

# A Guide to Researching Building History

This brochure was designed to help you understand the types and sources of information available for researching the history of a specific residential or commercial property.

The time commitment required to complete your research will vary, depending on your interest and the extent of the information available from the sources presented in this guide.

There may be various fees associated with the retrieval or reproduction of information from some public and private sources.

Even though you consult all of the available sources, it's possible you won't find all of the answers to your questions, but you will know more than when you started.



Researching a building involves looking at two broad sources of information – *site specific information* and *contextual history information*.

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## Site Specific Information

Site specific information will provide you with details about:

- 🌸 date of construction
- 🌸 architect and builder
- 🌸 original layout and appearance
- 🌸 materials used in construction
- 🌸 assessed value of property at the time of construction and over time
- 🌸 renovations and physical improvements
- 🌸 original and subsequent owners
- 🌸 use and occupants
- 🌸 relationship to adjacent buildings and surrounding community

Site specific information must often be gathered from a variety of public and private sources, as detailed in the following pages. Even though you may follow up on all of these suggestions, it is possible that not all of the details will be found. Some sources of information may no longer exist or may never have existed, but it is worthwhile to do the site specific research.

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## Alberta registries and the Calgary Land Titles Office

The first step in researching the history of a property is to identify the title of the land on which the building sits. A land title search can provide details about original and subsequent ownership, lot size, and mortgages and liens that have been registered against the property. Land title searches can vary in depth, depending on how far back in time you want to go.

Land title searches can be conducted at any registry office. (Consult your *Yellow Pages* directory for *Licence & Registry Services* for a registry office near

you.) You can also access Service Alberta – Land Titles at [www.servicealberta.ca/LandTitles.cfm](http://www.servicealberta.ca/LandTitles.cfm).

When requesting a land title search, you will need to provide a legal description for the property in question. A property's legal description can be obtained from The City of Calgary either in person at the Property Tax Customer Service counter (see page 8 for further information), or online at [calgary.ca/cityonline](http://calgary.ca/cityonline). Legal descriptions are free of charge for the property owner, and subject to a fee for non-property owners.

### There are three types of land title searches that you can request.

- 🌸 The **Regular Search** can provide land title information going back to approximately 1990. A Regular Search can be requested through any registry office.
- 🌸 The **Historical Search** enables you to gather information on a specific land title registrant or date. When requesting this type of search you will need to have the specific name and year associated with the land title. You can begin your Historical Search at any registry office and if necessary, they will refer you to the Calgary Land Titles Office.
- 🌸 The **Back-to-Patent Search** will provide information on all land title transactions that have been recorded on the property. You can begin your Back-to-Patent Search at any registry office and they will refer you to the Calgary Land Titles Office if necessary.

### When conducting any type of land title search, it is important to note the following:

The name of the owner(s) identified on the title document does not necessarily imply that they were or are the resident(s) of the property.

The title itself will not show exactly when a building was constructed. The earliest indication of a mortgage might indicate that a building was constructed on the site at approximately the same time, but this should be confirmed by comparing the information with other sources, if possible.



# The City of Calgary Corporate Records, Archives

The City of Calgary's Archives holds records that you can research to learn information about the date of construction, original and subsequent ownership, the assessed value of a property and associated improvements, and details of construction. (See page 8 for further information about contacting the Archives.)

You will need the property's legal description to conduct property research at the Archives. A property's legal description can be obtained from The City of Calgary either in person at the Property Tax Customer Service counter (see page 8 for further information), or online at [calgary.ca/cityonline](http://calgary.ca/cityonline). Legal descriptions are free of charge for the property owner and subject to a fee for non-property owners.

## The following records will be of help in your research.

❁ The **Assessment History Cards** were produced between 1935 and 1950 and include a brief description of each Calgary building at one time during that period. Unfortunately, the cards were seldom dated on the initial collection of information. The cards usually have a record of the date of construction, building dimensions, construction materials, general condition, assessed value and record of inspections. Although the construction date is an estimate, you can confirm the date by using Assessment Rolls and building permit applications. A construction date can also be found using My Property: [calgary.ca/PDA/DBA/Pages/My-property-and-assessment/My-Property---Assessment.aspx](http://calgary.ca/PDA/DBA/Pages/My-property-and-assessment/My-Property---Assessment.aspx).

❁ The **Assessment Rolls** are compiled annually by a municipality in order to tax the value of the land and any improvements made to the property.

