

The Publow Terrace, Court House Square, built 1895-96



The Brockville House Detective

Researching Your Historic Building

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THE BROCKVILLE HOUSE DETECTIVE

Researching Your Historic Building

Given time and determination, anyone can find information about historic buildings in Brockville and their owners. There is a lot of information recorded in different places and in different ways – a challenge for those who enjoy detective work.

Your chief resource is the Land Registry Office maintained by the Province of Ontario, located downtown on West Market Street, below the Scotiabank. The land registry system was established to record all official documents related to local land ownership. These documents seldom mention any buildings on the land, but they do tell you the succession of owners.



Nehemiah Seaman House
234 King St. W. At Perth St.

Using the Land Registry Office

Ask staff at the back counter for help in doing some historical research. The staff will ask for the specific block and lot you're interested in. If you don't have this information beforehand, there are two ways to find out.

One way is to cross Market St. W. to the City of Brockville **Tax Office**, located just inside the entrance to City Hall. This office has block and lot information for every street address in town. The other way – if you are sure of the location of your

building – is to consult the wall-mounted map in the Registry Office itself, which shows all the blocks and lots in town.

Once you have given the Registry Office staff the block and lot numbers, you will be handed the appropriate Abstract Book. It lists all documents that have been filed over the years in relation to the property on which your building stands.

The documents will include B&Ss (bill & sales), land transfers, deeds, mortgages, and probated wills. The abstract begins with the first land grants made by the Crown, which may be as early as 1803, and ends with the current owner(s). In early years, blocks of land were quite large. Nowadays, they may have been broken into quite a number of smaller lots.

There is a fee for looking at an Abstract. You should also be aware that when requesting an Abstract, you may be in competition with professional title searchers working for lawyers, and their needs will take precedence over yours.

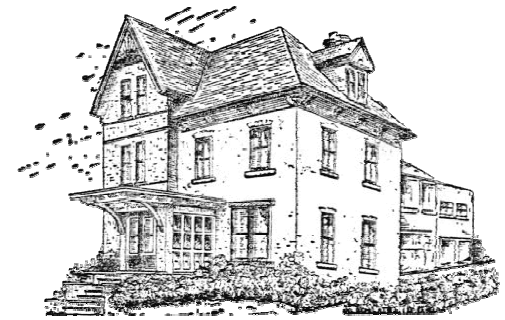
Once you have obtained the relevant Abstract Book from the staff, first try to locate the exact lot you are looking for. Then move down to the latest transactions and check that the current owner's name is included. We advise that you should follow the document trail by starting at the end and working back to the beginning.

Each paper that was filed at the Registry Office was given a number and dated according to the day it was registered. Try to record all the relevant information given, watching for the numbers that are used for each document. Sometimes you have to leap-frog over unrelated listings that pertain to neighbouring lots.

The abstract system is relatively complicated for the novice house detective. Be patient and careful as you research and record the information. The Abstract can be photocopied, but

only for a relatively high fee, and you will get a lot of irrelevant entries as well as relevant ones.

It is possible to see each land document in its entirety – but only by viewing yards and yards of microfilm of **all** registered documents in chronological order, day by day, year by year. You will soon become tired and frustrated, and when you do find the document you are looking for, it will seldom give you any more information than the Abstract Book did.



Edward Buckman House
33 James St. E.

"Interviewing" Your House

As noted, the Registry system relates to ownership of the land, not the building or buildings on it. Your house has something to say about its own date, but you have to know how to listen. Even at that, you will most often have to guess.

To hear what your house has to say, you must familiarize yourself with the names and dates of distinctive architectural styles during the 19th century – from Georgian, through Italianate and Gothic Revival, to various eclectic styles. Architectural styles took time to reach Brockville, and new ones overlapped old ones by many years.

Another approach to getting a rough date for your house is studying some of the old Brockville maps reprinted in **BROCKVILLE, A PICTORIAL HISTORY** (Besancourt Publishers, 1986), a copy of which may be found in the **Brockville Public Library** (Buell Street at George) or the **Brockville Museum** (5 Henry St. at Water St. W.) Start with the WALL & FORREST map of Brockville of 1853 (pp 63-64), and then move on to H.F. WALLING's map of 1861-62 (pp 92-93), and H. BROSIUS's bird's-eye view map of 1874 (pp 102-103).



Alexander Morris House
22 Court House Ave.

If you find your building on any of these maps, you may reasonably assume that the building was built before the date of the map. Also, these accurate maps may give you an idea of the original, or at least early appearance of your building, its ground plan and even wall elevations.

Another possible source of information about your building is the photo archives of the Brockville Museum. Though there may not be an early, dated photo of your building on file in the archives, there may one of your street, and it may show your building.

Finally, the Brockville Museum has a small but useful number of fire insurance maps of Brockville from earlier times. These maps are large in scale

and show virtually all buildings in town, and were colour-keyed indicating stone, brick or wood-frame construction.

Original Builder and Previous Occupants

Determining who had your building constructed is sometimes guesswork. It was usually the owner of the land at the time. Identifying the designer and contractor is a difficult task at best. Such information was seldom recorded.

Discovering previous inhabitants is not quite so difficult. National censuses were taken every ten years, starting in 1851. Some of the older censuses are available on microfilm at the research library of THE LEEDS & GRENVILLE GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY. This library is located in the basement of the Brockville Museum, and a nominal yearly fee is required at the museum entrance. The censuses contain information on households – families and live-in servants if any – and sometimes include sketchy house descriptions.

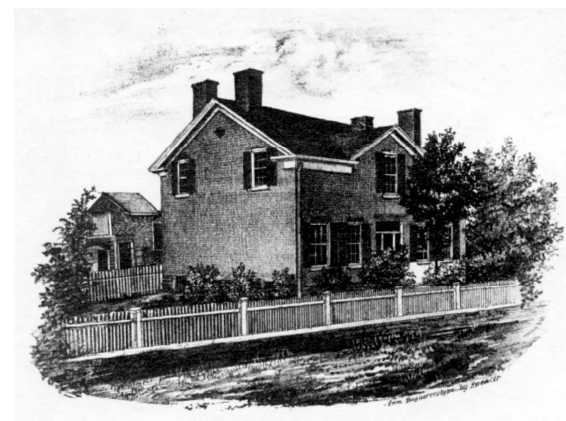
Brockville city and business directories are another source of information about people who lived and owned businesses in town. The **Brockville Museum** has a set of Vernon's directories from 1913 – 1973, and the **Public Library** has most of the **Vernon's** directories from 1913 – 1997, and the **Might-Polk** directories from 1997 - 2000.

Once you have owners and occupants' names, you may find more biographical information from inscriptions on tombstones at the **Brockville Cemeteries**. These have been recorded and published by the Leeds and Grenville Genealogical Society and are available in their research library. While at this library, you should consult Ed Livingston's printed index of personal names mentioned in thousands of "ON THIS DATE" columns previously published in the Brockville

RECORDER AND TIMES. These lists often include many details about area residents and are reliably dated.

Prior to ON THIS DATE, the Recorder at times published columns titled "100 YEARS AGO," "50 YEARS AGO," etc. Most of the available Brockville newspapers have been microfilmed, and the reels can be viewed by appointment at the **Brockville Public Library**. You can print off photocopies for a fee.

Some prominent Brockvillians are profiled in various files and histories available at the **Brockville Museum** reference room.



Fordyce Lothrop House
130 Perth St. (1852)

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