

# Dating Houses

By Tim Oglesby, Home Check America

A place to find Mr. Right. Right? Sorry, we are talking about figuring out how old a house is, not dinner and a movie. There are many techniques that can be used to guess the age of a house if you don't know the date of construction. The hardest home to date is one that has been modified significantly or one that has been added onto, maybe several times. Here are some popular tricks Home Check America uses to figure out the age of your house.

## Manholes and sidewalks

In newer subdivisions, you can pick up dates from manhole covers, sidewalks and curbs. This will give you an idea of when the subdivision was built. This may not work in older neighbourhoods. Some older manhole covers have the date the company started business, thus not always correct.



## The toilet trick

Porcelain plumbing fixtures usually have a manufacture date stamped into them. If you remove the lid from a toilet tank, the date will often be stamped on the underside of the lid and on the right hand side of the rear portion of the tank. The date inside the tank is more reliable than the date on the lid because sometimes lids get broken and replaced. You should be convinced that this is an original toilet or else all you have done is determined the date of the bathroom renovation.



## Thermal pane windows

Thermal pane windows usually have a metal strip that separates the two panes of glass. On that metal strip you will often find the manufacturer's name, a CMHC number and the date of manufacture. Check several windows. If they all have the same date, you have just figured out how old the house is or the date when all of the windows were upgraded.



## Sticker on electrical panel

On houses built in the last 30 years, you will often find a sticker on the outside, or inside of the electrical panel indicating the possession date of the house. For example, most Chicagoland towns, the local building inspector placed a sticker with a date when the home passed the final plumbing or electrical inspections.

## Building Materials

Certain building materials can be clues to the age of a house. Keep in mind that these clues can vary dramatically by region.

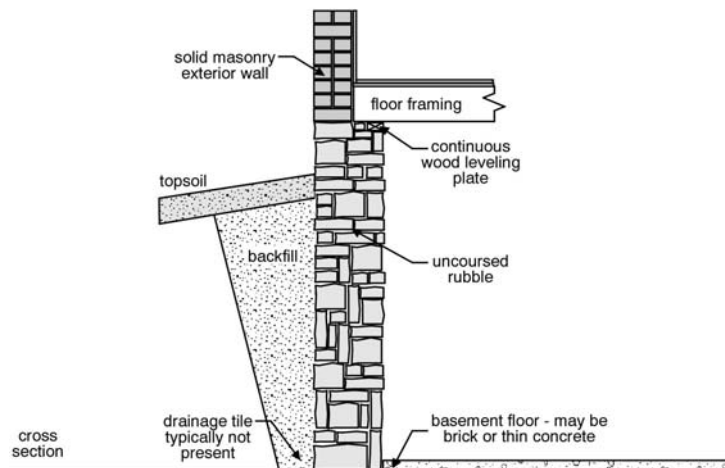
### Foundations:

Stone foundation walls were mostly built from the 1800s to about 1930.

Brick foundation walls were built from 1910 to the early 1930s.

With the exception of custom-built houses, most houses built with concrete block foundations were built from the late 1930s to 1970.

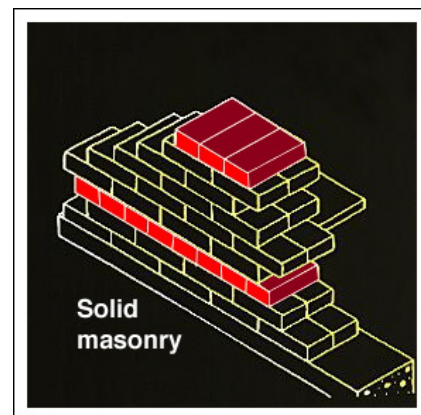
Stone foundation with masonry exterior walls



Poured concrete foundations began to be seen in the 1930's in limited numbers. The forms were usually made of wood planks, which translated their grain image and seams to the concrete creating a layered look. Around the late 1960's prefabricated forms were developed and the board image disappeared. These forms were made with a brick, stones, or smooth pattern.

### Brick exteriors:

For houses that have brick exterior walls, there are two types of wall structure, solid masonry and brick veneer. Most brick houses in Chicago were solid masonry construction (two wythes of brick) up until the late 1960s. Most brick houses built after 1970 are brick veneer construction (one wythe of brick with a wood stud wall behind). You can recognize a solid masonry house by the "header course" of brick every sixth row. The header course "locks" the two wythes of bricks together.



### **Subfloor:**

If you stand in an unfinished basement and look up at the subflooring, you will find that most houses before 1965 used plank subflooring. After 1965, most houses had plywood subflooring, until the early 1980s, when waferboard subflooring, also called OSB (Oriented Strand Board) became popular (with the builders at least).



### **Aluminum wiring:**

Aluminum wiring began to be used residentially in about 1965; however, it did not really catch on until about 1970. When was it banned? It was never banned, however, it received so much bad press, that aluminum wiring stopped going into houses by about 1978. Aluminum wiring has higher resistance than copper and thus builds up heat more when used. It is also usually thicker than copper wiring. To this day, aluminum wiring is used to bring power into the house from the street. This is acceptable in most areas if the wire is stranded and not solid.

How do you recognize aluminum wiring? If the printing on the side of the cable is still legible, you should see "ALUMINUM" or "AL".

