

## The City of Kingston Archives

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## THE CITY OF KINGSTON ARCHIVES

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*Anne MacDermaid*

Kingston's three centuries of existence have been filled with a wealth of interesting detail. In 1673, the establishment of a fort at the junction of the Cataraqui and St. Lawrence Rivers and Lake Ontario by Count Frontenac; the landing and settlement of the United Empire Loyalists in 1784 and following years; the excitement as a garrison town during the War of 1812 and the building of Fort Henry to protect the town; the incorporation as a town in 1838; the brief spell of glory as Capital of the United Canadas from 1841 to 1844; incorporation as a city in 1846; the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1861; the funeral of Sir John A. Macdonald in 1891; the establishment of several major industries from 1900 to 1960; the sailing Olympics of 1976--all combine to give a depth to Kingston's history and to provide intriguing avenues for scholarly exploration.

The presence in the town of many federal and provincial correctional, educational and health-care institutions has accounted for other unique features of Kingston's growth. The Portsmouth Penitentiary (1836), Queen's University (1841), Hotel Dieu Hospital (1845), Kingston General Hospital (1849), Royal Military College (1876) and the Kingston Prison for Women (1934), are but a few of the tax-free institutions that have made Kingston their home for many decades.

Useful insights into these and many other aspects of Kingston's history can be obtained from the extensive records held in the City of Kingston Archives. A city archives was formally established when Queen's University and the City of Kingston entered into the following agreement, approved by a meeting of City Council on June 26, 1972:

That all official records of the Corporation of the City of Kingston more than 30 years old and no longer required for administrative purposes should be under the care of professional archivists. We therefore recommend the acceptance of the Queen's University offer to make available the facilities of their Archives Department for this purpose. All records transferred shall remain the property of the

Corporation of the City of Kingston and will be known as the City of Kingston Archives. The archives shall be stored in locked, environment controlled archival stacks, arranged, described and made available under proper supervision to civic administrators, researchers and the general public.

The immediate impetus for the establishment of a city archives was the corporation's 1973 tercentenary project to renovate completely Kingston City Hall. City records held in the basement jail cells of City Hall had to be moved to secure quarters, and Queen's University offered to supply both space and professional care for the records. Discussions over a year between a City Records Committee and the University resulted in the 1972 agreement, designating the Queen's University Archivist as the Archivist of the City. The first Archivist in this dual role was Ian E. Wilson.

Five hundred linear feet of records in ancient, dusty wooden cases, were thus transferred to Queen's University for storage and care. The City Archives staff as an adjunct of Queen's Archives (personnel were one and the same) sorted and listed the holdings over a period of several months. Dust cloths, potassium lactate for leather bindings and an abundant of acid-free folders were used. A 75 page finding aid was drawn up and fully indexed, and a wealth of information began to shine forth. Included in the surprisingly complete holdings were almost a cubic foot of material related to the building of City Hall in the early 1840s; 84 feet of petitions, licenses, vouchers, bills, draft council minutes with particulars of votes, and correspondence sorted by year from 1838 to 1900; and invaluable other series.

The records start with the proceedings of the first town council in 1838 and continue to the present day. Many of the early minute books are indexed, and are a treasure trove of views on local and even national issues. In addition there are separate volumes for committee reports between 1842 and 1898, and for by-laws between 1838 and 1949. The minute books and correspondence of the Finance and Accounts Committee are also of interest. The story of the Fire Department between 1888 and 1936 is to be found in the records of the Committee on Fire and Light, where the story of Kingston's transition from gas lights to electricity is also detailed. There are scattered records for the Parks and

and Property Committees, fairly detailed records for the Board of Works between 1891 and 1936, and for the Board of Health around the same time. The correspondence of the City Clerk is complete from 1898 to 1938 and there are letterbooks from 1952 on as well as scattered letterbooks from 1852 to 1896. The records of the City Treasurer comprise an extensive collection of account books as do the records of the City Engineer.

The City Assessment Rolls, a series very heavily used by researchers, run from 1838 to 1934, and Tax Collector's rolls from 1850 to 1936. There is some census material, mostly for school children from 1891 to 1943, and population 1953 to 1969. Board of Trade minutes are complete up to 1927 and offer many insights into the aspirations of Kingston's business community. There are records for the Board of Police Commissioners, the Planning Boards and the Court of Revision

The City of Kingston Records are divided into five groups. Extensive records exist and are fully described in the inventory, for all of the following groups and series.

