

# Researching Historic Properties in the Greater Kingston Area

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As a tenant or owner of a heritage house or store, you may wish to learn or confirm its building date and later history. You can pursue two avenues: hire a consultant on historical research and dating buildings from the physical evidence or undertake the project yourself by consulting:

## Secondary Sources

These are written, drawn, oral, or printed sources that were created well after the original date of your building, for example *The Old Stones of Kingston* by Angus, *With Our Past before Us: 19th-Century Architecture in the Kingston Area* and *Modern Architecture in Kingston: a Survey of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Buildings* by McKendry, *Buildings of Architectural and Historic Significance, Kingston* by the City of Kingston in 7 volumes, *County of a Thousand Lakes: the History of the County of Frontenac 1673-1973* edited by Rollaston or *Kingston: Building on the Past for the Future* by Osborne & Swainson. (For a full bibliography and chronology of the region's architecture, go to [www.mckendry.net](http://www.mckendry.net) and click on 'bibliography' and 'chronology' under articles on architecture)

The most reliable secondary sources contain notes (usually at the bottom of the page or at the end of a chapter or the book) that cite the primary sources used by the author. The least reliable secondary sources have not used primary sources, but have taken information from other secondary sources. Errors are thus perpetuated or even increased, yet the writing tone

may sound very self-assured. Always take secondary sources 'with a grain of salt.' Always read endnotes or footnotes carefully (check the index for additional topics not covered in the text but included in the notes). Look for the publishing date, and start by reading the most recent book or article on the subject, and then work your way to the oldest published material. Write down what books you have consulted (author, title, publishing date, call number, which library), and whether or not they contained useful information -- on 4 x 6 inch ruled index cards. If you should set this project aside for a time, it is difficult to remember later what you did or did not consult. Or what initially seemed like useless information (on the historical period or the neighbourhood but on not your house) may take on a new and useful slant at a later stage in your research. Look for secondary sources in municipal libraries, college and university (Stauffer Library and Special Collections in Douglas Library) libraries, and new and used bookshops. Ask about inter-library loans if necessary. Don't forget to look for articles in journals, such as *Historic Kingston* (the Kingston Historical Society); *Foundations*, the newsletter of the Frontenac Heritage Foundation; and the *Journal* of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada ([www.canada-architecture.org/journal.aspx](http://www.canada-architecture.org/journal.aspx) for old issues). Make notes of oral history, but remember that people's memories generally only extend into their grandparents' generation, and that there is often considerable error in memories. On the other hand, they can contain a kernel of truth and give an interesting human slant on events.

### **Primary Sources.**

These are written, drawn or printed sources of information that are more or less contemporary with your building, for example, maps, tax assessments, newspapers, censuses, architectural drawings, photographs, diaries, etc. In general, it is desirable to have at least two primary sources to validate facts. Sometimes the research game seems like doing a puzzle and, eventually, all the pieces fall into place -- if you are on the right track.

### **Begin At Home**

Assemble as much information as you already have from secondary sources, and take it with you to the archives, land registry office (in transition, check on location), or where ever you are going to do further research on primary sources. Minimally -- before you leave home -- you should start your search with the building's street or rural address, town lot number or portion of (ie -- north-east corner town lot number 21), and farm lot number (ie -- east half of farm lot 12, 4th concession, Storrington township). Make note of the full names of any owners or tenants and the dates they were associated with your building (you may only know yours and the person who sold you the property). **How to find this information:** your property tax forms, your purchase of property records, and county atlases (many have been reprinted, see local libraries) such as Meacham's *Illustrated County Atlas of Frontenac, Lennox & Addington Counties*, 1878, reprinted 1972. A copy of any map showing your lot is helpful when you are working on site, and when you are explaining your interests to staff or for yourself when puzzling out bits of information. Google your address or names of persons in case the web can provide information. Someone, for example, may have posted helpful information about an ancestor, who may have once owned your property. County atlases have been posted on line, as well as censuses and certain newspapers.

