

How-to tips given on researching houses

By Peter Heck
Staff writer

CHESTERTOWN — When was your home built? Who lived there before you did?

Odds are, unless it's a brand new home, you have only a vague idea — unless you're one of those who saw Michael Dixon's presentation "If This Old House Could Talk" Sept. 12 at the Kent County Public Library. The talk was sponsored by the Maryland Humanities Council and is part of the library's fall series of programs for adults.

Dixon, an adjunct history professor at University of Delaware and several other area colleges, is a graduate of Washington College. He has a special interest in social history, with an emphasis on mass media and criminal justice.

Dixon led some 16 attendees on a guided tour of the resources available to those who wish to research the history of their home. The hour-long presentation, which included a PowerPoint show as well as print materials, was not so much a lecture as a freewheeling exchange in which many audience members contributed ideas and stories.

One of the best was Dixon's tale of how, as official historian of the town of Elkton, he was asked to sort through a historic house the town had acquired for \$700,000. The sellers had removed items they considered of value, but left behind what they referred to as the "junk" — which included old furniture along with a treasure trove of letters and papers that told a fascinating story.

The payoff came when an old electrical company envelope turned out to contain an original letter by Thomas Jefferson. Authenticated by a documents expert, the letter was appraised at \$700,000 — as much as the town had paid for the house! The letter was later sold at auction to help fund restoration of historic Elk Landing.

Few homeowners will be that lucky, but those with a taste for history and family lore can find treasures enough. Wilson advised the audience to look at things like tax bills, repairmen's bills, and old photos that may show earlier stages of the house's construction.

After doing "attic archaeology," as Dixon called it, a visit to the county courthouse is in order. There research can turn up deeds, wills, and other documents illustrating the history of a home. Even the records of lawsuits can reveal

the names of builders and architects, often hard to determine about older homes. Establishing a chain of custody — easily done once you learn to read property transfer records — is one of the key steps to creating a history of any building.

Old newspapers, often available in academic libraries, are also valuable records of local history. Social columns and obituaries give such details as names of family members; especially in early days, when local papers flourished, and every editor needed to come up with enough copy to fill his weekly edition. Many older newspapers are now available in digital form from state archives and from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dixon said. Another source of digital copies of old newspapers is www.ancestry.com, although the site charges a user fee.

Town maps — particularly those compiled to let insurance companies assess the various properties they might have to write policies for — can also be useful. The Sanborn maps, which appeared every few years from 1885 to the 1940s for Kent County towns, are available in many large local libraries. The maps generally include the street address, height of building and number of stories, building construction materials, building use, and right of way information. The Sanborn company began in 1866 and is still one of the leading U.S. mapping companies.

Dixon used his computer, connected to a projector, to show some of the other resources available on line. The Library of Congress now has a searchable Web site (www.loc.gov) with Depression-era photos of many old properties. At one point in the presentation, Dixon was thrilled to turn up a group of images of the old Kent County Jail once located on Cross Street next to the county courthouse.

The Maryland Historical Trust Web site also has a wealth of data, including many photos, for properties on its register of historic buildings. Local sources include the Historical Society of Kent County, the public library, Washington College library, and the county courthouse.

Dixon will email a package of links and sources, along with a broad outline on the process of uncovering the history of a house, to anyone interested. His email address is history@cchistory.org