

one

Something Like a Sears House

Skyscrapers are Ready Cut. Why Not Your Home?¹

—*Sears, Roebuck Catalog of Houses*, 1926

The previous owner's offhand comment to me at the closing on the purchase of the house had aroused my curiosity. "You know, it's a Sears house, or—oh, I can't remember—but it's something like that," she remarked. That immediately caught my attention. Sears, Roebuck and Co. mail-order, factory-produced houses began to receive attention as a historical phenomenon in the early 1980s in articles in the *Old-House Journal* and *Historic Preservation* and in the 1986 book *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company*, which thoroughly examines and illustrates 447 models, nearly all the company's standard residential designs.² Interest grew and more articles appeared, with one 1985 national newspaper headline reading, "Mail-Order Homes Sears Sold in 1909–37 Are Suddenly Chic." Press coverage has continued in a steady stream.³ Today real estate agencies even advertise houses with come-ons such as, "This 1930s original Sears built home will delight everyone. . . ."⁴ and "Own your own piece of history! 1930s Sears & Roebuck home available for the first time. . . ." The latter, a bungalow called The Katonah in the Sears catalogues from 1917 to 1919, originally sold for \$265 to \$827 with no bath. It was on the market in 2004, presumably with a bath, for \$925,000.⁵ There was, and still is, strong interest in Sears houses.

Just what was my new house? I could see it was a Cape Cod, and Sears had produced many of them, but if it was a Sears, I was determined to confirm it with facts. Given my abiding interest in Sears mail-order houses, I already owned a copy of *Houses by Mail*. My initial awareness of them had come about during visits in the 1980s to see my college roommate and some relatives, living in different states a hundred miles apart. Struck by the similar feel of the doorknobs in the two houses, I also noticed they had mirror-image floor plans, even though the houses' exteriors bore no resemblance to each other whatsoever. Questioning the two families elicited responses suggesting the houses might be Sears

houses—both families had heard rumors to that effect over the years. But I wanted to know more; consulting *Houses by Mail* confirmed that the rumors were true. I hoped the same simple research would tell me my new house was a Sears too.

FACTORY-BUILT HOUSES

Factory-made, mail-order houses developed out of a long-standing practice of prefabricating houses in a myriad of ways over several centuries. Explorers took knocked-down wooden houses on board ship from England to Canada in 1578; settlers of Cape Ann, Massachusetts, did the same in 1624. Prospectors in the 1849 California gold rush transported similar types of shelter and assembled them at the mining sites. Portable buildings were patented and manufactured in New York and Boston as early as 1861 and used by crews building the transcontinental railroad in the decade that followed. Throughout the 1800s, architects, builders, and lumber companies produced another precursor to factory-built housing—pattern books. At first offering skeletal plans only, just after the Civil War they began offering full-fledged architectural plans by mail.⁶

By 1870, houses produced in factories were being sold through catalogues in the United States. Initially spurred by the industrial revolution, a national railroad system, and the growth of balloon framing,⁷ by the early 1900s the demand for factory-built housing had blossomed, partly the result of the passage of the Rural Free Delivery Act of 1896, which allowed catalogue selling to reach geographically isolated customers. Factory-built homes took the form of either sectional wood panels joined on site with bolts, or precut materials delivered by rail in a boxcar. The latter type, also known as ready-cut homes, made up the larger share of the industry. Shipped with detailed instructions, these houses were ready to be assembled on site by the owner or a local builder. Available styles followed

fashion, changing over time. Research done in the early 1940s indicates that about one-quarter million of them were built in the preceding forty years.⁸

A number of mail-order house companies competed nationwide. The largest was Sears, Roebuck and Co. in Chicago, its Modern Homes division having been started in 1908. Others included Montgomery Ward, also in Chicago, Aladdin Homes and Lewis Manufacturing Company, both in Michigan, the Hodgson Company of Massachusetts, Bennett Homes of New York, and Pacific Ready-Cut Homes and Whiting-Mead Company of California. In 1928 the Gordon-Van Tine Company of Iowa produced one of the earliest Cape Cod types to be found in a mail-order catalogue for ready-cut houses.⁹