### **Gather supplies to take with you**

Black, blue, red pens; pencils (archives usually only permit pencils); erasers; ruler; lots of ruled 4 x 6 inch index cards with elastics to hold them in order; lined and plain 8.5 x 11 inch paper; perhaps tracing paper and graph paper; and change for photocopy machines. Some archives will not allow you to use pens. If you are able to use pens, consider colour coding information (blue for notes, black for references, red for main date of entry....). Complex information such as land registry abstracts may work better on 8.5 x 11 inch paper, which you divide with a ruler. Some prefer to record on laptop computers and other electronic devices. You may want to take your own photographs of documents, usually flash is not permitted. You can also order photographs at the archives – check on the cost, which periodically changes.

### **Working at the Research Site**

Write everything down, by topic (tax records, city directories, family stories...), on index cards. Each card should have a concise heading on top, including the date of the material noted. Don't forget to make a note of which documents you consulted that were *not* helpful (... nothing in 1861 census, nothing in 1871, can't find 1881 census ....). Write down the sources for all information. Make photocopies whenever possible (don't forget to write the source on each).

### **Land registry records**

Land registry records are usually located in a Registry Office near a county court house BUT this is in transition, for example in Kingston. You likely do not need to go to a Registry Office at all. Many original documents (land registry books or "index"), microfilms of the indexes and bound copybooks of the instruments at the Queen's University Archives (second floor, Kathleen Ryan Hall, 613-533-2378 and <http://archives.queensu.ca/index.html> for hours and directions). They also have land information for certain areas beyond Greater Kingston – it is worthwhile inquiring.

If you are having problems knowing which registry book to use, look at the large wall map, which is coded to work with a separate key to the various subdivisions. Once you exhaust the information in a particular registry book, look at the bottom of the last entry for the directions to the next book and page ("index 3 folio 465"). You may end up using several books if the information on your lot is scattered. You may find it easiest to begin in the abstract book with the most recent entry on your property -- your acquisition is likely filed under the farm lot and town lot numbers by township, town, village or city. Then work back in time tracing by owners (write it all down!), until you get as far back as possible -- possibly to the 1790s with the United Empire Loyalist grants (your property may only be a very small portion of the original grant). Buildings usually do not appear in land transaction documents, unless they are particular landmarks or designate land boundaries, for example, the building's eaves overhang adjacent property. They may, however, be mentioned in wills as legacies (wills are sometimes included in land registry records). You cannot assume that the first (or even later) dated recording of your property means that it included your buildings. It may have been vacant land or have contained a structure that has disappeared and predated your building.

Now assess the most likely clues for improvements to vacant land: jumps in purchase prices (“B & S”), heavy mortgages (to build or to extend or to modernize), subdividing of the land (1/4 or 1/5 acre lots created out of larger acreages). After you have narrowed down a possible building date (rural properties provide the fewest clues), it may be worthwhile pulling and reading some of the documents, in case a building is mentioned (“the leasee must build in the same material as the existing adjacent brick building owned by the leasor....”). Wills are particularly promising and may, at the least, reveal familial relationships with married daughters or with granddaughters or widows who have remarried. Some properties which seem to have changed hands frequently may actually have remained in the same family for generations.

You now have a list of names associated with the property, and a possible building or improvement date. These are helpful as you search further.

### **Tax assessments**

The City of Kingston (earliest 1838), Village of Portsmouth, and Township of Kingston records are at the Queen’s University Archives. Start with the approximate date you found in the land records plus the list of names. The city records are organized by wards (see Meacham County Atlas of 1878, your voting notice, or maps at the archives. The ward boundaries & names change with time). The records may have an alphabetical listing of surnames and/or the assessor may have gone from house to house on the street. Write down all the information on your property, and look for hastily added notes, such as “being built.” You may discover the ages and occupations of the tenants and owners. In general the assessments reflect the conditions of the previous year. You may need to read for a number of years to establish a pattern. Was the property assessed at \$50 from 1870 to 1879, and then suddenly increased to \$150 in 1880? This likely indicates a building was erected at that time. Was there a further jump the following year and then that amount stabilized? This may mean that there was a transitional year, in which the building was only partly built and thus taxed lower than when the building was finished for a full year. Occasionally, there is very useful information on the house’s materials, number of storeys, fireplaces, and tenants.