The roll will provide the name of the property owner(s), an assessed value of the property, and an assessed value for any buildings or development on the property. The first year that the property shows an assessment for any *improvements* is often an indicator of construction date. A substantial rise in the assessed value usually indicates new construction.

The early records also provide information on the amenities a building had when it was first constructed, such as electric lighting, sewer, water, gas connections and sidewalks. Since the early Assessment Rolls are organised by legal description (e.g. section, plan, lot and block number), and the later rolls are organised by roll number, it is helpful to have both when conducting your research.

❁ **Building Permits** provide the most direct access to information about a site's construction activities, but these are available for a limited number of years.

The Building Permit indicates the date of application, the permit number (assigned in chronological order of application receipts), the property's legal description, the applicant and/or builder, the name of the architect (if any), the purpose or the type of building, and the value of the project. Since these permits are organised by year and are not indexed, the best way to search for the original application is to use an approximate date of construction.

❁ **Architectural Plans** are helpful to building history research. Although The City's Archives has very few residential property plans, it is still worthwhile reviewing the Archives' holdings.

❁ **Photographs** of residential street scenes can also be useful to building history researchers. You can search for such photographs at The City's Archives through <http://asalive.archivesalberta.org:8080/access/asa/photo>.

❁ Knowing the **Annexation** history of Calgary can also assist you with your research, as it is unlikely The City's Archives holds records about properties prior to the land being part of Calgary. This *History of Annexation* map may help you determine when land became part of Calgary: <http://www.calgary.ca/PDA/LUPP/Documents/Publications/annexation-history-map.pdf>.

❁ The Archives has records from the towns of **Bowness**, **Montgomery** and **Forest Lawn**, and from the **Village of Crescent Heights**, which may also prove useful to researchers.



## Municipal directories and telephone books

Municipal directories and telephone books can be used to supplement information about land ownership, taxation and regulation from archival sources. However, when using directories, exercise caution, as they were not always updated promptly. Sometimes the publishers continued to use out-of-date information until updated information was received. You should also be aware that street names and/or numbers changed over time, as did house numbers.

One of the most useful municipal directories is the ***Henderson's Directories***. These privately published directories allow you to search a property either through a street address or a resident's name. The first *Henderson's Directories* dealt primarily with Winnipeg and secondarily with towns in the Northwest Territories, but by 1908, Calgary and other centres in Alberta had their own directories.

You can also use *Henderson's* urban directories to learn about the history of adjacent properties in order to bring together a rough sketch of the changing character of the street over time. It should be noted that not all businesses and residents of the time were listed in these directories since inclusion was voluntary.

### The *Henderson's Directories* are divided into four sections:

- ❁ The *Buyer's Guide* contains listings of local businesses or services categorised according to function.
- ❁ The *Alphabetical Directory* lists the names of local adult residents, as well as their respective marital status, occupation and address. The names and addresses of local businesses are also included in this section, along with listings of their official personnel and the nature of the business.
- ❁ The *Directory of Householders*, including *Street and Avenue Guide*, contains listings of street and residence addresses arranged in numerical and alphabetical order, the names of respective householders and concerns, designation of owner occupied residences, and telephone numbers of homes and businesses.
- ❁ The *Numerical Telephone Directory* lists the telephone numbers in numerical order.

You can search the 1910 to 1953 Calgary *Henderson's Directories* at <http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/bibliography/2961.html>.

The City's Archives has a limited number of *Henderson's Directories* spanning the years 1955 to 1991. Both the Glenbow Library and the Community Heritage and Family History Collection at Central Library have *Henderson's Directories* for Manitoba and the Northwest Territories from 1885 to 1906, and Calgary *Henderson's Directories* going back to 1906. And all three hold copies of *Gronlund's* directory from 1902 and the Burns & Elliot's directory from 1885, titled *Calgary, Alberta, Canada – Her Industries and Resources*.

Calgary telephone directories from 1903 to present can be accessed in the Community Heritage and Family History Collection at Central Library.

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## Historical maps

Fire insurance plans are often the most useful mapping source for researching buildings because they include detailed urban maps. These maps were produced for the insurance industry in Canada up to the 1950s by Charles E. Goad and later by the Western Canada Insurance Underwriters' Association. Frequent surveys of the community made it possible to keep these maps up to date regarding alterations to existing buildings and the construction of new buildings. The layouts of buildings, their location on the lot, roof types, construction materials, the number of storeys, property lines, the purpose of the building, and even such things as cornices, fire walls, or elevators are documented on these maps. In addition, the names of commercial and government structures are often provided.

