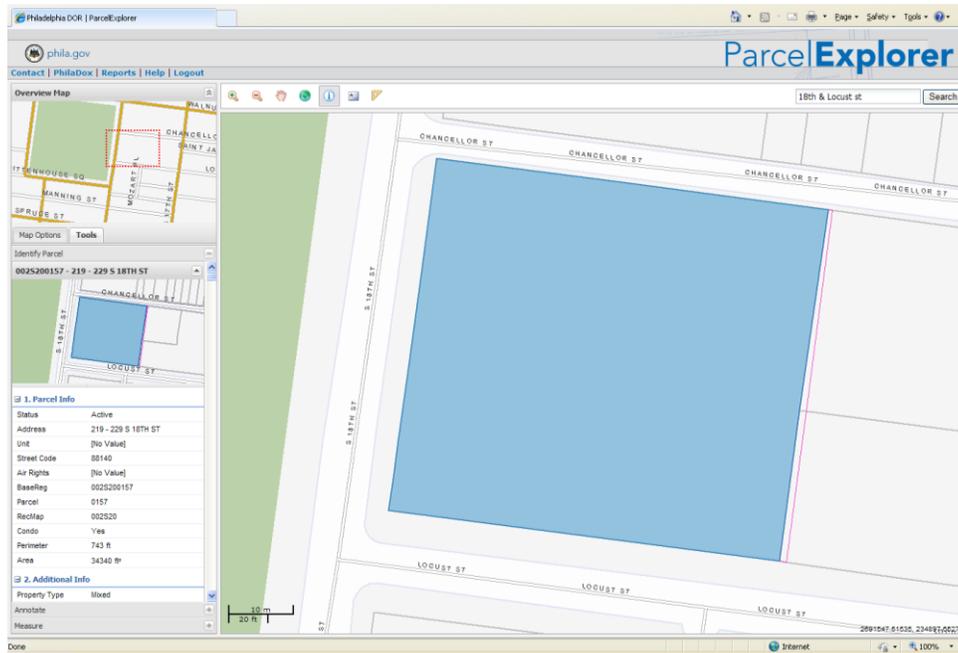
1. Log-on to ParcelExplorer and either type in an exact address or intersection (e.g. 18th & Walnut St. – remembering to include the abbreviation “st”, “ave”, etc.) in the search box or use the zoom tool on the overview map to locate the section of the city you want.



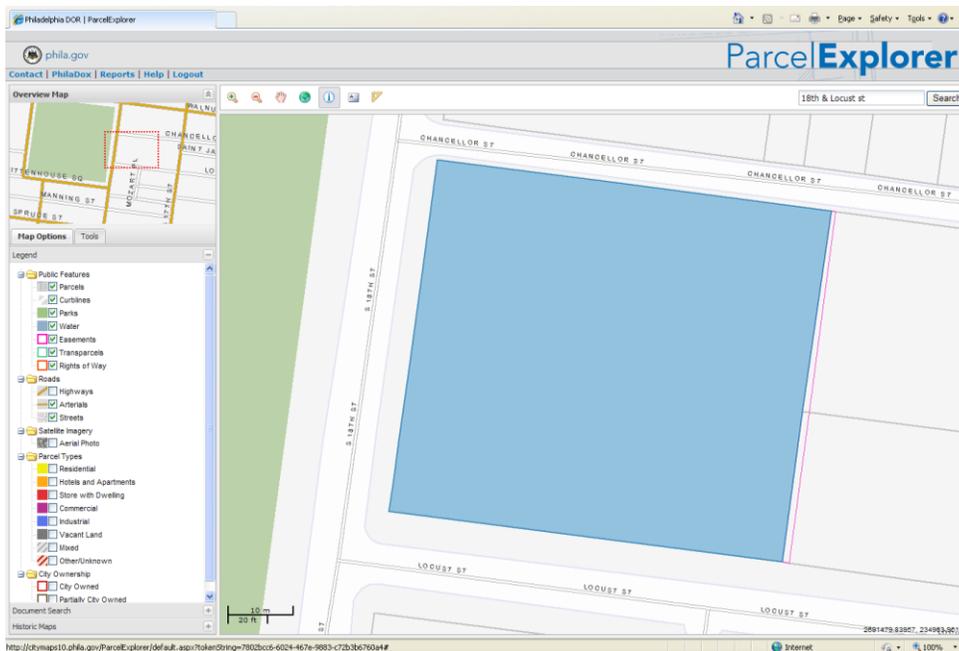
2. Move the map around with the “Drag and Pan” tool (the hand symbol) until you have located the property on the map.