SEARS, ROEBUCK AND CO. MODERN HOMES

Given the popularity of Cape Cod-type houses in the late 1920s, it is not surprising that various companies included them among a number of other house types in their mail-order, ready-to-assemble house catalogues. Not until 1931, however, were Capes found in the catalogues of Sears, Roebuck and Co. From then until the last Sears house catalogue in 1940, there was at least one Cape Cod-type house in every annual issue but one, and most years there were several.¹⁰ An enclosure in the 1939 catalogue announced, “‘Nine new Sears Modern Homes, too late for publication in the catalog, . . . represent the latest thought in architectural design and planning, [and] we think you will find them especially interesting.’”¹¹ That year the catalogue included a total of eleven Capes, and of the nine

FIGURE I.I The Attleboro in the 1934 Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogue, *Modern Homes*, page 17. (Photograph courtesy of the Sears Holdings Historical Archives.)

THE ATTLEBORO ▲▲

▲ SIX ROOMS — BATH AND LAVATORY



THIS type of Cape Cod home is one of the first designs built by the early New England settlers. Homes built over a hundred years ago grow old gracefully and still retain a certain warmth and beauty. It seems to have many friends in both urban and suburban areas. The Attleboro achieves distinction with its fine doorway, dormers, shuttered windows and correct architectural details. No "gingerbread" to get out of date. Outside walls are shown of Cedar shingles, but will look equally attractive with siding.

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

The first floor lavatory opening off the rear hall, in addition to complete second floor bath, adds greatly to the value. Closets for outer wraps handy to front and rear doors. Central hall with semi-open stairs, large living room, dining room and exceptional kitchen, complete the first floor plan. Double drainboard kitchen sink with built-in cabinets as shown by kitchen cabinets as shown are suggested at a slight additional cost.

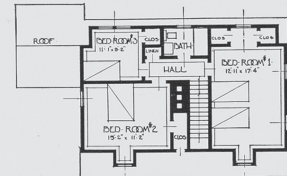
SECOND FLOOR PLAN

Two large bedrooms and one smaller one, each with a good closet, open off the upstairs hall. Each bedroom is well lighted and contains good wall space. A hall closet for linens at the left of the bath is a real convenience. The bathroom plumbing "roughs in" directly over the kitchen which reduces installation cost. Three attractive "Aristocrat" plumbing fixtures as available in Specification 22B work out nicely in the bath. A built-in Venetian mirrored medicine case is part of the standard equipment furnished with this home.

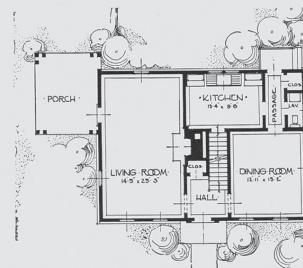
The floor plan is 36 ft. wide by 26 ft. deep and will require a 60-foot lot on account of the 11 foot porch at the side. In case of a narrow lot, porch could be placed at the rear of the living room instead of at the side.

At the price quoted, we furnish all necessary material to build this six-room-and-bath home, consisting of lumber, lath, millwork, flooring, shingles, building paper, hardware, metal and painting material according to complete detail specifications.

MODERN HOME
No. 3384
ALREADY CUT AND FITTED
PRICE \$1810⁰⁰



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

new houses announced in the insert, seven were Cape Cod types. Evidently Sears hoped to cash in on the latest fashions and economic trends in home building by offering so many Capes.