**Pugh House** 1 Baiden Street, Kingston ON, 1860. The building date for this frame house in Portsmouth Village was confirmed by a note added to the 1861 census that the house was “nearly finished, 2 stories, frame,” in addition to a frame house of one-and-a-half storeys that had appeared on the 1851 census. Voters’ lists, tax assessments and appeals, directories, land records, and other primary sources filled in the history of the Pugh family who owned it until 1901.



**Voters’ Lists** can also be useful.

### **Censuses**

Censuses are on microfilm at many provincial, national archives and libraries or use in Documents in Stauffer Library. These were taken every 10 years, and are now available to

1911. They are organized geographically, hand written, and frustrating to use, as you search for names. They are divided by wards within the city. It is worthwhile to check if someone has redone them with alphabetical listings of names (see especially the genealogical section of the Kingston Public Library). Especially helpful are the searchable versions on the Library and Archives Canada website, [www.collectionscanada.ca](http://www.collectionscanada.ca) You may want to double-check the original census, in case the transcriber missed useful material. Here you may find the ages of the tenants or householders with their families, where they were born, religion, occupation, acreage owned, pets, animals, and sometimes the material and number of storeys in the house. Check for added notes such as "half finished," if the building was just erected or being erected during the census-taking. Agricultural censuses for rural properties can provide interesting details about a family's assets.

### **Directories**

There were annual business and personal directories, beginning in Kingston in 1855, and found in local archives and libraries (see Kingston Public Library and Queen's University Archives - the runs are incomplete in both locations). Often the city, neighbouring villages, and rural areas were included in the same directory. They may be organized by street and/or alphabetical (more or less) lists of surnames, usually accompanied by occupations. Street numbers are not very helpful, as they were subject to change. Does the family name you found in the registry office suddenly appear in the directory listing for your street? This may confirm that your building was erected at that time. Many directories are now in a searchable form on the web. <http://archive.org/search>.

### **Newspapers**

Kingston papers begin in 1810, and are on microfilm in the Kingston Public Library and in Stauffer Library. They are frustrating to use, unless you have a specific date in mind. Kingston papers are indexed from 1810 to about 1855 in the Kingston Public Library -- now available on line at [www.digitalkingston.ca](http://www.digitalkingston.ca) Some entries have the actual wording of the newspaper article. Try <http://ourontario.ca> for newspapers running into the late 1890s.

### **Maps**

Many maps do not contain specific information on individual buildings, but can be helpful in locating your lot. There are numerous original maps in the National Map Collection of the Library & Archives Canada in Ottawa, and certain of these have been reproduced and can be consulted in Maps (Stauffer Library) and Special Collections (Douglas Library). County atlases from the 1870s and '80s are useful - don't forget to look for lists of names and for views of houses (remember your house or store may be listed in the table of contents under the name of whoever owned it at that time). There are certain maps that contain information on buildings, such as the very detailed 1869 Ordnance Maps (showing verandahs, landscaping, outbuildings, fences, paths) and the Fire Insurance maps of the 1890s into the 20th century (1892, 1908, 1924, 1929, 1947, 1963; see Special Collections and the Kingston Public Library). The insurance maps tell you about materials, number of storeys, additions, and some alterations as you track the building over several years.



left 1869 Ordnance (Baiden at Church) with modern street names added and tinting to show what shapes represent buildings and trees

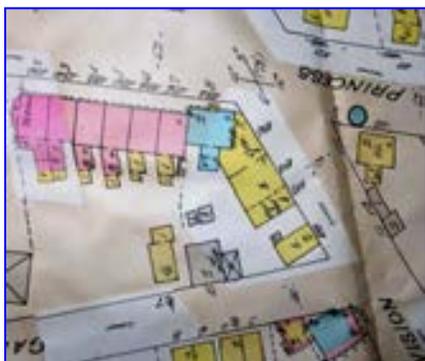
right 1865 Innes (Ontario, Clarence Brock, etc.)



