

Urban History Resources in the Paintings, Drawings and Prints Section

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

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URBAN HISTORY RESOURCES IN THE
PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS AND PRINTS
SECTION

In the past few years, especially since the Centennial, which generated a spate of illustrated books, the illustrated history or the history written by pictures alone has gradually become more plausible. The Kerr and Davidson book A Visual History of Canada is one example and W.K. Lamb's recent foray into the genre, Canada's Five Centuries, is another. But in the desire for maximum and most effective illustration from the book marketing point of view, the most appropriate document often has been passed over for the best picture in terms of print quality, the best known picture or the most curious picture. In addition little account was taken of the peculiarities of the engraving, lithography and photography processes which generate, by the token of the medium, distortions and omissions. Similarly in using original water-colours and drawings, little account was taken of the effects of such movements as the Picturesque and classicism which had a decided effect on the way people saw the world in the 18th and 19th centuries.

With these cautionary comments in mind, the collections of the Paintings, Drawings and Prints Section present a major resource still to be exploited by the urban historian conscious of the issues of urban

living which have their origins at the very beginning of our historical development. The country is regionally well-covered by the Section's collection insofar as the country was settled and the military officers, illustrator-journalists and artists were present; however, west of the Lakehead the documentation is usually photographic since photography became the medium of record after the 1860's.

Paintings and prints present a peculiar graphic representation of population densities, scale of the urban centres, architectural concentrations, both from a plan point of view and in space. Urban historians interested in the influence of architectural scale, concentration of buildings and aesthetics on the human environment will find the Section's collections a useful record of the street level existence in the major population centres before 1850. The further back into the collection we dig the closer the researcher approaches the period which saw the great proliferation of books almost always containing at least one illustration of the most curious phenomenon described in the text. In the 17th century, and even more so in the 18th and 19th, views of faraway lands and exotic places captured the attention of both the publisher and the reader to the extent that the mid-18th century saw portfolios of pictures

published as books. The print collection of the Public Archives contains all of the major and most of the minor representations of the fledgling urban centres of the colony in the 17th and 18th century from the well known Ramusio view-map of Hochelaga (Montreal) to the sophisticated views of Richard Short of Quebec and Halifax.

The 19th century is covered in both prints and water-colours. In this latter category the collection is strong in topographical drawings made by the British officers. The 20th century is represented by the Wilson collection which recorded many of the historically important buildings and neighbourhoods in Canada in 1967, some of which have vanished since.

While by no means exhaustive the following notes will suggest both the types of material available and concentrations in the collections in the Paintings, Drawings and Prints Section of the Public Archives.

Because of its central position in the development of Canada Quebec is well represented in prints and water-colours; the collection of water-colours executed by the British military officers is unsurpassed for the period from the 1760's to 1850.

London and Chatham, 19th century Upper Canadian garrison centres, are recorded in the water-colours of P.J. Bainbrigge, H.F. Ainslie,

G.R. Dartnell and H.J. Warre.

E. Whitfield produced a series of large panoramic - bird's-eye view lithographs of all the major centres in mid 19th century eastern North America. Not only are the prints for the Canadian cities accessible, but also some of his sketchbooks in which he sketched single streets.

James Peachey, Assistant Deputy Surveyor-General to Samuel Holland, produced an interesting series of views of Cataraqui (Kingston) in its first formative year-and-a-half on the site of the old Fort Frontenac. Mrs. Cartwright in the early 1830's shows the town's later development.

George Heriot, onetime Deputy Postmaster-General, records the state of development of a variety of centres from the Maritimes to Niagara, all of which he saw in the course of his travels as a civil servant. Some of his panoramic views of Quebec are unique for their detail in the first decade of the 19th century.

Toronto, or York, Upper Canada, as it appears in the careful work of E.F. Hale, J. Hamilton, S. Stretton and W. Armstrong is sporadically traced through the 19th century from a row of houses along the water front to its relatively developed state in the 1850's.

Fortifications are a relevant subject for urban historians and there is a large selection of views of trading posts, military fortifications

and the like scattered throughout the collections.

For the period 1870-1884 the Canadian Illustrated News provides a considerable amount of data on Montreal, Toronto and Quebec from polluted water supplies with illustrations of the bacteria to strident editorials and telling pictures of the removal of a cemetery from downtown Montreal - urban renewal! Both the text and the pictorial portions of this periodical are valuable sources.

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Paintings

Drawings & Prints Section