



Finding Lost Wells

Searching For Wells on a Property

Minnesota Department of Health

Well Management Section
625 North Robert Street, P.O. Box 64975
St. Paul, Minnesota 55164-0975
651-201-4600 or 800-383-9808
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/wells

Environmental Health Division

Unused wells are often visible as a 1¼ inch to 6-inch diameter steel pipe sticking above the ground, the floor of a basement or basement offset, or a well pit. However, older wells may have casing made of concrete, tile, rock, brick, or stone; and many newer wells are cased with plastic pipe. As discussed previously, some wells were originally buried, and if properties have been remodeled, wells may be built over or around, cut off, or buried. Wells have a life expectancy that can vary considerably. While some wells may last 100 or more years, a life of 25 to 50 years is more common. Properties with a long history may have more than one well. Farm properties are more likely to have multiple wells to serve barns, irrigation, and other purposes.

Well searches generally start with a visual inspection. The information listed under “Physical Evidence” may help find a well. People familiar with the property may be aware of the property’s history, and may be able to point to “lost” wells. State well records were not required before 1974. However, the Minnesota Geological Survey has collected historic well records where available. Counties, townships, or cities may have well information with building permit, sewer permit, or property files. In cases where the physical evidence, personal knowledge, or records are absent, some tools may be needed to locate wells.

Individuals Familiar With Property

- Property owner.
- Relatives or acquaintances who may know about wells on the property.
- Previous property owners.
- Neighbors who might be familiar with property (**neighboring wells may also give a clue as to well location, depth, and construction**).
- Contractors (well drillers, pump installers, plumbers, remodelers) who have worked on property.
- Inspectors (well, plumbing, building, septic system, milk).
- Current or former employees, maintenance personnel.

Physical Evidence

- Casing visible above ground, concrete slab, or through basement floor.
- Evidence of a well, such as circular ring in cement or patch in the floor.
- Basement offset (small room off of basement, often under steps).
- Glass block or patch in step or concrete (access for well below).
- Windmill (usually directly over well).
- Pit in yard or basement (may be covered with wood, concrete, or steel; well may be at the bottom of pit or the pit may be a dug well).
- Waterline (pipe) or patched hole through basement floor or basement wall.

Physical Evidence (continued)

- Water system components (i.e., pressure tank, pump, or evidence of former components, like “shadow” lines on floor or wall).
- Electrical components (wiring through basement floor/wall, control box).
- Low spot in yard, circular depression (may be damp).
- Outbuildings (may be well house).
- Additions, false walls, paneling which may “hide” well.

Record Search

- Owner’s records (i.e., bills, easements on deed) or information written on pressure tank, control box, or well room wall.
- “County Well Index” database – at Minnesota Geological Survey (612-627-4784), Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Well Management Section, or local government agencies.
- Well Disclosure Certificates – at MDH Well Management Section (filed since November 1990). A Well Disclosure Certificate might have already been filed for the property. Visit the MDH Well Management Section, Well Disclosure Program Web site at: www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/wells/disclosures.
- Well and Boring Records and Well and Boring Sealing Records – at the MDH Well Management Section.
- City, Township, or County Officials – may have records of wells on a property, such as through building, water connection, or sewer permits.
- Municipal water department – may have record of when public water supply was provided to property. If home or facility predates this connection, the property likely has one or more wells.
- Sanborn Fire Insurance maps and Fire Underwriters Inspection Bureau (a.k.a. Fisher) maps (well information for commercial or industrial properties), available at Minnesota History Center and at University of Minnesota Wilson Library.
- Old photographs of the property.
- Aerial photographs of property (may show windmills, well houses) – available at local Soil and Water Conservation District office or at: msrmaps.com
- County plat books (Minnesota History Center, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, County Records/Auditors).
- Topographic maps – locations of buildings and roads.

Equipment and Tools for Well Contractors

- Metal locators and magnetometers (i.e., fluxgate magnetic pipe locator or proton magnetometer).
- Tape measure or “snake” to follow pipes (i.e., Sondes, pipe locators, or tracers).
- Ground-penetrating radar (outlining buried structures).
- Excavation equipment including shovels, hammers, chisels, backhoe.
- Small rotary hammer or corer, bits, extensions, vacuum.

Visit the MDH Well Management Section Web site at: www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/wells.

To request this document in another format, call 651-201-4600. Deaf and hard-of-hearing: TTY 651-201-5797.