Sears houses came with everything—as many as 30,000 separate parts, including up to 750 pounds of nails, enough paint and varnish for four coats, a seventy-five-page bound book of instructions, and even the lock and key for the front door. Builders constructed an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 of them nationwide,¹² about two hundred in Westchester County, New York, alone. With Sears clearly featuring Capes in the mid- and late-1930s, I thought it perfectly possible that the former owner had been correct about my 1937 house. Its location near a railroad line was yet another characteristic it shared with many Sears mail-order houses. Unfortunately, though, the easy confirmation I had hoped for did not materialize. *Houses by Mail* included drawings and floor plans of seven Capes from the Sears catalogues of 1931 to 1937—The Gordon, The Stanford, The Cape Cod, The Portsmouth, The Concord, The Attleboro, and The Milford—but my house was not among them.

Perhaps my house had been somehow missed in *Houses by Mail*, so I sought out the actual Sears catalogues. They are hard to come by, some no longer in existence, but I checked the ones that have been reissued along with other books and journals where parts of the catalogues have been published, in order to match floor plans and façades with my house, but nothing added up. Though the company has no records of where all their houses ended up, the Sears Archives website does contain images of many of the houses. That, however, did not help either.¹³ I even searched for physical evidence, one of the sure-fire ways to establish a house as a Sears. Equipped with a flashlight, I crawled around in the basement and attic looking for stamped numbers near the ends of exposed structural wood. I also checked for Sears markings on window and door hard-

ware and on bathroom fixture faucets, some of the other clues one should look for. I was unable to find any physical verification.

“AUTHENTIC CAPE COD”

Still refusing to completely let go of the idea that my house was a Sears catalogue house in the absence of any proof to the contrary, I kept looking. It was the former owner's words, “something like,” that spurred me on. Certain she had not fabricated or fantasized the whole thing, I sensed there was something there, some kernel of truth in what she had said, a link to something I was looking for.

So if all evidence indicated it was not a Sears, maybe it had been produced by one of the other mail-order companies. Knowing the houses had arrived by rail in boxcars and sometimes went up in a matter of days, I thought that such an event might have warranted local newspaper coverage. Armed with the knowledge that the house had been built in 1937, I went to the local library and began methodically turning the pages of enormous bound volumes of dusty, disintegrating newspapers from that year, standing because the pages were too big to do it sitting. It was slow going, to say the least.

Eventually, Eureka! I came upon an artist's rendering—clearly the image of my house—in a real estate section advertisement for a home construction business. Below the picture were the words “Authentic Cape Cod design—6 rooms, tile bath, attached garage.” Fortunately, I continued looking. In the next issue, the same drawing appeared in an ad for the same builder, but this time, below the picture was the headline “A ‘McCall's’ Home-of-the-Month.” The ad copy read: “We take pleasure in presenting this colorful home for your inspection. Chosen by McCall's Magazine for its livable room arrangement, it combines the quaintness and comfort of Cape Cod architecture with the newest trends in interior decoration and the best of



FIGURE I.2 A builder placed this ad in the weekly real estate section of a local newspaper for several weeks in the fall of 1937. (Photograph courtesy of the Journal News and the Mamaroneck Public Library.)

equipment.”¹⁴ The former owner’s comment now began to make sense.

The newspaper discovery sent me racing to the New York Public Library, where I knew there were bound volumes of old magazines. I began working backward from the September 1937 date of the ads, and there, in the May 1937 issue, with Amelia Earhart on the cover (just weeks before her disappearance in an attempted round-the-world flight), was a photograph of a carbon copy of my own Cape Cod house, the *McCall's* “Home of the Month.” Along with a photograph of the house were three alternative floor plans, the suggestion that the house could be expanded later by finishing the second floor, and the headline “The May



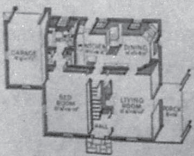
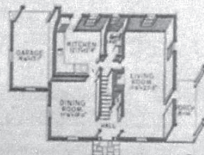
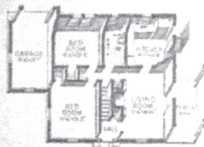
FIGURE I.3 Amelia Earhart on the cover of the May 1937 issue of *McCall's* magazine, purchased in 2005 on eBay. (Originally published in the May 1937 issue of *McCall's* magazine. All Rights Reserved. ©Copyright 2009 Meredith Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Photo by author.)



