



Researching a Heritage Property

A guide to discovering the history of a property or building in Edmonton

The Edmonton Historical Board | The City of Edmonton Archives | City of Edmonton Urban Planning and Environment

Looking to learn more about the history of a property in Edmonton? This publication guides you to resources and describes approaches you can take for successful results.

Research: A doorway to knowledge

You might be conducting research on a property out of general interest or in advance of applying for historical designation. Or perhaps you are looking to renovate a heritage building and want to preserve or restore its original character.

Regardless of your goals, an organized approach to learning about a property's history will help you make the most of your time. And knowing where to look and who to ask may reveal facts about, or at least render clues to, many aspects of a property's history, including:

- When the property was legally created
- How a structure on it looked originally, both inside and out
- The changes or additions made to it over the years
- The year of its original construction, its builder, and the materials that went into it
- Its previous occupants
- The makeup of its neighbourhood and surrounding areas
- The social and cultural environments in which it existed

Nailing down the cost

While you'll likely pay nominal fees for photocopying or government records processing, your main cost will be in your time. Even then, depending on how much information you want and how far the records and your patience take you, it typically takes only a few hours – visiting a few different locations for resources and speaking with key people – to uncover a number of pertinent facts about a building's history.

Conducting your research

While researching a property, you will often find yourself guided by what you discover along the way. Information gathered in one place can lead you to more information in another, and so on.

Start close to home

It's a good idea early in the process to ask neighbours what they know about the history of the property. They may also know of long-term residents in the area who may remember former owners or tenants of the property. You can also check with the community association to see if a local history has been written, which may contain information on former residents. Finally, consider putting a notice in a community newsletter asking people with knowledge of local lore to contact you.



Reference Room at the City of Edmonton Archives.



A man stands in front of the Prince of Wales Armouries ca. 1915 in one of the Archives' earliest photos of the building. Photo credit: City of Edmonton Archives, EA-29-166.

Step out to the City of Edmonton Archives

The City of Edmonton Archives is located in the Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre. At the Archives, you'll find a large concentration of useful resources for your research. While staff cannot conduct research for you, they can be very helpful in assisting you to identify and locate the resources you need. It's always a good idea to call the reference desk before visiting.

Remember to take along basic supplies—pencils (not pens!), paper, and even a magnifying glass for looking at fine print. A trip to the archives can also be a chance to do something with a friend or family member, and it's nice to have someone along to spell you off and give your eyes a break from the microfilm reader.

The Archives houses a wide variety of records, publications, photographs, and other materials, which are constantly being acquired, catalogued, and made available to the public. Depending on such factors as the property's age and location, some resources will be more or less useful to you.

Visit the Archives' online catalogue, where you can discover a wide variety of records from their ever-growing collection.

City of Edmonton Archives

Address: 10440 – 108 Avenue NW

Reference desk phone: 780-496-8711

Web: edmonton.ca/archives

Hours: Monday, Thursday, Friday 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Tuesday: 12:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Wednesday: 8:30 a.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Closed on weekends and holidays

Appointments are strongly encouraged, and Wednesday evenings are by appointment only

Available Resources

Henderson's Directory

The names and occupations of those who have been associated with your property are some of the most basic kinds of information you need for further research. This is particularly true when you're looking for information in resources like newspapers and records of official government correspondence.

To this end, the Henderson's Directory is invaluable. It was a commercial directory published annually until 1987. Organized by address and neighbourhood, it lists names, addresses, and other information about residents and businesses.

Hard copies for 1907 to 1987 are available at the City of Edmonton Archives. The University of Alberta makes the [directory](#) available online for the years 1908 to 1960. A selection of other directories is available at the Archives dating to 1895, although not every year is available.



A Henderson's Directory on display.

Using the Henderson's Directory

While land title records are a more accurate way to date a house or building, you can discover an approximate construction date using the Henderson's Directory. Check the volume for the year in which you believe the structure was built. If you find it there, see whether it was built earlier than you thought by going back a few years, until it no longer appears, then move forward. Once you've found the earliest entry and discovered the occupant's name, look for that name at the back of the volume for such information as the occupant's employer, occupation, spouse's name, and ownership status.

If the structure was built before the City annexed its neighbourhood, chances are it will not appear in Henderson's for those years, and a building permit may not have been issued. You may be able to find the building listed in the directory only for the years after annexation. Check the last page of this brochure for other resources that might be helpful in ascertaining its date of original construction.

While Henderson's is a researcher's boon, note that it is not always perfectly accurate. Spelling errors and transposed street and avenue numbers are not uncommon. Also, the listed occupant is not always the owner—he or she may have been renting, renting to own, or in the process of purchasing the property.

Other Directories

While Henderson's are the most common type of directory, the Archives has others as well - [Edmonton District Directory](#) (1895) [Lowe's Directory](#) (1899), and Polk criss-cross directories (1990s).

Photographs

The Archives houses a large and growing collection of photographs, and thousands are available through the [online catalogue](#). They are indexed by building, house, street, business, people, and neighbourhood. While you likely won't find photographs donated by previous owners of your house, it can be worthwhile to look for a scene of your street or a nearby landmark in hopes of catching sight of your home in an earlier era.

Aerial Photographs

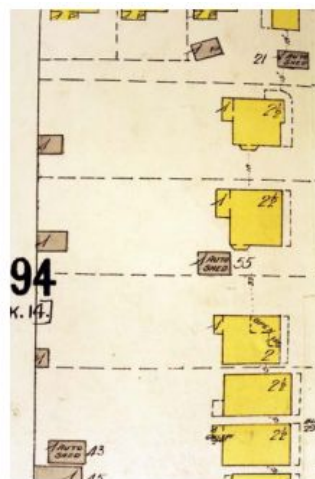
At the Archives you'll find [aerial photos](#) from the City dating from 1924 to 2002. While not all of the photos have been digitized, there are over 14,000 online.