The City of Calgary's Archives holds a collection of fire insurance maps. Those from 1908 to 1947 are an incomplete set and are mostly of the downtown area of Calgary. The maps from 1954 to 1972 are a complete set of maps of Calgary.

The Glenbow Library maintains a full set of Calgary fire insurance maps spanning the years 1908 to 1972.

The Community Heritage and Family History collection at Central Library includes Calgary street maps from 1907 to present.

The Glenbow Library also holds historic street maps, as well as a list of the names of streets before they were changed to street numbers in 1904.

## Architectural plans

Blueprints of buildings, elevations and floor plans (primarily for public or large commercial buildings) may be available through The City's Archives, the Canadian Architectural Archives <http://caa.ucalgary.ca>, the Glenbow Archives [www.glenbow.org](http://www.glenbow.org), or the Provincial Archives of Alberta <http://culture.alberta.ca/paa>.

These documents are usually organised by the name of the individual architect or architectural firm. When using blueprints, it is necessary to check whether changes were made between their preparation and the actual construction of the building.

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## Historical photographs

There are a couple of good sources to consult for historical photographs: the Glenbow Archives <http://ww2.glenbow.org/search/archivesPhotosSearch.aspx> and the Community Heritage and Family History Digital Library at the Calgary Public Library <http://calgarypubliclibrary.com/books-more/community-heritage-family-history>.

Keep in mind that you may find a particular building in photographs of the site or events such as parades, street festivals and ceremonies.

Air photos enable you to map out changes to a particular property and surrounding community over time. The City of Calgary's Archives has a collection of vertical air photos of Calgary and surrounding area from 1951 to 1999. Additionally, **MADGIC** (Maps, Academic Data, Geographic Information Centre) at the University of Calgary's Taylor Family Digital Library maintains a collection of both vertical and oblique air photos dating back to 1924. You can contact them at [maps@ucalgary.ca](mailto:maps@ucalgary.ca) to enquire about their holdings and retrieval service.



## Local newspapers

Newspapers are useful for finding accounts of buildings under construction. During the pre World War I boom in particular, newspapers in Alberta communities included accounts of most public buildings and outstanding private residences. Do read local newspapers with a critical eye as they were not always completely accurate.

The Glenbow Library and Calgary Public Library, Central Branch, have collections of Calgary newspapers available on microfilm. Most Alberta local newspapers are available at the Legislature Library in Edmonton and you can search their catalogue at <http://elibrary.assembly.ab.ca/uhtbin/cgisirsi.exe/UcXiwgeMyC/x/203290011/60/502/X>.

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## Government inventories

The City of Calgary's **Inventory of Evaluated Historic Resources** is a list of sites that have been evaluated by the Calgary Heritage Authority according to the Council-approved policy. Sites are evaluated for their heritage value based on a set of nine criteria which includes historical and architectural significance. Placement on the *Inventory* is a formal acknowledgement of this heritage value. Some of the sites on the *Inventory* are legally protected and regulated by the Province and by The City of Calgary.

You can access this inventory online at: [calgary.ca/PDA/LUPP/Pages/Heritage-planning/Historic-resources/Inventory-of-evaluated-historic-resources.aspx](http://calgary.ca/PDA/LUPP/Pages/Heritage-planning/Historic-resources/Inventory-of-evaluated-historic-resources.aspx).

The City's heritage planners also maintain a hardcopy file on each of these sites which contains background information such as photographs, newspaper articles or reports. To make an appointment to view these files contact Heritage Planning at **403-268-1859**, or call **3-1-1**.

The Province maintains a database of more than 70,000 records of non-archaeological heritage resources in Alberta. Culture and Community Services has made the **Alberta Heritage Survey Program** available online. You can search this database using HeRMIS <https://hermis.alberta.ca/ARHP> and selecting *Alberta Heritage Survey Program*. As well, the Glenbow Archives maintains a hardcopy of the *Alberta Historic Site Service*, *Calgary Building Inventory*, the version of the *Alberta Heritage Survey Program* produced prior to 1985.