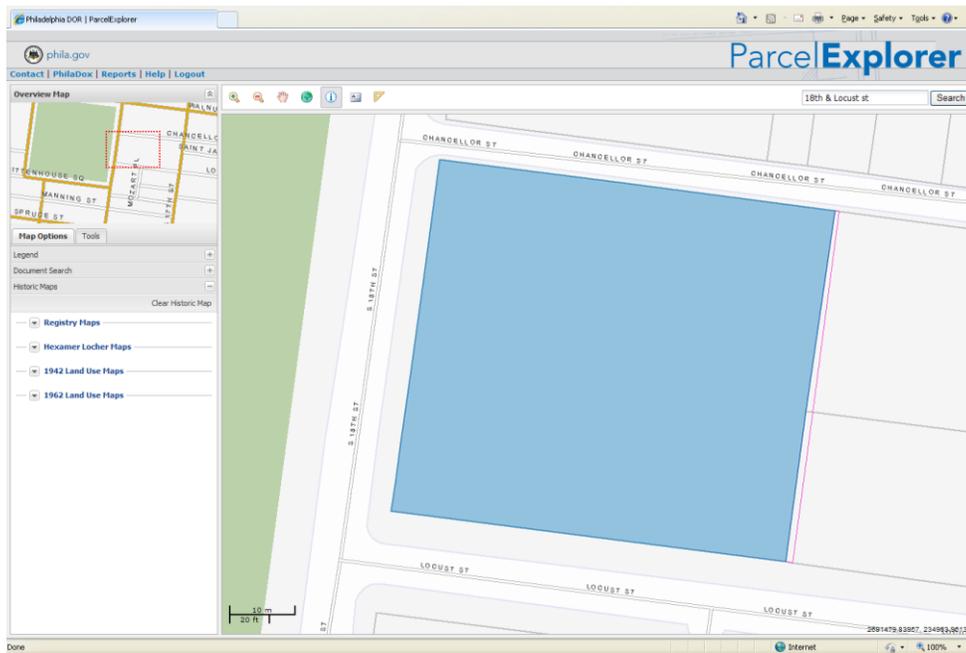
3. To find out what the current Map and Parcel number for the lot is, click on the “i” in a circle icon on the tool bar and then click inside the property. This will fill in the “Identify Parcel” panel on the left. The map number is found after the “RecMap” label and the parcel number after the “Parcel” label. In this case, the map is 002S20, or 2S20, and the parcel is 0157 or 157.



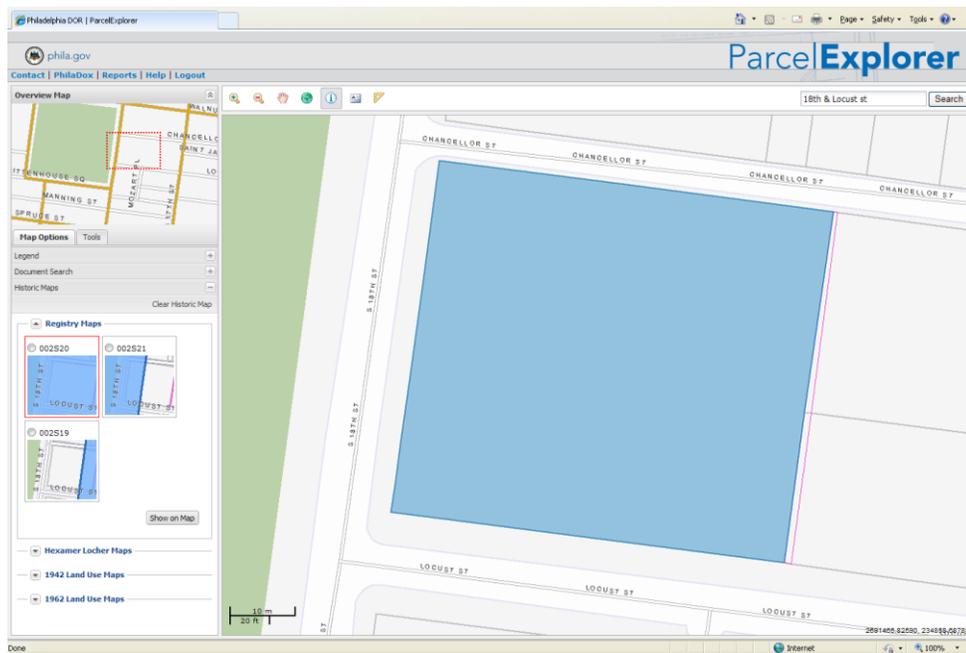
4. To view the Historical Registry Map, click on the “Map Options” tab in the left panel.