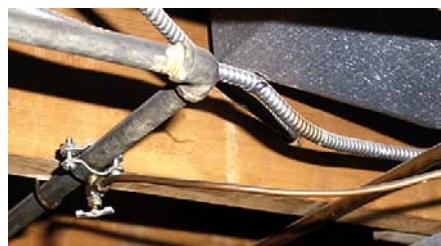
### **Knob and tube wiring: (1920 to 1950)**

As you are probably aware, knob and tube electrical wiring makes insurance companies very nervous. Knob and tube wiring was superseded by conventional modern wiring in the late 1940s. You can identify knob and tube wiring in an unfinished basement or attic by the characteristic ceramic knobs and tubes.



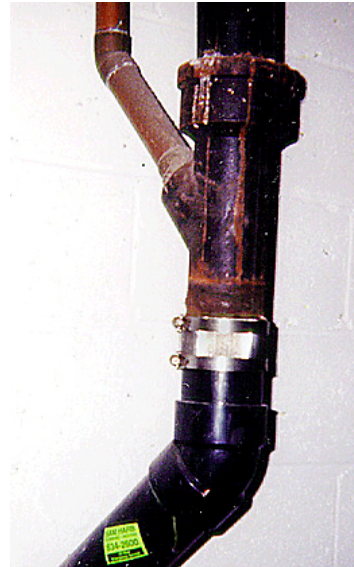
### **Water supply plumbing**

From 1920 to 1950, water supply plumbing was galvanized steel. After 1950, copper became the material of choice. Galvanized steel pipe has a typical life cycle of 40 to 50 years. It has not been used in over 50 years so if you see it in a house, there is a good chance that it's time to replace it. This picture shows a galvanized steel pipe on the left and a copper pipe on the right.



## Waste plumbing

Prior to about 1960, houses tended to have cast iron waste plumbing and galvanized steel piping. Lead piping was also used before the 1950's, but was not the most common installation. After about 1955, waste plumbing was more likely to be copper than cast iron. Around 1968-9, the price of copper went through the roof and plastic became the material of choice in the 1970's. (It was this jump in the price of copper that also led to the use of aluminum wiring).



The drain assembly shown here includes ABS plastic drainpipe at the bottom, cast iron in the middle and copper feeding into the cast iron from the left. This was an equal opportunity plumber. ABS plastic (black) was only used for a few years in the 1970's and was replaced with more reliable PVC plastic (white).

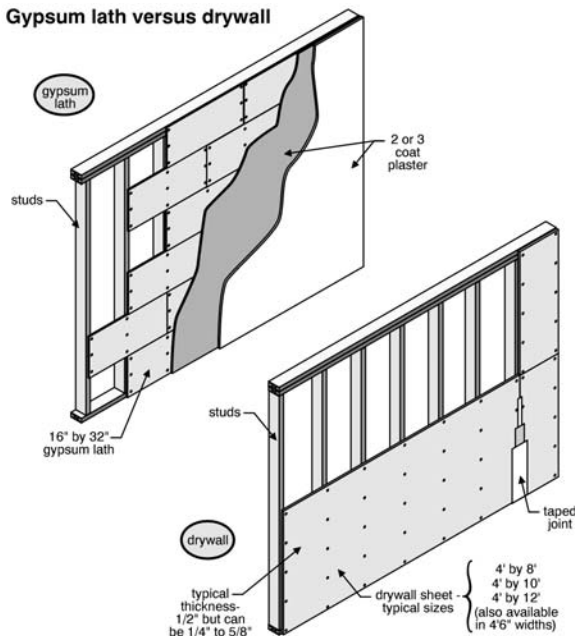
## Plaster and drywall

Old houses have plaster on the walls and ceilings whereas new houses are built with drywall. While there was no magic day when plasterers quit and drywallers began, most houses built before the sixties were plaster and most houses after were drywall.



From the late 1930s to 1960, a material was used that seems to be neither plaster nor drywall. Technically it is a plaster wall but rather than using wood strips as the base (lath), sheets of gypsum 16 inches by 32 inches were used as the lath. Houses that have gypsum lath walls often show a characteristic "shadow" that outlines the sheets of lath. While somewhat less than ideal cosmetically, it is not considered to be a concern.

Gypsum lath versus drywall



Dating houses can be helpful for a number of reasons. For example, the type of furnaces installed 20-25 years ago has a life expectancy of 20-25 years. Therefore, most houses built in the early 1970s will probably have a new furnace or will need one shortly. Most houses built in the early 1980s were built with asphalt shingle roofs that lasted up to 15 years. Most of these houses either have a new roof or need one. The good news about a 1982 house in need of new shingle is that it couldn't possibly contain Urea Formaldehyde Foam Insulation. It was banned in December of 1980!!

#### About The Author

In 1984 Tim Oglesby unknowingly bought a home with significant defects. In 1994 he began Home Check America to assist new homeowners in NE Illinois. With a degree in business and masters in management, Tim was trained as a home inspector with Carson & Dunlop Engineering, was a general contractor for eight years, and is a licensed home inspector and real estate broker. He is a sought after public speaker and author on issues important to property management and home inspections. Contact: [www.homecheckamerica.com](http://www.homecheckamerica.com) or call toll free 1-866-245-4663. Home Check America is responsible for the content of its articles and has no affiliation with the RE/MAX organization.