## Contextual History Information

The second type of information you need to look at is *contextual history information*. This information helps you to make sense of the site specific information and to evaluate its broader significance, since it must be set into its historical and architectural context. In other words, the contextual history allows you to place the building in the history of the society that built and used it. The emphasis in this type of research is on effectively finding and using the literature that has been produced on the subject.

Secondary sources are your most valuable resource in this search. Even if nothing has been written about a specific building, you can often find information on buildings of a similar type or period or on related subjects that will help place the building within its appropriate historical and architectural context.

General histories of the province and region provide a good starting point and will help to locate a particular building within the general framework or development of the province. Local histories provide a more focused context and are useful for identifying periods of growth or development of specific businesses, services, or institutions. General architectural histories may also be useful in evaluating a design in terms of broad stylistic trends. However, these studies are most relevant in assessing large, architect-designed buildings.

The Calgary Public Library is a good resource for contextual history information. The following books are a few examples that focus on Alberta and Calgary buildings:

- ☼ Boddy, Trevor. *Modern Architecture in Alberta*. Regina: Alberta Culture & Multiculturalism and The Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987.
- ☼ Dennis, Thelma. *Albertans Built: Aspects of Housing in Rural Alberta to 1920*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Printing Services, 1986.
- ☼ Melnyk, Bryan. *Calgary Builds: The Emergence of an Urban Landscape 1905 – 1914*. Regina: Alberta Culture & Multiculturalism and The Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1985.
- ☼ Treacy, Robert M. *Sandstone, Brick and Wood: A Collection of Calgary Pioneer Homes and Histories*. Calgary, 1975.
- ☼ Wetherell, Donald G. and Irene Kmet. *Homes in Alberta: Building Trends and Design 1870 – 1967*. Edmonton: Alberta Culture & Multiculturalism, Alberta Municipal Affairs and The University of Alberta Press, 1991.

The Central Library's Community Heritage and Family History collection also has a number of non-circulating reference materials that you can use for building history research, such as books on Alberta and Calgary history and architecture, and house and plan catalogues.





# Research contacts

## The City of Calgary

### Corporate Records, Archives

Main Floor, Administration Building  
313 Seventh Ave. S.E.

**403-268-8180**

#### Mailing Address:

City Clerk's Office #8007  
PO Box 2100, Station M  
Calgary AB T2P 2M5

**archives@calgary.ca**

### Calgary Heritage Authority and Heritage Planning

Fourth Floor, Municipal Building  
800 Macleod Trail S.E.

**403-268-1859**

#### Mailing Address:

Land Use Planning & Policy  
Heritage Planning #8117  
PO Box 2100, Station M  
Calgary AB T2P 2M5

### Property Tax, Business Tax and Animal Licensing counter

Third Floor, Municipal Building  
800 Macleod Trail S.E.

call **3-1-1**

**<http://calgary.ca/cityonline>**

## Other agencies and institutions

### Calgary Public Library Community Heritage and Family History Collection

Central Library  
616 Macleod Trail S.E.  
Calgary AB T2G 2M2

**403-260-2785**

**hum1@calgarypubliclibrary.com**

### Canadian Architectural Archives

Fifth Floor,  
Taylor Family Digital Library  
The University of Calgary  
2500 University Dr. N.W.  
Calgary AB T2N 1N4

**403-220-7420**

**archives@ucalgary.ca**

### Culture and Community Services Historic Resources Management Branch

Old St. Stephen's College  
8820 112 St. N.W.  
Edmonton AB T6G 2P8

**780-431-2300**

### Glenbow Museum Library & Archives

130 Ninth Ave. S.E.  
Calgary AB T2G 0P3

**403-268-4197** Library

**403-268-4204** Archives

**[www.glenbow.org](http://www.glenbow.org)**

### Land Titles Office – Calgary

Service Alberta Building  
710 Fourth Ave. S.W.  
Calgary AB T2P 0K3

**403-297-8641**

**lto@gov.ab.ca**

### MADGIC (Maps, Academic Data, Geographic Information Centre)

Fourth Floor,  
Taylor Family Digital Library  
The University of Calgary  
2500 University Dr. N.W.  
Calgary AB T2N 1N4

**403-220-6822**

**maps@ucalgary.ca**

### Provincial Archives of Alberta

8555 Roper Rd.  
Edmonton AB T6E 5W1

**403-427-1750**

**paa@gov.ab.ca**



All images are from The City of Calgary, Corporate Records, Archives.