For you... and you... and you—a Cape Cod house whose rooms are elastic. Without changing the exterior, the first floor may have the three different arrangements shown below

THE MAY HOME OF THE MONTH *can be tailored to order*

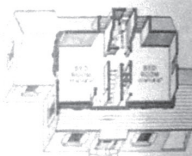
BY J. HAROLD HAWKINS
LORILLARD WISE, Architect



1 For you—if you like a bedroom and bath downstairs and a home-like combination kitchen and dining room. The complete kitchen with a bay window added is shown on page 53

2 For you—if you like rooms that are luxurious in size, with both bedrooms upstairs. There is a hall closet, too, and a convenient downstairs lavatory

3 For you—if your family asks for two bedrooms and bath downstairs and you would like to finish the upstairs later—a complete home on one floor



For everyone the upstairs is the same—two comfortable bedrooms with cross ventilation, clothes closets, linen closet and bath. And for everyone, an attached garage with doors at front or back, a shady open porch between the garden and the house

SEE IT YOURSELF. You are invited to visit the May, 1937, Home of the Month at the following addresses:

CALIFORNIA—Los Angeles—2676 Carlton Avenue
Built by The Economy Housing Corp., Los Angeles

DELAWARE—Dover—Greenhill Road, Eastover Hills
Built by G. Leslie Gardner, Dover
Furnished by J. E. Beck Co.

NEW JERSEY—Teaneck—1103 Wilson Avenue
Built by The Century Housing Corp., Teaneck

NEW YORK—Rye—Corner Park Avenue & Boston Post Road
Built by H. A. Lockwood & Co., Inc.

TENNESSEE—Memphis—751 Mallory Ave., Longview Heights
Built by The South Memphis Land Co., Memphis
Furnished by Arthur Seelinger

1936 Homes of the Month are being built at these addresses:

OKLAHOMA—Tulsa—2140 East 31st Place, Bren Rose Addition
from the April, 1936, plan. At 2741 East 31st Place, Bren Rose Addition, from the August, 1936, plan.

Built by Robert E. Adams, Tulsa
Furnished by The Collier Furniture Company

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS HOUSE—Directions for these plans, and for a one-story variation. Furnishing and planting plans. Send for HM-12-152. Address: The Modern Homemaker, McCall's, Dayton, O. Catalogue of Houses—32.

Home of the Month Can Be Tailored to Order.”¹⁵ A short article, “Cottage May Expand,” in the *New York Times* on May 9, 1937, noted that the house appeared “pictorially in the current issue of *McCall’s* magazine.”¹⁶ Though not actually my house, the one pictured in *McCall’s* was a short distance away in Rye, a town adjacent to mine.

MCCALL’S “HOME OF THE MONTH”

The house began its rise to notable dwelling when architect Lorillard Wise teamed up with a local builder to create the “All American Model Home.” Its prominent location in Rye on U.S. Route 1, a busy thoroughfare, assured that it would be seen by many.¹⁷ By late 1936 at least eight houses based on the model had been completed or were under construction in the New York City metropolitan area. The builder had submitted photographs and plans of the model house to the *McCall’s* “Home of the Month” series, the magazine selecting the house for its May 1937 issue. A second New York-area builder began advertising the same design in local newspapers, where I happened upon it, and in the *New York Times*. By 1938 at least twenty-five of them, including my house, and probably more, had been built across the country.

The *McCall’s* “Home of the Month” series, which lasted nearly three years from 1936 to 1938, presented in a one-to two-page spread basic floor plans and photographs of houses submitted by architects or builders. Representatives from the National Association of Real Estate Boards and the magazine’s architectural editor selected a house, based upon its “livability,” for each monthly article in the series. Average, middle-class houses, only a few of them were large and grand enough to include servants’ quarters.

