



Photo: Tony Webster, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons (cropped). A City of Pittsburgh “Building permit issued” card taped in a window, 2019.

How to Look Up the Building Permits on Any Address (Before You Buy, Hire, or Wonder About That Dumpster)

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A plain-English guide to the public building permit register. Learn what a permit record shows, how to search it by street address, what “issued,” “expired,” and “final” mean, and why the FTC says a contractor who asks you to pull the permit is a red flag. Worked examples from Portland, New York City, and Los Angeles. Not legal advice and not a government site.

Every city and county that issues building permits keeps a record of them. That record is public. In many places you can search it online, for free, by typing a street address. It is one of the most useful registers most people never open.

This paper explains what a building permit record is, how to find the one for your address, how to read it, and when it is worth checking. The facts come from city building departments in Portland, New York City, and Los Angeles, plus the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and USA.gov. Links are at the bottom. Nobody here is selling you a remodel. We promise.

What a building permit record is

A building permit is the local government’s written OK to do certain kinds of construction work at a specific address. Which jobs need one depends on your city or county. New buildings, additions, and demolitions usually do. Many electrical, plumbing, and mechanical jobs need their own “trade” permits too.

Each permit becomes a public record. The record usually shows the address, a permit number, the type of work, a short description, and dates. Many cities also show the status, the inspections, and sometimes the stated value of the work. Put together, the records for one address are a kind of history book for the building. A history book

with fewer kings and more water heaters.

Step 1: Find who keeps the register

Permits are local. The register is kept by whoever issues permits where the property sits. Inside a city, that is usually the city's building or development services department. Outside city limits, it is often the county.

Not sure which office that is? USA.gov keeps a directory of local governments by state at <https://www.usa.gov/local-governments>. Start there, find your city or county website, and look for words like "building," "permits," "development services," or "permit search."

Step 2: Search by address

Most online permit searches start with the street address. Some also let you search by permit number or by parcel number. A parcel number is the ID the county uses for the piece of land.

Type the street number and the street name first. Leave off "Street" or "Avenue" if the search gets picky. Portland's own help guide gives the same tip: if a search does not work, try just the building number and street name. If you live in a condo or an apartment, look for a way to pick the right unit.

Write down the permit number for anything you want to ask about later. Clerks love a permit number. It is the fastest way to get help on the phone.

Example: Portland, Oregon

Portland puts permit records on PortlandMaps (<https://www.portlandmaps.com>). The city's help guide says to type the address in the search bar, open the Permits & Zoning section, and select Permits. That shows active and historical building permits, trade permits, land use reviews, and enforcement cases from 2000 to the present.

Click an application number to see the work description and status. Click Activity to see each step of the review and inspection process. The city says the application number begins with the year it was submitted. The last two letters tell you the type of permit or case.

Portland says plans and applications for permits issued from June 1, 2012, through December 2023 are free on PortlandMaps. Most documents for permits issued after December 2023 are not online yet. For those, you file a public records request, and the city warns it can take two weeks or more. The PortlandMaps Advanced search also lets you filter by permit type, date, and neighborhood, and download results as a spreadsheet.

Example: New York City

The NYC Department of Buildings says you can review the history of any building in the city, including permits, violations, and complaints, using two tools. The Building Information System (BIS) has a profile page for every property. It holds older filings and filings made in eFiling or at a borough office. The DOB NOW Public Portal holds filings made in the newer DOB NOW system.

The Department says the Public Portal's search tools work without making an account or logging in. You can look up a property by address, by borough-block-lot, or by building number. Because records are split between the two systems for now, the Department also points people to the city's Open Data Portal to see all filings for an address in one place.

Example: Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) runs a records search called PRISM at <https://prism.dbs.lacity.gov/>. Its help page says you can search by address, by assessor parcel number, by legal

description, or by document number.

LADBS says its online records include building permits from 1905 to present and certificates of occupancy from 1940 to present. That is a long memory. Some homes in LA have permit records older than anyone living in them. LADBS lists “purchasing a property, to know what permits have been issued” as one of the reasons people use its records.

How to read what you find

Labels are different in every city, but a few words show up a lot. “Applied” or “under review” means someone asked for a permit and the city has not decided yet. “Issued” means the city approved it and work may start. “Final,” “finaled,” or “complete” usually means the last inspection passed.

“Expired” or “cancelled” can mean the work never started, or that it started and never got its final inspection. That second one is worth a question. A permit that was issued years ago and never closed is like a library book that was never returned. Somebody, someday, may ask about it.

Enforcement or code cases are a separate kind of record. In Portland they sit right next to the permits. In New York, BIS lists complaints and violations on the property profile. If you see one, read the description and the status before you worry. Many are closed.

When it pays to look

Before you buy a home. The records can show what work was permitted, like a new roof, an addition, or a finished basement. If the listing brags about a remodel you cannot find in the register, ask the seller about it. Your agent, inspector, or the building department can help you read the result.

Before you hire a contractor. You can look up past permits at your own address to see what was done before. In some cities, like New York, you can also search permits by the licensed professional.