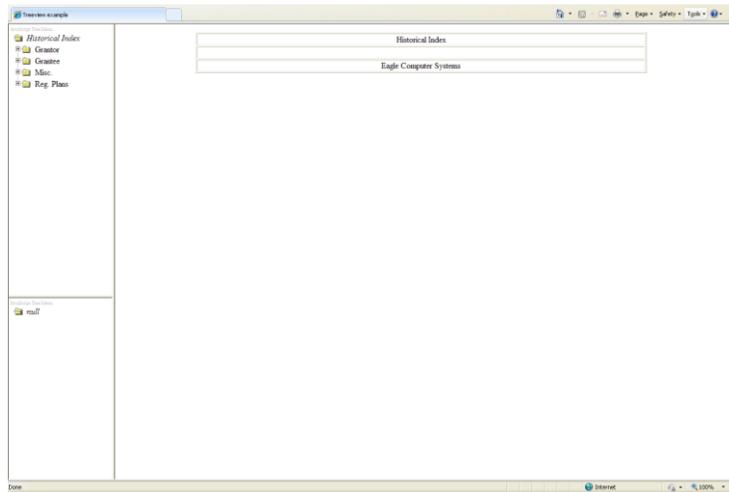
5. Click on the plus sign in the “Historic Maps” section.



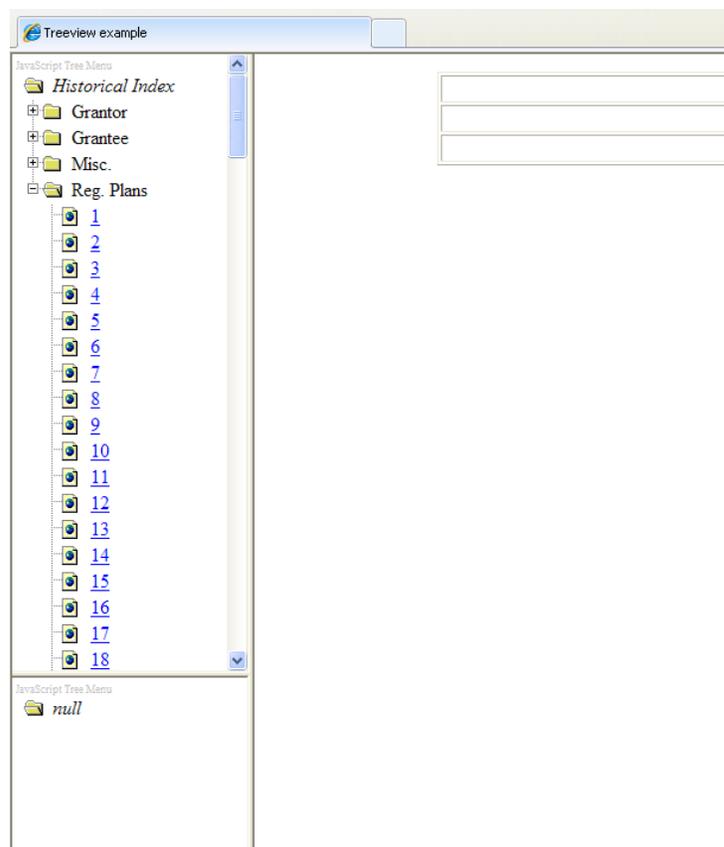
6. Click on the down arrow button in the Registry Maps section for get the selection of historic registry maps that cover the area you are searching.



