

Interpreting Historic Certificates of Occupancy (CO)

Information Sheet

Background:

The Department began issuing Certificates of Occupancy (COs) in 1969. Since then, both record-keeping practices and the Building Code have evolved. This instruction sheet explains when CO information exists, how to interpret it, and what actions may be required when a CO cannot be located.

When interpreting historic records, it is essential to consider both:

- The record-keeping method used at the time.
- The Building Code classifications that were in effect.

Before proceeding, review the Department's [CO Information Sheet](#) to understand when and under what conditions a CO is required.

Record Keeping by Time Period

1969 – 1999

During this period, CO-related information was maintained in permit books, including:

1. Whether a CO was issued
2. Use and occupancy classification
3. Construction classification
4. Presence of sprinkler systems

How to search:

- The CO record in [Atlas](#) links to the scanned permit book page.
- You must manually search that page for the property address to locate the relevant entry.

Important notes:

- Although most historic records were scanned, gaps exist. The absence of an entry does not always mean a CO was not issued.
- Permit book information establishes a legal use and occupancy, but it is not a Certificate of Occupancy.
- If a Certificate is required, search zoning records in Atlas. If none is found, a new CO application with plans must be filed.
- COs were generally not issued for buildings used solely as one- and two-family dwellings during this period.

2000 – March 2020

- All CO information was retained electronically.
- The CO available in Atlas is a replica generated from the system of record.
- Core building information is accurate; however, some administrative fields (e.g., Building Code Official) may be blank or reflect the information at the time records were replicated.

If no CO is found:

- The Department did not issue a CO under that property address during this period.

March 2020 – Present

- The Department retains all issued Certificates of Occupancy.
- The CO available in Atlas is the actual Certificate issued upon project completion.

If no CO is found:

- The Department did not issue a CO under that property address during this period.

Historic Building Code Information

Building use classifications and construction types have changed across Building Code editions. The tables below are intended to assist in interpreting historic records using today’s terminology.

The accompanying tables identify:

- [The Effective Building Code by construction period](#)
- [The Use and Occupancy Classification under the code in effect and its current code equivalent](#)
- [The Construction Type under the code in effect and its current code equivalent](#)

Use this table to identify which Building Code may be in effect based on the date of permit or CO issuance.

Effective Building Codes	
Date of Issuance	Code in Effect
1969 – 3/7/1971	1969 Philadelphia Building Code
3/8/1971 – 12/27/1983	1973 Philadelphia Building Code
12/28/1983 – 12/21/1987	1981 BOCA Code
12/22/1987 – 4/10/1991	1987 BOCA Code
4/11/1991 – 3/18/1997	1990 BOCA Code
3/19/1997 – 12/17/2003	1997 Philadelphia Building Code (Incorporating 1996 BOCA Code)
12/18/2003 – 12/19/2006	2004 Philadelphia Building Code (incorporating 2003 International Building Code)
12/20/2006 – 2/16/2010	2007 Philadelphia Building Code (incorporating 2006 International Building Code)
2/17/2010 – 9/30/2018	2010 Philadelphia Building Code (incorporating 2009 International Building Code)
10/1/2018 – 12/31/2025	2019 Philadelphia Building Code (incorporating 2018 International Building Code)
1/1/2026 – Present	2021 Philadelphia Building Code (incorporating 2021 International Building Code)

Use this table to find the equivalent occupancy classification under the current code based on the date of permit or CO issuance.

Use and Occupancy Equivalency Guide

Use Description	1969 - 12/27/1983	12/28/1983 - 12/21/1987	12/22/1987- 4/10/1991	4/11/1991 - 12/17/2003	12/18/2003 - Current
Assembly – Gathering for civic, social or religious functions, recreation, food or drink consumption.	A	A	A	A	A
Assembly use w/ fixed seating, intended for production and viewing of performing art or motion picture	F-1A / F-1B	A-1A / A-1B	A-1	A-1	A-1
Assembly use intended for food and drink consumption	F-2 ^d	A-2 / A-3 ^c	A-2 / A-3 ^c	A-2 / A-3 ^c	A-2
Assembly use intended for worship, recreation or amusement and other assembly not classified elsewhere.	F-3	A-3 ^c / A-4 ^a	A-3 ^c / A-4	A-3 ^c / A-4	A-3
Assembly use intended for viewing of indoor sporting events and activities with spectator seating	F-3	A-3	A-3	A-3	A-4
Assembly use intended for participation in or viewing outdoor activities	F-5	A-5	A-5	A-5	A-5
Business – Office, professional or service-type transactions, storage of records and accounts.	E	B	B	B	B
Educational – Six or more persons at any one time for educational purposes through the 12 th grade.	F-4	A-4 ^a	E	E	E
Factory Industrial – Assembling, disassembling, fabricating, finishing, manufacturing, packaging, repair or processing operations.	D	F	F	F	F
Moderate – Hazard Industrial use involving processes and manufacturing operations involving machinery or combustible materials that present moderate fire or safety risks.	D-1	F	F-1	F-1	F-1
Low – Hazard Industrial use involving manufacturing of brick, glass, ice, or food-product that present minimum fire or safety risks.	D-2	F	F-2	F-2	F-2