When something new shows up on your block. A big hole, a crane, or a dumpster the size of a school bus usually has a permit behind it. The register can tell you what is being built before the rumor mill does.

Who should pull the permit? Not you, says the FTC

The FTC’s home improvement advice lists warning signs of a scam. One of them is a contractor who asks you, the homeowner, to get any required building permits. The FTC also warns about contractors who knock on your door because they are “in the area,” say they have leftover materials, push you to decide right now, or want everything paid up front or only in cash.

The FTC says to consider only licensed and insured contractors and to check a license with your state or county government. Get more than one written estimate. Get a written contract with the contractor’s name, address, phone number, license number, start and end dates, and no blank spaces. If you signed it at home, the FTC says the contract should include your right to cancel within three business days. Do not pay the full amount up front, and do not make the last payment until the work is done.

After the job, look up your address again. If the work needed a permit, you should be able to find it, and you want to see it reach a final inspection. A contractor who says “permits are a waste of time” has just told you how much time they plan to waste on yours.

What the online register will not tell you

Online records are not always complete. Portland says most documents for permits issued after December 2023 are not online yet. New York splits records between two systems. Older paper records in many places are only

on microfilm or in a records room. LADBS says records not in its online system may be available through its Records Section.

A missing permit online does not prove that work was done without one. It may just mean the record is not scanned yet, or it is filed under a slightly different address. When it matters, call or email the building department, or file a public records request.

A permit record is also not a home inspection, a title search, or a promise that the work is good. It shows what the city approved and inspected. It does not show what the last owner did on a Saturday with a borrowed saw.

If a contractor or caller seems like a scam

The FTC asks people to report home repair and contractor scams at <https://reportfraud.ftc.gov/> or by phone at 1-877-382-4357. Your state attorney general or consumer protection office may also take complaints. USA.gov lists state consumer protection offices at <https://www.usa.gov/state-consumer>.

Quick checklist

1. Find who issues permits for the address: city, or county outside city limits (<https://www.usa.gov/local-governments>).
2. Search the permit register by street address. Try the number and street name only if it gets picky.
3. Write down permit numbers. Read the status: applied, issued, final, or expired.
4. Ask about expired or never-finaled permits before you buy.
5. Hire licensed, insured contractors who pull their own permits.
6. After the job, check that the permit reached final inspection.
7. Missing records online? Call the building department or file a public records request.

Where this paper came from

Filings · sourced with Filed Nearby (<https://filednearby.com>). Filed Nearby reads public building permit files from covered cities and counties and emails a plain-English report for a street address. Its site lists the cities it covers and says it uses public records only and tells readers to confirm details on the city's copy before they act. This paper uses only the official city and federal pages below.

Official sources

USA.gov, Local governments directory: <https://www.usa.gov/local-governments>

USA.gov, State consumer protection offices: <https://www.usa.gov/state-consumer>

Portland Permitting & Development, PortlandMaps general permit search guide:
<https://www.portland.gov/ppd/portlandmaps-help-guides/portlandmaps-general-search>

Portland Permitting & Development, PortlandMaps advanced permit search guide:
<https://www.portland.gov/ppd/portlandmaps-help-guides/portlandmaps-advanced-search>

Portland Permitting & Development, Find public records: <https://www.portland.gov/ppd/public-records>

NYC Department of Buildings, Find Building Data: <https://www.nyc.gov/site/buildings/dob/find-building-data.page>

NYC Department of Buildings, DOB NOW Public Portal FAQs:
<https://www.nyc.gov/site/buildings/industry/dob-now-public-portal-faqs.page>

Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety, Property Records:
<https://dbs.lacity.gov/services/search-online-building-records>

LADBS PRISM, Help & FAQ: <https://prism.dbs.lacity.gov/help>

FTC, How To Avoid a Home Improvement Scam:
<https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/how-avoid-home-improvement-scam>

FTC, Home Repair Scams: <https://consumer.ftc.gov/features/pass-it-on/home-repair-scams>

FTC, Report fraud: <https://reportfraud.ftc.gov/>

Limits

This is general information, checked against the official pages above on October 6, 2026. Permit rules, search tools, and record dates change, so confirm on your city or county's own site. Portland, New York City, and Los Angeles are examples, not the only places with online permit registers.

Notice Nearby is not a building department, a contractor, or a real estate agent. Not legal advice. Not a newspaper. Not Legal Publication. Record of Sale, LLC (Oregon).

Notes

- Filings · sourced with Filed Nearby. <https://filednearby.com>
 - Evergreen filing/register explainer. Facts from Portland.gov (PP&D), NYC Department of Buildings, LADBS, FTC consumer pages, and USA.gov, checked 2026-10-06. Not a single-city permit pack.
 - Original Notice Nearby write-up (written_by_nn). Author: Ryan Standley / Record of Sale, LLC / Notice Nearby.
 - Hero: Tony Webster, "Pittsburgh Building Permit Issued Sign," June 14, 2019, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons; cropped to 16:9. Not from any city or address named in this paper.
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<https://noticenearby.com/papers/how-to-look-up-building-permits-by-address-oct-2026>