

The National Map Collection

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Resources for the Study of Urban History in the Public Archives of
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The National Map Collection

The National Map Collection of the Public Archives of Canada holds over 13,000 maps, plans, charts and other related materials of Canadian urban centres, dating from the earliest extant plans to the most recently produced large-scale plan, and ranging in nature from general town plans to maps showing individual city lots. Until now, the demand from interior decorators for copies of these maps has probably exceeded the demand from urban historians. I expect this situation will change as maps gain in prominence among the documents consulted and researched by urban historians.

The urban historian's unawareness of the potential research value of maps is understandable. Maps are difficult to store, consult and reproduce; the format in which information is presented is extremely diverse. Consequently, the study of maps requires special analytical techniques with which historians have not traditionally been equipped.

Unfortunately, few descriptive catalogues exist which could be consulted by researchers unable to visit map repositories, and several years will pass before computerized print-outs listing the entire holdings of the National Map Collection and other map collections will be

available. At present, the National Map Collection can, for a small fee, supply xeroxed lists of the titles of maps and plans of major Canadian cities on file in the collection.

Information about the number of plans and maps and related materials for several cities can probably give urban historians an idea of the extent of the National Map Collection's holdings. For each of such cities as Quebec, Montreal, Kingston, Ottawa, and Toronto, there are approximately 350 to 450 maps, ranging from maps of individual lots to large scale maps showing all streets, major buildings and other features. The presence and activity of the military in these cities is largely responsible for this profusion of maps. Maps of each city's environs are also available, and are useful in studies of cities in their larger context.

For other centres such as St. John's, Halifax, Winnipeg and Vancouver there are approximately 100 to 150 maps each.

Also important for the urban historian are the numerous plans of structures, predominantly military and public, in the collection. For each of Quebec and Kingston, for example, there are well over one thousand such plans.

The nature of the collection can best be described by discussing the various types or groupings of maps.

The bulk of early maps of Canadian urban centres before 1800 consists of hand-made and photographic copies of maps produced predominantly by the military and held by French and British map repositories. In the early decades of the 20th century, the Public Archives had copyists in London and Paris making copies of documents relating to Canada. In recent years, microfilm and other photographic means of reproduction have replaced these copyists, and consequently, researchers are able to carry out much of their research into the 17th and 18th century development of Canadian cities without visiting the archives in London and Paris.

Topographic maps produced originally by the Department of Militia and Defence, and today called the National Topographic Series, are a principal source for the study of 20th century Canadian urban development. The scale of approximately one inch to the mile is sufficiently large to enable a very accurate study of the territorial expansion of a city and the construction of railways, hydro-electric power lines, factories and major buildings. For some cities, a large number of revised sheets were

printed. For example, the first Ottawa sheet in the series was printed in 1906 and more than a dozen revisions have been printed since that date. Recently, the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources has begun producing maps of urban centres at a larger scale of 1:25,000.

The collection of panoramic maps or bird's-eye views of Canadian cities consists of over fifty items. This type of map is a non-photographic depiction of a city as if viewed from above at an oblique angle. Although not generally drawn at scale, the bird's-eye view is a reasonably accurate visual representation of street patterns, individual buildings and major landscape features. The bird's-eye mapping technique flourished in the period 1870-1910, and several editions during this period are available for most of the major Canadian cities at that time.

Insurance atlases also constitute a rich source of historical information about Canadian urban centres. These atlases were used by insurance companies from approximately 1870 to 1930 to determine insurance premiums on structures. Each sheet of these atlases covers, as a rule, several city blocks and shows all existing structures. Various symbols and colours are used to indicate the type of material used in construction, the number of stories, the type of roofing and

various other architectural details.

A number of other types of maps should be mentioned. Maps of individual townships in the prairie provinces are invaluable in a study of the earliest years of prairie urban development. Plans produced by the Department of Public Works often show urban features such as wharves and bridges in detail not found on general town plans. British admiralty charts and Canadian hydrographic charts often locate such features as mills and breweries in and around Canadian cities. And useful bits of information are sometimes found on maps produced by the Geological Survey of Canada, in county atlases and in the extensive fortification surveys carried out just after the middle of the 19th century.

Finally, urban historians may also be interested in the non-Canadian materials in the National Map Collection. The large collection of original historical atlases and recently-produced facsimiles contains hundreds of town plans useful for comparative studies. And the Foreign Section of the National Map Collection holds a large collection of current foreign topographic maps and modern town plans of large cities outside Canada.

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