Fire Insurance Plans

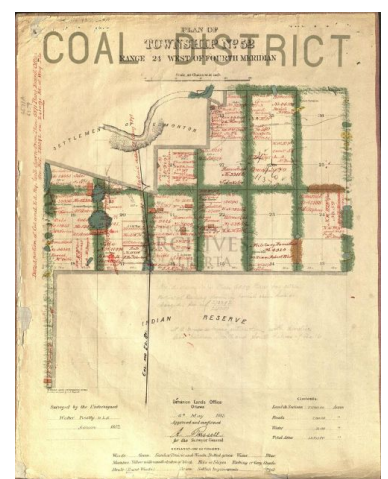
The Archives has digitized [fire insurance plans](#) for various areas of Edmonton dating from 1913 and 1925. Fire insurance maps from 1953 to 1964 are available as hard copies. Old Strathcona Fire Insurance Plans from 1899 and 1905 are available at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. You can also contact heritageplanners@edmonton.ca for copies of the Strathcona plans.

Township Survey Maps

Township survey maps are available at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. These maps show information of homesteads before subdivisions were created. This is helpful in finding a homestead record which contains genealogical information. Digital versions are available and can be obtained by contacting the [Provincial Archives of Alberta](#).



Fire insurance map example.



Township survey map example.
PAA Accession GR2004.0214.1753a

Building Permits

The Archives has building permits on microfilm and [online](#) dating from 1905 to 1976, and from South Edmonton (Strathcona) from 1912. Permits may have been issued up to two years prior to occupancy.

Blueprints

Very few blueprints are available for individual residences, but it is worth checking. If an architect designed the structure or a major renovation, there is a better chance that you will find a plan for it. If there is no plan for a specific house you're researching, it is possible that one exists for a similar house (or, perhaps, one with a mirrored design) in the neighbourhood. Note, however, that blueprints for older homes typically contain far less detail than those for modern ones.

City of Edmonton correspondence

Transfers to the Archives from the City of Edmonton are known as record groups and are indexed with the prefix RG. You can access correspondence for such items as homeowners' complaints to the City about various issues (e.g., road conditions, neighbours' yards, etc.), which can occasionally lead you to a former occupant or to the builder.

Newspapers

During your research, you might want to find out more about a builder, neighbourhood development, or about real estate history. Newspapers from the past are a great resource. The Archives has a selection on microfilm dating from the 1890s to the present. Online newspapers are even more convenient as they are fully searchable. The University of Alberta makes various Edmonton and Strathcona newspapers, including the Edmonton Bulletin between 1880 and 1923, [available for free](#). [Newspapers.com](#) (a paid subscription service) also has the searchable full text of various Edmonton and Strathcona newspapers including the Edmonton Journal from its inception in 1903. Search by name, address, or other keyword.

Private manuscript files

In Archives terms, anything donated to the City by a private citizen or business is considered a private manuscript. Records received in this category are described as MS groups.



The Edmonton Archives has an extensive microfilm collection.

Clipping Files

The Archives has a large collection of newspaper clipping files on biographical, general, and City department subjects. These files are discoverable through the [online catalogue](#). In such groups you will occasionally find something relevant, such as a donor's scrapbook containing reference to a person or place you are researching.

Non-lending library

A small non-lending library at the Archives contains various local, biographical, practical, and technical publications dealing with subjects pertinent to Edmonton and its citizens. You can also find trade publications, catalogues, and manuals about home décor in this collection. Although these items cannot be signed out, and some are too fragile for photocopying, they can be a treasure-trove of information on Edmonton's history.

Heritage resources and designation

Structures that are eligible for historical designation or protection are typically significant for their architecture, design, construction, or association with notable local or national historical figures. This publication does not focus on historical designation, but it is worth mentioning because appropriate research and the careful restoration of your property can be a step toward such recognition if desired.

To find out more about historic resources and designation, see the City of Edmonton Historic Resources [webpage](#). The [Historic Resources Management Program](#) and the [Financial Incentives](#) sections are a good place to learn about the benefits of owning a designated resource.

The [Standards and Guidelines](#) for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada are used as a guide in assessing the appropriateness of an alteration.

Other Resources

Alberta On Record

Web: albertaonrecord.ca

Architects in Canada (1800-1950)

Web: [dictionary of architects in canada.org/introduction](http://dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/introduction)

City of Edmonton Maps

Web: maps.edmonton.ca

Edmonton Historical Board

Web: <https://www.edmontonhistoricalboard.com/>

Edmonton Public Library

EPL's North of 52 Collection (Stanley A. Milner Library, second floor) is rich with local history resources.

Glenbow Library and Archives

University of Calgary
Web: glenbow.ucalgary.ca/archives/

Heritage Resources Management Information System (HeRMIS)

Web: hermis.alberta.ca

Land Titles

Phone: 780-427-2742
Web: Alberta.ca/land-titles

Peel's Prairie Provinces

Web: library.ualberta.ca/peel

Phone Book Records

Web: <https://mhdgs.ca/historical-records/phone-books/>

Provincial Archives of Alberta

Phone: 780-427-1750
Web: searchprovincialarchives.alberta.ca

SPIN2

With an address, you can find the property's legal description and then use that to find historical plans of subdivision.

Web: <https://alta.registries.gov.ab.ca/SpinII>

Contractors List for Heritage Buildings

Please contact
heritageplanners@edmonton.ca