2. The Historical Index page is divided into three rectangular frames. The frame in the upper left contains folders which expand and allow you to drill down the lists of what is available.

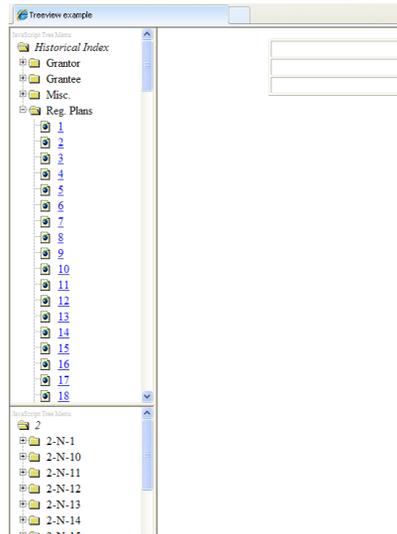


3. To access the Registry Bureau Ledgers, click on the plus sign by the folder titled “Reg. Plans”

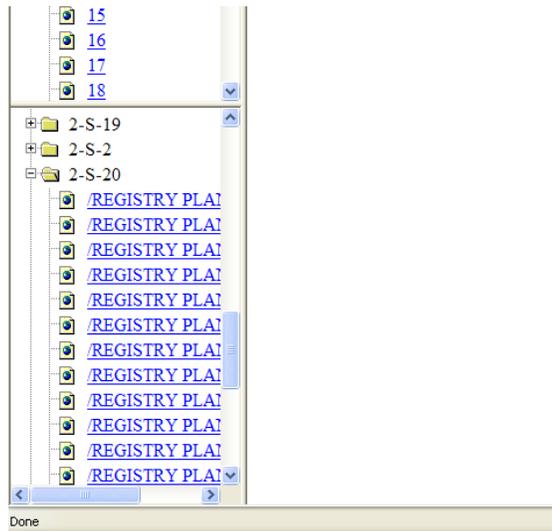


A list of numbers will appear. These numbers correspond to the first number of the Registry Map. All Registry Maps are composed of combination of two numbers and letter – “S” or “N”.

4. Click on the number that corresponds to the first part of the Registry Map number as it appears in ParcelExplorer, ignoring any leading zeros. In this example, 2 for 002S20



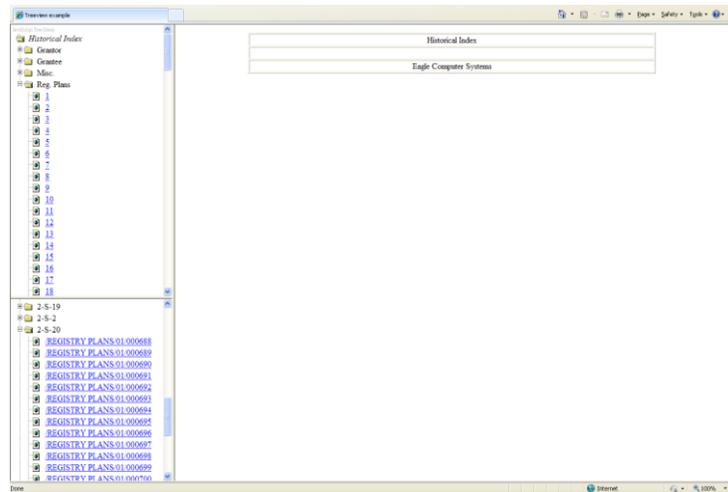
Once the number is clicked, another list of folders will appear in the frame in the lower left corner. Scroll down the list until you find the plan number you are searching for and then click on the plus sign by the folder for that number.



