



RealEstateJournal

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL *Guide to Property*

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Use Basic Sleuth Skills To Locate Homeowners

By **JAMES R. HAGERTY**
Special to RealEstateJournal

Question: I am interested in purchasing vacant, distressed properties in my neighborhood, but I am finding it difficult to get in touch with the people who actually own them. Some of these houses seem to be held up in probate court as families battle over who will get the proceeds from the sale of the property. What can I do to get the owners of these dwellings to make me an offer so I can buy them?

-- *Alain, location not provided*

Alain: Call or visit the tax department in your county hall, suggests William Bronchick, author of "Wealth Protection Secrets of a Millionaire Real Estate Investor" (Dearborn Trade, 2003) and other real-estate investing books. If you have the property address, the county should be able to give you public records showing who is responsible for paying taxes there. After you have a name, it's a question of "basic sleuth work" to track down the person, Mr. Bronchick says. One approach is to ask the post office for any forwarding address for the previous occupant. Another is to ask the neighbors what they know about the house and its owners. "You'd be surprised at how much information the neighbors will give you," says Steve Berges, another real-estate author, who buys and rehabilitates houses in Michigan.

-- *Mr. Hagerty is a staff reporter for The Wall Street Journal. His "House Talk" column appears most Fridays on RealEstateJournal.com. [E-mail him](#) your questions about the residential real-estate market. Please include your first name and city and state. If your question is answered and posted, we will show your first name and city. Due to volume of mail received, we regret that we cannot answer every question.*

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