Use Description	1969 - 12/27/1983	12/28/1983 - 12/21/1987	12/22/1987- 4/10/1991	4/11/1991 - 12/17/2003	12/18/2003 - Current
High-Hazard – Manufacturing, processing, generation or storage of materials that constitute a physical or health hazard (e.g. flammable liquids, explosives, toxins).	A	H	H	H	H
High-Hazard use containing materials that pose detonation hazard	A	H	H	H-1	H-1
High-Hazard use containing materials that pose a deflagration hazard or a hazard from accelerated burning	A	H	H	H-2	H-2
High-Hazard use containing materials that readily support combustion or that pose a physical hazard	A	H	H	H-3	H-3
High-Hazard use containing material that is health hazard	A	H	H	H-4	H-4
High-Hazard use intended for semiconductor fabrication facilities and comparable research and development areas in which hazardous production materials are used	A	H	H	F-1	H-5
Institutional – Care or supervision provided to persons who are or are incapable of self-preservation without physical assistance or are detained for penal or correctional purposes.	G	I	I	I	I
Institutional use intended for housing more than 16 people on a 24-hr. basis, who live in a supervised residential environment that provides personal care services. The occupants are capable of responding to an emergency situation without physical assistance from staff.	G-1 ^b / G-2 ^b	I-2 ^b	I-1 ^b	I-1 ^b	I-1
Institutional use intended for medical, surgical, psychiatric, nursing or custodial care for persons who are not capable of self-preservation.	G-1 ^b / G-2 ^b	I-2 ^b	I-2	I-2	I-2
Institutional use occupied by more than 5 persons who are generally incapable of self-preservation due to security measures not under the occupants' control.	G-1	I-1	I-3	I-3	I-3
Institutional use occupied by more than 5 persons of any age who receive custodial care for less than 24 hr.	G-2	I-2	I-2	I-2	I-4

Use Description	1969 - 12/27/1983	12/28/1983 - 12/21/1987	12/22/1987 - 4/10/1991	4/11/1991 - 12/17/2003	12/18/2003 - Current
Mercantile – Display and sale of merchandise, and involving stocks of goods, wares or merchandise.	C-1 / C-2	M	M	M	M
Residential – Sleeping purposes not categorized as an Institutional Group I	H	R	R	R	R
Residential use intended for sleeping units where occupants are transient in nature	H-1	R-1	R-1	R-1	R-1
Residential use intended for more than 2 dwelling units where occupants are primarily permanent in nature	H-2	R-2	R-2	R-2	R-2
Residential use where occupants are primarily permanent in nature, and not classified as R-1, R-2, R-4 or I	H-3	R-3	R-3	R-3	R-3
Residential use intended for residential care/assisted living facilities including more than five but not more than 16 occupants including staff	G-1 ^b / G-2 ^b	I-2 ^b	I-1 ^b	I-1 ^b	R-4
Storage – Storage that is not classified as a hazardous occupancy	B	S	S	S	S
Moderate-hazard storage intended for storage of combustible materials presenting stricter fire risk (e.g. paper, lumber, furniture)	B-1	S-1	S-1	S-1	S-1
Low-hazard storage intended for storage of noncombustible materials with minimal fire risk (e.g. metal, glass, stone)	B-2	S-2	S-2	S-2	S-2
Utility and Miscellaneous – Accessory or miscellaneous structures not categorized in any specific occupancy (e.g. sheds, garages, barns, towers, carports)	M	T	U	U	U

- ^a Group A-4 use for churches, schools, colleges, child day care centers and for similar education and religious purposes.
^b Occupied by more than five but not more than 16 occupants.
^c Restaurants were categorized as Group A-3. Group A-3 restaurants are now categorized as Group A-2 in the current code.
^d Use group of restaurants not specifically indicated.

Use this table to find the equivalent Construction Type under the current code based on the date of permit or CO issuance.

Construction Type Equivalency Guide

Note:

There was no change in Construction Types after 12/18/2003 to current.

1969 – 12/27/1983	12/18/2003 - Current	12/28/1983 – 12/21/1987	12/18/2003 - Current	12/22/1987 - 12/17/2003	12/18/2003 - Current
IA (NC/P)	IA*	1A (NC/P)	IA**	1A (NC/P)	IA**
IB (NC/P)	IB*	1B (NC/P)	IA	1B (NC/P)	IA
II (NC/P)	IIA*	2A (NC/P)	IB	2A (NC/P)	IB
IIB (NC/P)	IIA*	2B (NC/P)	IIA	2B (NC/P)	IIA
III (HT)	IV	2C (NC/UP)	IIB	2C (NC/UP)	IIB
IVA (NC-C/P)	IIIA	3A (HT)	IV	3A (NC-C/P)	IIIA
IVB (NC-C/UP)	IIIB	3B (NC-C/P)	IIIA	3B (NC-C/UP)	IIIB
V (NC/UP)	IIB	3C (NC-C/UP)	IIIB	4 (HT)	IV
VIA (C/P)	VA	4A (C/P)	VA	5A (C/P)	VA
VIB (C/UP)	VB	4B (C/UP)	VB	5B (C/UP)	VB

NC = Noncombustible C = Combustible P = Protected UP = Unprotected

* There is no equivalent construction in the current code – The construction exceeds the requirements of the current construction equivalent with the exception of the roof and supporting members may have a reduction in minimum fire-resistant rating.

** There is no equivalent construction in the current code – The construction exceeds the requirements of the current construction equivalent.

When a New or Duplicate CO is Required

If a Certificate of Occupancy is required:

- To update use or construction classifications to an existing CO to correlate to current Code, you may apply for a duplicate CO through a [virtual or in-person permit appointment](#).
- To obtain a formal Certificate where only permit book entries exist or construction pre-dates floor plans, you must [apply for a new CO](#) and include floor plans.

Disclaimer - Historic information is provided to assist property owners in confirming the legal use of a building. Older records may be incomplete, and property addresses may have changed over time. The Department cannot guarantee the completeness or accuracy of all historic records.