N.B. If you do not find the plan number you are looking for, there are two options to locate the images:

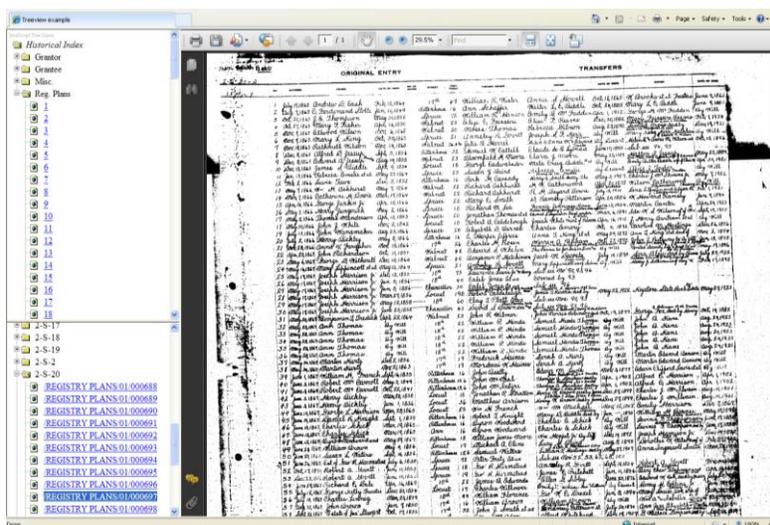
- 1) Look for other numbers which may be close. All map numbers have two numbers separated by an “S” or “N” but some of the folder headings have variations like 48-N-A-11-A. Ignore all other letters except “S” or “N”. These anomalies in the folder headings relate to problems from unclear markings on the original Registry Office Ledger sheets.
- 2) Look at the images for plans immediately before or after the plan number you want. Sometimes these images were grouped under the adjacent plan because the original pages were not marked with the correct plan number. If you compare the lot numbers and address information in the ledgers you can verify that you have the right pages.

A list of images of the ledger pages will appear. The list has all the ledger pages that exist for that plan. It is often helpful before going through the list to expand the frame to see the entire page image name so you can keep track of where you are on the list as you browse. To expand the frame, place the cursor over the vertical frame boundary that divides the two frames on the left from the single frame on the right. When the cursor symbol changes to a double arrow (\leftrightarrow), hold the left mouse button down and drag the column to the right until the full file name appears.

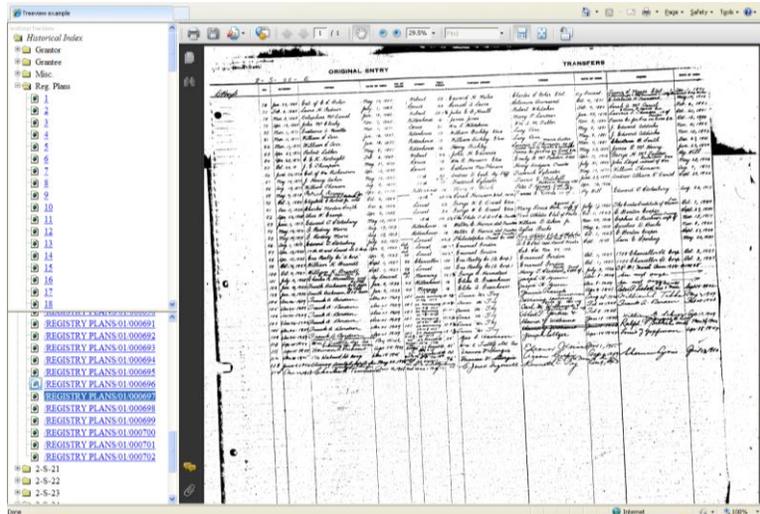


The Registry Ledger is indexed only to the Registry Map number level. All the individual pages are arranged in parcel number order and then chronologically until all the transfer pages needed for a particular parcel number sequence is completed to 1955. You will need to browse through the images until you locate the Original Entry Page for the lot number you are searching for.

5. To begin searching for the ledger page that has the lot you want, click on the linked page numbers in the lower left panel. Clicking on any link in this panel will open up the page image in Adobe Reader in the viewer pane on the right.



The first page usually contains lots 1 through 75. In order to find parcel 93, which is one of the older parcel numbers for this site, you will need to browse through the images. The Original Entry page for parcel 93 is found on /REGISTRY PLANS/01/000697. Note that the highest parcel number is 114 (all other parcel numbers were assigned after 1955).



6. To zoom in on the specific lot, use the navigation tools found at the top (the plus and minus sign buttons) and the hand icon to move the image around.