In each segment of the series, *McCall’s* invited interested readers to send fifteen cents (at a time when the magazine itself sold for ten cents) to the magazine’s corporate headquarters to obtain additional information for

any given “Home of the Month.” In booklet form, the material included slightly larger and more detailed floor plans as well as elevations so that a local builder could be engaged to recreate the house. Finding the booklet for my house was a lengthy adventure leading me to a library at the University of Illinois, which may well have the only copy in existence. The simple publication—except for the cover, not even typeset—states, “The drawings and descriptions in this booklet are offered as practical suggestions for you to take to your local architect or realtor-builder and his architect . . . [who] will draw up working plans and specifications for your house, and will build your home for you.” It characterizes the house as being unusually flexible, with a variety of possible room arrangements. The various choices allow for an extra-large kitchen or living room with bedrooms on the second floor or a combined living-dining room with two first-floor bedrooms. An article about the house in the *Washington Post* noted that it was “a home providing for later enlargement as its occupant’s family grows.”¹⁸

The booklet is specific in its recommendations. For example, the “Schedule for Room Color Schemes” suggests that the bathroom walls be dusty pink, the tile white, the floor brown, the shower curtain rosy red, and the towels brown and white. It also includes drawings for a one-story version of the house, and a detailed landscape plan for both a standard sixty-by-one-hundred-foot lot and a corner property, mentioning such details as a lilac bush and flowering vines on the porch posts.¹⁹

As part of each “Home of the Month” article, *McCall’s* published the locations of houses built from the current featured plans as well as from previously published ones. The May 1937 issue lists street addresses where five examples of the featured Cape could be seen. The diversity of locations where people eventually built the house—including California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Tennessee—attests to the

