

City of Charleston Building Inspections Division Records, 1932-2015

Descriptive Summary

Title and Dates:

City of Charleston Building Inspections Division Records, 1932-2015

Creator:

Building Inspections Division

Forms of Material:

Microfilm, digital files, databases, and physical index

Location:

Microfilm: Multimedia Room: Cabinet 04, Drawer 04

Digital Files: iaFolder: Public Service and Stormwater Departments cabinet

Abstract

The collection consists of records issued or received by the Building Inspections Division of the City of Charleston Public Service Department. The records include building permits, certificates of occupancy, and elevation certificates.

On January 10, 1882, the City of Charleston enacted an ordinance to require an approval process for building projects. The ordinance required that before construction of a structure “the owner, architect, or builder shall notify the City Assessor . . . and shall submit . . . the specifications and plans.” There is no indication that an actual building permit was issued to the applicant, and even though the City Assessor was charged with keeping the plans, none of these early records remain.

The City’s building permit collection does not actually start until 1932. The introduction of a formal permitting process is most likely tied to the enactment of the 1931 zoning ordinance. On October 13, 1931, the City of Charleston, South Carolina, became the first United States city to adopt a zoning ordinance with a defined historic district. The ordinance established the Old and Historic District, the first historic district protected by local legislation in the United States. The ordinance also established parameters for the preservation and protection of the city’s historic buildings and neighborhoods, and it paved the way for the creation of the Board of Architectural Review (BAR), a board tasked with approving or denying architectural changes in the Old and Historic District. The ordinance seemingly led to a more systematic permitting process for building projects in the city; at this point, City officials began indexing all applications and retaining duplicate copies of approved building permits. Prior to 1932, there is still a way to glean some historical data as notices of construction projects were printed in local newspapers (note: a researcher has compiled a database of these notices, and Records Management will search the database upon request).

The 1931 zoning ordinance also references certificates of occupancy (CO’s). While Records Management has a few COs dating back to the 1930s, the City’s collection does not start in a substantive way until around 1975 (with the bulk of the records dating from 1980-2013). The reason for this might be that the Records Management Division itself did not exist until 1976, following the passage of the Public Records Act of South Carolina (Title 30 of the South Carolina Code of Laws).

The City's elevation certificate collection dates to 1975, but the bulk range from 1980-2015. Elevation certificates are a record identified in FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). The NFIP was created as part of the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968. Its goals were to protect property owners from the effects of flooding and to reduce future flood damage effect. However, it was not until the Flood Insurance Protection Act of 1973 that the purchase of flood insurance for some homeowners in high-risk flood zones was required.

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists of building permits, 1932-2015; certificates of occupancy, 1937-2013 (bulk 1980-2013); and elevation certificates 1975-2015 (bulk 1980-2015). The collection also contains limited supporting documentation such as Building Inspections Division copies of BAR documentation.

Note that any Building Inspections Division records post 2015 are not retained at Records Management.

Records Inventory:

Building permits, pre-1932: The Eberle Database (internal database with newspaper citations to City building projects from 1882 through 1936).

Building permits: 1932-1989: Building permits on microfilm with a card catalog index.

Building Permits, 1989-2004: Building permits on microfilm with an internal database index.

Building Permits, 2004-2015: All permits have been digitized and are indexed in iaFolder, the City's internal electronic document management system.

Certificates of occupancy, 1937-2013 (bulk 1980-2013): All COs have been digitized and are indexed in iaFolder.

Elevation certificates 1975-2015 (bulk 1980-2015): All elevation certificates have been digitized and are indexed in iaFolder. Note that elevation certificates are also accessible on the City website (see <https://www.charleston-sc.gov/2452/Elevation-Certificates>).

*** Note that building permits from 2016-present are available through the City's Customer Self Service (CSS) portal (https://egcss.charleston-sc.gov/energov_prod/selfservice#/home).