I. EXECUTIVE BRANCH. The elected officials. This is divided into the following series:

1. Mayor and Council
2. Finance and Accounts
3. Fire, Legislation and Housing
4. Parks, Recreation and Property
5. Public Works (formerly Board of Works)
6. Miscellaneous city committees: City Health, Civic Services, Industries, Printing, Streets and Improvements, Water Works, Railroads and Improvements.
7. Board of Health

II. ADMINISTRATIVE BRANCH. Appointed, salaried officials.

1. Clerk-Comptroller
2. City Treasurer
3. City Engineer (Includes Water Works, Sewers, and Local Improvements)
4. Assessment office
5. City Tax Collector

6. City Auditor
  7. City Solicitor
  8. Department of Social Welfare
- III. INDEPENDENT OR SEMI-INDEPENDENT BOARDS. Most of these are composed of both Aldermen and Citizens.
1. Board of Police Commissioners
  2. City of Kingston Planning Board
  3. Kingston Area Planning Board
- IV. COURTS
1. Court of Revision
  2. Recorders' Court
- V. MISCELLANEOUS CITY RECORDS
1. Fire Department
  2. Population Census
  - 3-18. Committee minutes, scrapbooks, boxes of letters, receipts, petitions, licenses, building permits, arbitration cases, etc.
  19. Kingston Tercentenary Committee
  20. Board of Trade
- VI. PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION
- A. Minutes
  - B. Account Books
  - C. Financial Statements
  - D. Accounts
  - E. Registers
  - F. Daily Report Books
  - G. Services
  - H. Miscellaneous
- VII. BOARD OF EDUCATION
- A. Minutes
  - B. Correspondence
  - C. Account Books
  - D. Contracts
  - E. School Taxes

## VIII. VILLAGE OF PORTSMOUTH

1. Correspondence
2. Assessment and Court Revision
3. School Board Records
4. Petitions
5. Re Voting
6. Contracts
7. Minutes and Resolutions
8. Financial Records
9. Legal Records
10. Miscellaneous
11. Bound Volumes
12. Assessment Rolls

Since the establishment of the City Archives the City has co-operated wholeheartedly in sending continuing accessions of series to the Archives, and in supporting conservation aid to the collection.

The City Archives enjoys an almost symbiotic relationship with its companion Queen's University Archives. With over 6,000 feet of papers and records and six staff members, Queen's Archives is one of the largest university archives in Canada. About one-third of its holdings are regional in nature. Among these holdings are eighty-one feet of records of the Kingston Chamber of Commerce, including correspondence, minutes, scrapbooks, newsletters, brochures and plans. Five feet of House of Industry records from 1848 to 1916 detail the activities of this home for indigent Kingstonians. Fifty-four feet of records of the Canadian Federation of Mayors and Municipalities provide a national viewpoint on urban issues. The 1,500 William Newlands Architectural Drawings of Kingston homes, businesses and institutions from 1880 to 1920 provide a rich resource. Local business records such as the Kirkpatrick-Nickle legal records, Calvin Company, R.J. Reid, Joseph Abramsky, and numerous others reflect business growth in Kingston and area. Private papers such as those of the Calvin Family, Cartwrights, Tetts, Baxters, Herchmers, Fairfields, Kirbys, and many others detail business and personal relationships in the region.

The shared-quarters arrangement with Queen's Archives appears to have succeeded completely with both users and staff benefiting. The combination of extensive City Archives and other local collections held in Queen's Archives has attracted a great number of users, both from the university and general community. City minutes have been used hand in hand with private papers, institutional records with citizens' petitions, assessment rolls with architectural drawings and the regional photograph collection. The City and University have thus joined successfully to provide a total research resource in this regional collection.

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ADDRESS: City of Kingston Archives  
c/o Queen's University Archives,  
Queen's University,  
Kingston, Ontario.  
K7L 5C4

TELEPHONE: Area 613 (547-3226)

HOURS: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday;  
7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday.  
Special weekend hours by appointment only.

RESTRICTIONS: Collections are open to researchers.

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