

BECOME A CAR & HOME SLEUTH



WHAT'S REALLY IN THAT
HISTORY REPORT?



BY **SUSANNAH NOEL**

WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE: YOU NEED A CAR OR A HOUSE, SO YOU START THE SEARCH.

You find one that fits your dreams (or your budget). You try to research the history through documents and the internet—but how can you trust what you find, and find all there is to know?

Here's the inside scoop on investigating a home or car: If you know where to go (and not go), it's a lot easier. Scope out the essentials with these tips.



SCRUTINIZE THE PROPERTY

- Beyond any stylish decorations or enviable details, such as a master bath hot tub, a home can harbor secrets. If there's been a recent remodel, homeowners and contractors should have obtained a permit for the construction work; you can obtain a copy through your municipality's building records department. No permit? The sellers probably did the work themselves, and code issues, such as wiring or plumbing, may be a problem.

- When you find a place you love, it's tempting to make an offer right away, but a little research could help you track whether a property has

gone on and off the market repeatedly over the last few years. This may suggest a hard-to-fix problem no one wants to inherit. Do an online search of "property records" and the name

of your town to look for county sites that may have details about a particular address. In addition, real estate listing services gather for-sale information that may be helpful.



IF A **PREVIOUS OWNER** HAD A

FENDER BENDER

BUT **PAID OUT OF POCKET** FOR REPAIRS **WITHOUT INVOLVING** THEIR **INSURANCE COMPANY** THE **VEHICLE HISTORY COMPANIES** **WON'T RECEIVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT AN ACCIDENT** AND IT **WON'T APPEAR** ON THE

REPORT

DRIVE ON

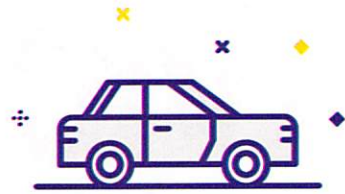
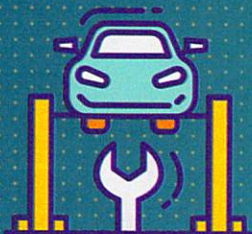
DECIPHERING A CAR HISTORY REPORT CAN BE CONFUSING. WATCH FOR:

1 → **BRANDED OR SALVAGE TITLE.** These tell you the car's been declared a "total loss" by the insurance company due to a previous incident. Think twice before buying a car in this situation.

2 → **ACCIDENTS.** Major or minor, a past accident can affect a car for the rest of its days, even after repairs.

3 → **MANY PREVIOUS OWNERS.** When a car has jumped from owner to owner, it could indicate a long-standing problem that's too expensive to fix.

4 → **RECALL NOTICES.** If the make and model of the car has a manufacturer's recall, the report will alert you, even if the seller doesn't.



DIG INTO THE VEHICLE HISTORY

- Search services use the car's vehicle identification number (VIN) to tell you how many owners your car has had, where the car has "lived," whether it's been in an accident and possibly even what service it's received. There may be a cost for the report.
- For used cars, the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System (NMTVIS), a free federal database, tracks title, odometer reading, brand history, and, in some cases, historical theft data. It doesn't, however, include repair and maintenance history or recall notices.
- **Remember: All records of a car's history are only as complete as the data they're built on.** If a previous owner had a fender bender but paid out of pocket for repairs, the vehicle history companies won't receive any information about an accident and it won't appear on the report. They also don't reveal the car's current condition. That's why a vehicle history report should never replace a test-drive and inspection by an independent mechanic.

HOMEWARD BOUND

IF A HOUSE IS MORE THAN A FEW DECADES OLD, IT'S LIKELY TO HAVE A VARIED PAST. THIS MIGHT BE A BOON FOR HISTORY BUFFS, BUT FOR HOME BUYERS, IT COULD MEAN A MAZE OF RECORDS TO SIFT THROUGH. PARE IT DOWN TO THESE FIVE ELEMENTS:

1

SAFETY. Renovations done without permits point to potentially troubling safety hazards that could lead to fires, structure failure or other unwelcome outcomes.

2

CHAIN OF OWNERSHIP. Look for an unexplained break in ownership, such as John Doe selling to Henry Home Owner, but someone besides Henry selling it from there. The last thing you want is a contested title from Henry's grandkids.

3

LIENS, MORTGAGES AND TAX INFORMATION. If there's a lien on the property, perhaps even from before the current owner's time, you should come across it in the property records. You can also search for how much the current owner owes on the mortgage and the history of property tax payments.

4

NEIGHBORHOOD. Many real estate portals include data on the neighborhood you might be moving into: average house value, crime reports and typical amenities, helping you craft a strong offer.

5

ENVIRONMENTAL. Is there an underground fuel oil tank on your property, or a former waste disposal site? Environmental factors could affect your quality of life, not to mention property values.