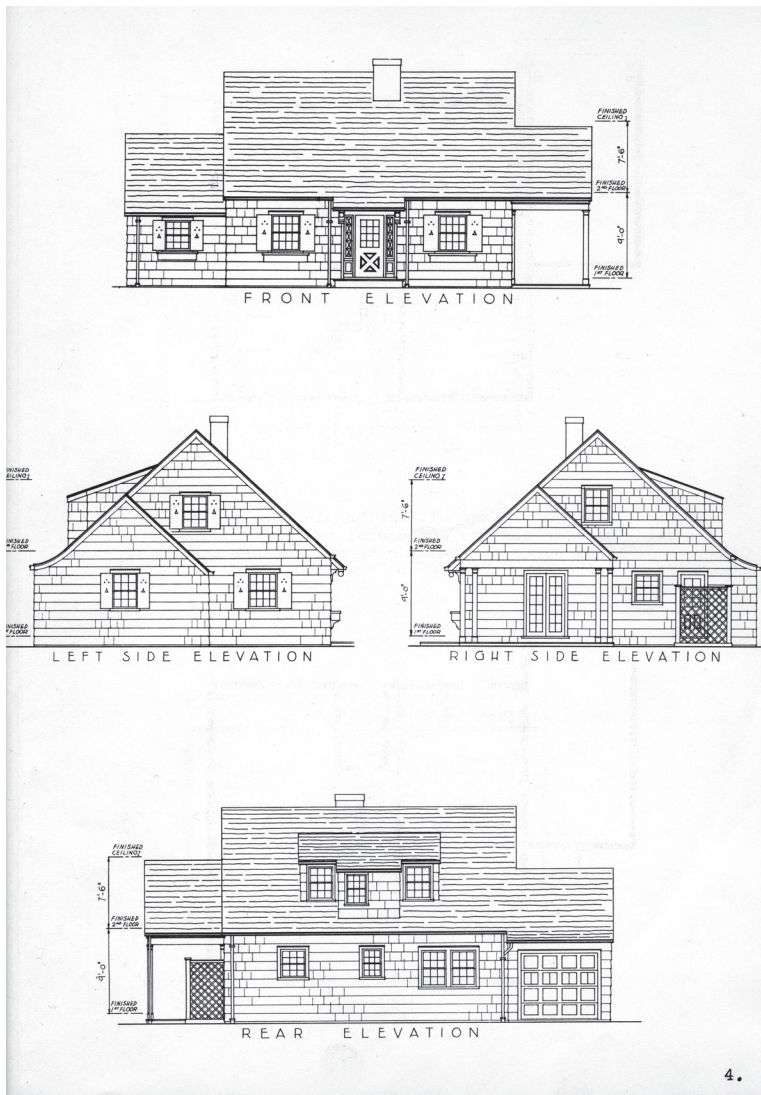


FIGURE 1.5 A page from the May 1937 “McCall’s Home of the Month” booklet. (Originally published in a “send-away-for” booklet advertised in the May 1937 issue of *McCall’s*® magazine. All Rights Reserved. ©Copyright 2009 Meredith Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Photo by author.)

popularity and the reach of the design.²⁰ Through historical newspaper research, information found in *McCall’s* magazines of the 1930s, and simply looking as I drive around the area where I live, I have found twenty-five other *McCall’s* May 1937 “Home of the Month” houses just like mine—spread out in twelve different towns in the New York City metropolitan area and in nine states across the country. Some have been slightly altered with front dormers or porticos added or shutters removed. Other examples probably exist but undoubtedly have been remodeled so as to be unrecognizable today. The majority of the sixteen I have seen in person, however, for the most part are unchanged.

During the run of the *McCall’s* series, members of the Land Developers and Home Builders Division of the National Association of Real Estate Boards received a monthly publication, including photographs, architectural drawings, and landscaping designs similar to those contained in the booklet offered to readers. It stated that “any Realtor-Builder erecting this Home of the Month . . . will have his name and the address of his house published in that issue of *McCall’s* which is on sale at the time his house is finished and open to the public. 2,600,000 copies of *McCall’s* are sold every month.”²¹ That number was equivalent to one copy of the magazine for every forty-nine people or one for every eighteen households in the United States. *McCall’s* magazine at the time had a very broad reach.

MCCALL’S

The history of *McCall’s* is worth noting in light of the “Home of the Month” series. *McCall’s* began publication in the 1870s as a fashion sheet consisting of ten slim issues a year to promote the *McCall’s* women’s clothing sewing-pattern business. Gradually the magazine introduced other material—household-help ideas, fancywork sewing suggestions, fiction, jokes, editorials, and so on—until

the 1890s when the editors asserted that it was no longer merely a fashion magazine, but included news and other items of interest to women. By 1900, each issue contained as many as seventy-two pages, partly due to increased advertising; by 1913, the total circulation had grown to 1.25 million. In 1917, *McCall's* increased its price to ten cents a copy. That change, along with the addition in the 1920s of famous and popular writers to its roster, raised the publication into a higher-class magazine category and helped to initiate what became its characteristic national coverage with nationwide appeal. In the 1930s *McCall's* became the first women's magazine to reach newsstand sales of over one million.

One of the publication's areas of expertise, beginning in 1934, was reader-interest research conducted through interviews. At the time, the magazine often referred to its national audience as "McCall Street" because the magazine's marketing staff had determined that the size of its readership would account for households located every twenty-five feet along both sides of a theoretical street running from Boston to San Diego.²² According to Frank Luther Mott in his comprehensive history of American popular magazines, "What *McCall* editors were visualizing was a middle-class audience living on an American street in ordinary houses anywhere in the country"²³—a street and house, it seems, like mine. It was just this "McCall Street" audience who would want the kind of homes represented in the *McCall's* "Home of the Month" feature.

