



Ancestry and Ownership

In searching for a property owner, genealogical research can help connect the dots

BY TRAVIS BAIRD

Negotiating with a landowner or their representative can be one of the more difficult aspects of a parcel acquisition. Building rapport and finding common ground on unit value, remainder impact and improvement values can be time consuming, and often requires patience and a creative mind. Adding to these typical challenges, the process can be further complicated by heirship issues, divorce and absentee landowners.

So what happens when you come upon a landowner whose identity is largely a mystery? Without this most basic of information, the negotiation process cannot even begin. Gaining approval to access the property for survey is impossible to obtain, and your client's options become limited and potentially very expensive.

In Search of an Owner

A little over a year ago, I received a call from one of our agents working a project in the Houston area. They had run into a dead end on a parcel. The property in question was a home in an older neighborhood in East Houston, had no current resident, and the mailing address for the landowner was the subject property. Furthermore, none of the neighbors could recall the last time someone had lived there or who owned the property.

The agent forwarded me two property records, one a quitclaim deed from 1945 and another a warranty deed from 1965. In the quitclaim, the grantee was named as Jack R. Randall, while the warranty deed named the grantee as J.R. Randall. I reviewed these deeds thoroughly, but they shed very little light on the identity of the landowner. I decided to attempt to track down the grantee first, but a review of the Appraisal District and County Property Records yielded nothing new. As far as I could tell, none of the sources available had any information on this person other than what I already had.

Next, I looked into the district clerk's records and found three tax suits over the last ten years. Each of these had eventually been dismissed because the

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appraisal district had not been able to serve the landowner with notice. I was also able to identify a marital record for one J.R. Randall, Jr., but this lead petered out quickly. While the names in each document were similar, the grantee was not definitively identified as the same person. And since these names were rather common, the likelihood that I would be able to positively identify this person in other public records around the county or state seemed slim.

At a loss, I reviewed the deed again for any last clues and decided to track down the grantor. It was at this time that I realized that the grantor in each deed could have also been the same person. In 1945, it was shown as a woman named Auban Blake Randall. In 1965, her name had changed to Auban Blake James, and she was joined by her husband Nelson James. I ran the same searches for Ms. Blake Randall, Mrs. James and Mr. James as I had for the Jack and J.R. Randall, again with little success.

A New Trail

With nowhere else to go, I decided to progress my search by making two assumptions: (1) Ms. Blake Randall and Mrs. James were the same person, and (2) Mrs. James was related to John and J.R. Randall in some way. Given the loss of the Randall name by 1965, I further assumed that she had been married to John.

Having made these assumptions, I turned to a new source—genealogical records. I had used online genealogical sites before to determine lines of heirship, but I had never used this method to try and research a potentially living landowner. In researching Ms. Blake

Randall, I was able to determine the string of information I would need to connect the dots.

I found her marriage to a Jack B. Randall in the ca. 1918 (making her Mrs. Randall), the birth of their son John Jr., and her divorce from Jack Randall in the mid-1940s, which explained the quitclaim, though not how she had come to own the property again. I also found records of her travels and marriage to Nelson James. I was able to sketch her son's life as well, and began to work off of the assumption that J.R. was her son. He became a merchant marine, often based out of the Houston area, retired to California and ultimately passed away in 1997.

With this information in hand, I returned to my file and began to compare the facts. While I could not tell exactly when the property had been vacated, the tax suits showed that delinquent payments began in 1997, about the time that J.R. Randall had died of cancer. Research of the neighborhood showed that in the mid-1960s the area had been largely populated by families tied closely to the port. With enough data collected, I was able to turn the file back over to the agent, along with a copy of Mr. Randall's death certificate and contact information for his son. Though nothing was conclusive and many questions still needed to be answered, the research provided several contacts for the agent and a path that could hopefully avoid an acquisition through condemnation and the need for citation by publication.

Connecting the Dots

Records that can often seem inconsequential or mundane can actually become a great resource in building a picture of an individual. As more documents are added, we can see not only a person's birth and death, but eventually find their occupation and addresses over time through various directories. An agent can use this information to tie a person to a place and identify a landowner. Otherwise, the only remaining option would be to post announcements in a local paper. In J.R. Randall's case, citation by publication in a Houston area paper would have satisfied the state code and allowed the project to move forward. But his family, who now reside in California, would have never known of their interest in this property or their potential rights to compensation.

The amount of information available on the internet increases every day. Facebook, public data search sites and county records provide excellent sources of information for agents as we seek to identify landowners and interested parties. Yet, when an agent is faced with a lack of information with which to begin a search—or even information that is just too generic to be useful—all efforts to find the property owner can be hindered. Genealogical records can help to bridge this gap. 🗝



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