

Photographic Resources for Urban History in the Public Archives

A. J. Birrell

Number 2, June 1972

Resources for the Study of Urban History in the Public Archives of Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020632ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020632ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Birrell, A. J. (1972). Photographic Resources for Urban History in the Public Archives. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (2), 11–13.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1020632ar>

Photographic Resources for Urban History in the Public Archives

Whatever the interest of the urban historian, he is still likely to consult the pictorial resources available to him only for the most trivial purposes.

For example, he will use photographs as interesting adjuncts to the finished product of his research, as in inserts in books. Maps, census reports, parish and city registers, newspapers, and manuscripts of various types remain his major resources. Only in the past few decades have audio-visual records available in the form of paintings, lithographs, photographs, films and tapes begun to attract the serious attention of archivists and historians as important primary resources. They are now beginning to explore the contents of pictures just as they do other forms of documentation. There will be problems and new techniques may have to be developed, but the historian may soon use the visual media to 'write' his history instead of the traditional book.

Much documentation of Nineteenth Century Canadian cities has been destroyed, but surprising riches remain and active steps are being taken to locate and preserve them. The Public Archives' National Photograph Collection, with more than two million photos, represents the largest,

and probably the most accessible, aggregation in the country. It is impossible within the scope of this article to elaborate on all the material available. The following remarks are intended only as guides to indicate the range of material and the contents of some of the larger collections.

The WILLIAM J. TOPLEY Collection is one of the largest and most comprehensive in the National Photograph Collection and is second only to the Notman Collection in Montreal as a record of Nineteenth Century Canada. Topley came to Ottawa in 1868 as manager of the new Notman studio there and later purchased the business. During the fifty-eight years of his career, Topley was recognized as one of the leading photographers in Ottawa. In addition to portraits of many of Canada's most prominent politicians, the collection contains extensive coverage of Ottawa. One can trace its growth from a sleepy lumbering town in 1865 to a bustling and relatively wealthy city in 1900. The city spreads, the buildings increase in size and the streets become more and more jammed with traffic and poles carrying myriad wires in every direction.

A good record of Toronto has been preserved as well. Some of the earliest photographs of Toronto are those found in a book of original prints entitled TORONTO IN THE CAMERA, published in 1867. Here are depicted the major

streets and buildings of the city at the time of Confederation. The 1870s are represented by about twenty negatives of downtown Toronto taken by the same photographer, but found in two different collections - ALEXANDRA STUDIO AND MIKE FILEY. The emphasis is the same as in the previous photos. FRANK MICKLETHWAITE came to Toronto from Ireland and set up his own studio in 1878. He soon gained prominence as a photographer but most of his negatives were lost or destroyed over the years. What remain are about five hundred excellent negatives of Toronto from 1890 to 1910. These photos depict the busy downtown streets of the period, the stately residences of the upper middle class, the churches, for which the city was famous, and the major buildings of note. They are therefore of interest to the historian of architecture as well as to the more general urban historian.

It should be noted that all the collections mentioned so far were published in various forms, and were taken with that view in mind. Late in the Nineteenth Century when reproduction of photos in books became practical, many cities produced pamphlets of half-tone reproductions which extolled the virtues of each city. Both Topley's and Micklethwaite's photos present this idealized picture.

A different outlook is presented in the TORONTO TRANSIT COLLECTION. Here the changes in the city and its growth are reflected in the increas-

ing need for more, and more effective, transportation. Of particular interest in this context is a series of photos taken in the 1930s showing extreme traffic congestion in downtown Toronto, which hampered the effectiveness of busses and street cars. Another section shows the amount of labour involved in laying and repairing street car lines.

The coming of the electric street car in the 1890s helped to extend the boundaries of the city dweller. Consequently amusement parks like those in Aylmer, Quebec, and Britannia Beach outside of Ottawa became practical and enjoyed great popularity. The WILLIAM HARMER Collection shows some aspects of this form of entertainment.

Since Daguerre first announced his invention in 1839 amateurs have played an important role in photography. As might be expected, their work presents a totally different perspective on city life than does that of the professional. JOHN BOYD, a Toronto amateur who worked for the Grand Trunk Railway, was one of the better amateurs. He began photographing in 1888, taking his equipment with him on his travels with the railway. What resulted was a personal view of the cities and towns he visited showing city growth, industrial pollution, recreation, transportation and middle class life over a period of fifty years.

The H.J. WOODSIDE Collection contains the work of another amateur for the same period. While Woodside was neither as discerning nor as capable a photographer as Boyd, the large body of material on Dawson City

and the Klondike mines at the height of the 1898 Gold Rush and shortly afterwards adds another dimension to the coverage of the professionals. Woodside took his camera into the houses of Dawson away from the garish and celebrated hotels on the river front. What emerges is a picture of ordinary men and women living ordinary lives under difficult conditions. This is certainly a far cry from the often sensational photographs of E.A. Hegg found in the NATIONAL MUSEUM Collection among others. Hegg captured the excitement of the mines, the dance halls, the gold and the boom days of Dawson; Woodside shows how life was after the excitement died down.

There are a number of collections relating to the Klondike Gold Rush, and taken together they provide an interesting history of the rise of Dawson from a single tent in 1897 through its halcyon days to its decline - all within about ten years. The relatively large number of general views of the city clearly show the stages of its growth.

Many aspects of modern urban life have been covered by press photographers and there are a number of excellent press collections in the Archives which are added to on a monthly basis. The largest and most comprehensive at present is the MONTREAL GAZETTE Collection which covers the Montreal scene from 1938 to 1968. In Toronto the ALEXANDRA STUDIO

Collection gives similar coverage though in less detail for the years 1920 to 1950. Both the GLOBE & MAIL and TORONTO STAR Collections present a total view of Toronto, but only go back to 1968. In Ottawa the DOMINION WIDE and the CAPITAL PRESS Collections cover events in the capital.

THE CENTENNIAL COMMISSION and EXPO '67 Collections are specialized but very thorough, the former encompassing the whole of Canada. The NATIONAL FILM BOARD Collection brings together photographs on a wide variety of subjects all across Canada. Much of this collection bears directly on city life from the 1940s to the early sixties.

I have mentioned only some of the outstanding collections in the National Photograph Collection; the list is far from exhaustive. It is impossible to attempt to describe the range of material contained in any of these collections. However, it is true also that there are large gaps in our coverage of all the major Canadian cities. These will be filled in time as we continue to search across the country for photographs of historical importance. In the meantime there is something of substance on most cities, and in many cases we can direct researchers to other institutions and individuals having important material.

A.J. Birrell

Historical Photographs Section