left: 1875 Brosius (King Johnson, Wellington William)

right below: 1878 Meacham atlas (Pittsburgh Township)

left below: 1892 with amendments to 1904, Fire Insurance Plan (Princess at Division). Colour coded: pink for brick, yellow for frame, blue for stone, grey for sheds, etc. (see preliminary pages in atlas for code)



### **Architectural Drawings, Accounts, and Tender Calls.**

Everyone hopes to find this sort of material which reveals so much about your building's origins, but such a find is exceptional. There are collections of drawings in the Library & Archives Canada in Ottawa (of particular interest to Kingston is the Power & Son collection, although only a small percentage predates 1900), Archives of Ontario in Toronto, and some municipal and university archives and libraries, as well as private collections. In Kingston, try the Queen's University Archives (Kingston Architectural Drawings including the Robert Gage drawings, Newlands drawings, Clugston drawings, etc.). The vast majority of buildings originally had such drawings, but they have been lost or are unavailable due to neglect, fire, private collectors, and so on. Tender calls by the architect for masonry contracts etc. are difficult to find in the newspapers, unless you have a reasonably narrow range of dates to search. There were no published tender calls for many buildings.

### **Photographs and other views.**

Drawn, painted, or photographed views that include your building can be very interesting to show even minor changes (bring or borrow a magnifying glass). They should be examined regardless of date. Alterations may have occurred only ten years ago. Ask around the neighbourhood, try to find the former owners or tenants (snaps of children may reveal, in the background, details about the house's front door, etc.), write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper or historical society or foundation newsletter, look at the picture collections in the local archives (in Kingston, Queen's University Archives) or libraries, provincial ([www.archives.gov.on.ca](http://www.archives.gov.on.ca) - search the collections – visual database) and national archives ([www.collectionscanada.ca](http://www.collectionscanada.ca) - research – photographs) Once you've exhausted the identified pictures and postcards, try the category of unidentified houses or stores. Check also under overall street and aerial views. Look through the many tourist and promotion booklets and postcards published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the collections of municipal and university libraries. Bird's-eye views of towns and cities, published in the 1870s and '80s, can

be very informative, for example Brosius's view of Kingston in 1875 (detail above). Many have been reproduced. Aerial views (Stauffer Library, Queen's U.) sometimes help but may not provide enough details or tree cover may obscure your building – good for rural layouts of large properties. Check in *Early Photography in Kingston from the Daguerreotype to the Postcard* (2013) by McKendry.

### **Municipal or Township minutes, building permits, etc.**

These are a long shot, but your building might be mentioned in connection with road infringements, digging sewers, placement of privies, tax appeals, etc. It is difficult to know what dates to search. Building permits are a fairly recent aspect. In Kingston, early city, township and Portsmouth records are held in the Queen's University Archives. One can always hope to turn up information in diaries and personal papers, but it is hard to know where to start, unless your research has given you leads. Wills are the most productive.

### **Genealogical information**

While this may not add to the information on your building, it will create an appreciation of the original owner as architectural patron. Certain aspects will have already been noted, as you looked in the censuses and tax records. Birth and death dates may be available at local cemeteries (Catawaqui Cemetery, St Mary's Roman Catholic Cemetery) and through recent cemetery recordings, often published by genealogical societies (see Kingston Public Library) in helpful alphabetical order.

### **Inscribed dates**

Check carefully over all interior and exterior parts of the building for an inscribed building date, possibly located in an unusual location such as a chimney stack. Assess whether it was made at the time of building or added later (and thus may be incorrect). Assess whether it actually refers to the building's construction or is a commemorative date particular to an individual or a family. Don't assume a coin of an early date that is discovered in a partition etc. coincides with the date of the building.

### **Style & Construction**

Now that you have acquired information from primary and secondary sources, assess your findings against the style and construction of your building. There is always the possibility that your house is a replacement for one lost by fire or demolition. There are various books and articles on style and construction in libraries and bookstores. In addition you may need to take courses or call in a consultant. For an article on this website. click on style in [www.mckendry.net](http://www.mckendry.net)

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