A PEDIGREE OF A DIFFERENT SORT

I wondered how the family who built my house—we are the third owners—might have found the plans for it. Did they see it in *McCall's* and then decide to build? It is difficult to say for sure. The model house in Rye, pictured in the May 1937 issue, was already in existence by June 1936 and could have been seen just a short drive away from my

neighborhood. A brief piece titled "Real Estate Notes" in the *New York Times* in June 1936 stated that houses based on the "All American Model Home" in Rye had sold in seven New York City area towns, including mine.²⁴ The family who built my house, however, did not buy the property for it until July 1936. Therefore, the house could have been constructed during the fall of 1936 before the magazine piece came out, or more likely, because of the February 1938 inspection date, in the summer and fall of 1937, just after the May *McCall's* appeared. It is impossible to know whether the choice of this particular house came about because of the nearby model house, as a result of the *McCall's* piece, or through some other means.

In any case, the comment by the former owner, "it's a Sears house," that had so captured my imagination proved to be inaccurate, but it contained a kernel of truth, one that led to the discovery of something equally remarkable, a pedigree of a different sort. Without doubt, as a Cape Cod type, my house is ordinary, a subject discussed at length in chapter three. At the same time, however, as a *McCall's* "Home of the Month," it is indeed noteworthy. And with one mystery concerning my house solved, I moved on to the next.

Newspapers

Consulting newspapers of the time period you are researching greatly enhances finding out about a particular topic at a given time and place and gleaning what contemporary public attitudes toward the issues surrounding it were. News articles, editorials, human interest stories, letters to the editor, and even advertisements all contribute to your understanding. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Complete* contains the entire contents of a growing list of major newspapers including the *Atlanta Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and a number of others in PDF format dating back to various years as far back as the mid-1800s. The PDF format means you can read the pages just as they originally appeared, noting what made the front page and what was relegated to back pages. Searching these newspapers will give you information on both topics of national scope and topics relating to the broad geographic areas covered by them. Surprisingly, a large newspaper like the *New York Times* in the early years of the twentieth century listed by street address new houses that had recently been built, even in suburban communities, allowing for a search of exact locations. I was able to find several houses like mine because the search terms “McCall’s Home of the Month” for 1937 yielded specific street addresses. Sometimes searching your own address or street name will turn up information.

A related database, *ProQuest National Newspapers*, includes the full text of several dozen important newspapers around the country from the last couple of decades. Included, among others, are newspapers from cities as geographically diverse as Denver, Houston, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Norfolk, Philadelphia, San Antonio, San Francisco, Seattle, St. Louis, and St. Petersburg. *Access Newspaper Archive* is a collection of newspapers from smaller cities around the country. *America’s Historical Newspapers*

includes newspapers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Chronicling America* is a project of the Library of Congress containing selected newspapers from 1880 to 1922. And *Early American Newspapers, 1690–1922* is an ever-expanding database of newspapers representing all fifty states.

Specialized newspapers may be found through the *Archive of Americana*, a web-based collection of historical material at <http://www.readex.com>. The site provides links to collections of American ethnic newspapers including African-American newspapers, 1827–1998, U.S. Spanish language newspapers, 1808–1980, and more than two thousand other newspapers from all fifty states, along with additional primary source material.

Really small newspapers that cover topics of local interest can often be found in bound volumes or in microform in libraries. In all kinds of newspapers are obituaries, which are often useful and frequently indexed locally. Check libraries for such old indexes. Local newspapers will not necessarily be indexed (though increasingly will be searchable as they become digitized), but if you have a date or time period as a guide, you can always search page by page. With experience using a given publication, you learn useful time-saving shortcuts—for example, which day of the week real estate news was covered or where obituaries usually appeared.

Newspapers, of course, can be notably biased, so if the issue you are concerned with is at all controversial, reading the coverage in more than one newspaper is a good idea when possible. For example, coverage in New York newspapers of issues relating to the American Revolution varied markedly, depending on whether the editors sided with the British or with the Patriots. Nevertheless, newspapers offer an invaluable fresh and of-the-moment perspective difficult to find in any retrospective discussion.