

The City of Toronto Archives

R. Scott James

Number 3-73, February 1974

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020598ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020598ar>

[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

James, R. S. (1974). The City of Toronto Archives. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (3-73), 2–9. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020598ar>

THE CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES

As early as 1887 the issue of an Archives for the City of Toronto had been raised in Council, but still nothing had been done by 1956 when the management consultants J.D. Woods & Gordon were surveying the civic administration. Acting on one of the recommendations, City Council in 1959 created a Records Unit in the City Clerk's Department and appointed, in 1960, a City Archivist - the first in English-speaking Canada

The Records Unit, now the Records and Archives Division, comprises two Sections. Central Records performs a records management function, helping the creating agencies determine the functional value of their records and housing those records during the non-current portion of their retention period. The Archives is concerned with those records which are either permanently held or have completed their retention period and are considered by the Archivist to have historical value. Both Sections are directed by the City Archivist who reports to the City Clerk.

On assuming his post in 1960 the Archivist, Robert Woadden, was confronted by the results of 126 years of unsystematic record keeping. Storage and maintenance of records had been a department responsibility and most material found its way into the Old City Hall attic where security was minimal and environmental control nil. Once a record ceased to have a functional value to the creating department, the historian was forced to rely for its continued existence upon the foresight (or even whim) of the individual employee.

In 1965, with the completion of the new City Hall, the Archives transferred to quarters where conditions most favourable to the preservation of records on paper now obtain. Having begun his work with the assistance of just one secretary, the City Archivist now has a staff of 11 in Central Records and four in the Archives. In the last two years both areas have also had help from temporary staff acquired under a Provincial-Municipal Employment Incentives Program and through civic summer employment funds.

Accessibility

The City Archives is open to all between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. each weekday. No appointment is necessary though, naturally, notice of a projected visit enables the archivist to prepare to assist the researcher.

With the exception of those gifts to the Archives upon which the donor has imposed restrictions, all records held by the Records and Archives Division are subject to an accessibility policy adopted by City Council on October 24, 1973. Very briefly, this policy provides that those records outside the meaning of Section 216 (1) of the Ontario Municipal Act, R.S.O. 1970, are available for research immediately upon accession by the Archives. Records designated by Section 216 (1), mostly departmental records, are available with the permission of the Head of the creating department and, once made available, are considered open to all from then on. A rider adopted on October 29, 1973 provides that those records scheduled for permanent retention in Central Records (e.g. Leases, Deeds, Agreements) be considered to have been accessioned by the Archives on completion of 25 years following transfer to Central Records.

The adoption of this liberal policy represents, particularly in light of the sensitivity displayed in the past by municipal politicians, a significant step forward in governmental recognition of the public's "right to know".

Archival Holdings

The Archives is, almost exclusively, a repository for City of Toronto government records, dating from the incorporation of the City in 1834. These include the Minutes and papers of Council, its Committees, Boards and Authorities; records of civic departments; records of municipalities annexed by the City (e.g. Village of Yorkville and, more recently, the Village of Forest Hill); papers of elected officials and prominent civic employees; photographs; maps; and a collection of "museum objects", largely gifts to the City by official visitors. In all, there are approximately 3,500 linear feet of records

in the Archives. Central Records holds some 18,500 linear feet plus over 300,000 plans relating to building permits.

Central to the collection are the Minutes of Council, Bylaws and Assessment Rolls, all of which date from 1834. The Minutes, a remarkably full record of Council decisions and the information on which they were based, are completely indexed. Minutes for 1834-1859, unindexed until 1973 and in manuscript form, are now available (owing to a recent Provincial-Municipal Employment Incentives project) as indexed typescripts. Assessment Rolls, full of (quantifiable) data on Toronto property and population, are in great demand by students of urban history and geography. These rolls, together with Bylaws and Minutes, are being microfilmed - both for security and increased ease of access.

Records of Council Committees, Boards and Authorities are less complete and date, for the most part, from the late nineteenth century. A good example would be the Minutes and Correspondence of the former Board of Control (the equivalent of the present Executive Committee) which are complete from 1896-1969. This powerful Board, elected City-wide since 1904, dealt with important business matters some of which never came before the full Council. Only a letterbook and some correspondence of the Board's predecessor have survived. While Minutes of the Committees on Works and Parks have survived from the 1850's, papers of these Committees, and all records of other Standing Committees are extant only from the 1920's. Records of most Special Committees since the 1880's still exist.

An important recent accession was the records of the Housing Authority of Toronto, 1947-1968, which developed the first public housing project in Canada - Regent Park North. The Authority's functions were assumed in 1968 by the Ontario Housing Corporation.

As yet no special finding aids have been created for Committee records. This has not been a priority because the indexes of the Minutes, where they exist, provide adequate access to the information. More analytical work is expected to be made possible by a recently approved increase in staff.

Departmental records, without even the protection usually afforded records of policy decisions by elected official, have suffered more than those of Committees. Accounting records alone are available continuously from 1834; Parks and Legal Department material exists from the 1880's, but little else remains from the period prior to the First World War.

One case well illustrates the losses which can result from the lack of a records management program. The Mayor's Letterbook 1834-1844 is full of fascinating glimpses of the Mayor at work, contemporary social conditions and the business of civic government in general - then a break in the series extends from 1845 to 1961. Similarly an over-zealous interpretation of Ontario election law has left very few Voters Lists prior to 1957.

Some most useful departmental records have survived intact. Aside from those already mentioned, researchers have recently 'discovered' Building Permit records. These consist of the counter-foils (stubs) of permits issued since 1882 and reveal the applicant's name, the location, nature and cost of the proposed building or alteration. By the mid-1890's the names of architects and contractors are being included. Used in conjunction with Assessment Rolls and with City Directories and Goad's Atlases (good collections of both being available in the City Archives) these records provide a mass of valuable information regarding the growth of Toronto.

In 1883 the City embarked on a program of territorial expansion which by 1912 had more than doubled Toronto's acreage. Among the annexations were six municipalities many of whose records, notably Minutes, Assessment Rolls and Bylaws, are now in the City Archives - another virtually untapped source of information concerning the period of the City's most dramatic growth. Transcribing and indexing of the Minutes is in progress.

A continuing campaign is under way to establish the City Archives, in the minds of municipal politicians, as a suitable repository for personal papers. Recent donations by two former Mayors (Nathan Phillips

and William Dennison) and several Aldermen are encouraging signs. Access to such papers is controlled by the wishes of the individual donor.

The City's photograph collection has received a great deal of attention from both the Archives staff and the general public. It consists of approximately 15,000 prints and 25,000 negatives, most of which were produced by the City Works Department's Photography and Blueprinting Section between the early 1890's and the early 1950's when the Section was discontinued. Most of these document daily operations of the Department - the building of bridges, the laying of street railway tracks, the widening of roads. The Section also worked on consignment for other departments producing, for example, a moving record of slum conditions in Toronto c.1912-1920 for the Health Department, and over 2,000 pictures of parks 1912-1945.

The negative collection is arranged as produced - chronologically by Series (e.g. Health, Parks) and, while there is not yet an index, there is a descriptive inventory. The print collection is arranged largely by subject and is indexed. Xeroxed copies of prints give the researcher quick and easy reference without danger to the originals. Limited quantities of reproductions are available at the discretion of the City Archivist.

The map collection remains in the first stages of organization but includes numerous useful and several important items, among which are a 1793 map of Toronto harbour by Joseph Bouchette, sundry plans by John G. Howard made between 1835 and 1864 and the original linen plans of the Old City Hall (see illustration).

The staff of the City Archives is acutely aware of the problems of conservation. Even given perfect environmental conditions the lifetime of a record is determined very much by its medium and the handling it receives. Many simple measures, such as using acid-free containers, can be taken by the responsible archivist. For more complex operations, such as the restoration of a valuable document, we are fortunate in Toronto in having available the advice and services of the

Conservation Department of the Royal Ontario Museum. In addition, the utility of microfilm for the security of vital records is appreciated, provided that the strictest quality controls are observed. The Archives' budget for conservation, now a significant proportion of the total budget, will ensure so far as possible that the use of records will not be hampered by their physical deterioration.

Future Plans

Future growth and direction of the Archives depends, naturally, upon the value placed on its services by those who use them - City Council, the civic service and the general public. Prevailing conditions in Toronto are favourable: the number of researchers using the Archives has risen dramatically from 476 in 1968 to over 3,000 in 1973. And the growing awareness among Canadians of the importance of their heritage is reflected in the current City Council. The Archives has been encouraged, for example, to submit for the first time a budget for the acquisition of historical material - the sum to be recommended is \$150,000 over five years.

It is also hoped that Central Records will develop as a Central Microfilming Unit for the City, both as a logical administrative convenience and to guarantee archival standards of production. Already, with one 35mm planetary camera in full-time operation, the most exacting quality controls in use in Canada are being applied by the staff of Central Records - processed film is tested for physical and photographic defects, residual Thiosulfate, resolution, density and reduction ratio.

Present priorities in archival tasks include completion of the index to the photograph collection, a detailed analysis of Committee records and the organization and proper housing of the map collection. Priorities are constantly being re-arranged to accommodate the needs of the civic service or of researchers - with time and staff in short supply the archivist has a clear obligation to be pragmatic. While there are many indications that the service provided by the Archives is

widely appreciated, there are areas where improvement in facilities is needed - the photoduplication service, presently very limited, is such an area. It remains to be seen whether the support of its patrons, and political and economic conditions in the coming years, will allow the Archives to continue to improve.

R. Scott James

MUNICIPAL AND COUNTY BUILDINGS

TORONTO. JULY. 1887.

This Plan was signed by the Architects as the original Plan submitted to the Corporation and includes all changes suggested in connection with the execution of the work by and under the supervision of the Corporation.

Signatures of Architects

<i>M. L. Hillier & Co. Architects</i>	<i>Execution drawn, ruled, cut stone, and brick work</i>
<i>1882 J. H. Sturges</i>	<i>Structures and masonry work</i>
<i>1883 J. H. Sturges</i>	<i>Iron, founder and blacksmiths work</i>
<i>1884 J. H. Sturges</i>	<i>Carpenter and joinery work</i>
<i>1885 J. H. Sturges</i>	<i>Carved and painted work</i>
<i>1886 J. H. Sturges</i>	<i>Painting and distempering work</i>
<i>1887 J. H. Sturges</i>	<i>Plumbing, gas, heating, steam, and sanitary work</i>



SCALE 8 FT | IN

FRONT ELEVATION

ARCHITECTS
 100, QUEEN ST. W.
 E. J. ENNOX, DESIGNER

*E. J. Ennox
 (Architect)
 March 1887*

Reduction from original linen plan of 'Old' City Hall