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# Survey of Research Resources on Old Town Toronto with special attention to digital and online content

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# 1. Introduction

This report comprises a survey of research sources on Toronto's Old Town area, as requested by Balen Grillo Design. The survey covers online, archival, and bibliographical sources, but particularly the first of these. My aim has been to document high-quality work that has already been done rather than to replicate it.

Adriana Balen of Balen Grillo has suggested that this research is the exploratory phase of gathering accessible materials for inclusion on a website or webpage devoted to the Old Town. It is not yet decided whether this material will contribute to an expansion of an existing web presence, or to an entirely new website.

Adriana also suspects that web resources on the Old Town are currently fragmented. Having conducted extensive web searches on the Old Town's internet presence, I concur with her assessment. A site which aggregates these resources could be a valuable contribution to internet heritage resources on early Toronto.

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## 2. Research Parameters

The following outline reflects my understanding of evolving discussions about the nature of this project with Balen Grillo.

Purpose. The purpose of this research report is twofold:

- To assess the variety and current status of available historical resources on Old Town Toronto, especially those available on the web
- To conduct limited searches within resource areas to gather samples of potentially useful materials for a website

The purpose of the proposed website itself seems to be fluid at the moment, but here are some possibilities that Adriana has suggested:

- To provide a locus for web information about the Old Town for interested visitors
- To provide foundational information on sources for Old Town researchers
- To document the changing urban and heritage landscape of the Old Town

Audience. The audience for the projected website will largely consist of interested citizens and heritage laymen rather than experts in narrow topics or minutiae.

Geographical Area. The boundaries of the Old Town assumed in this report are derived from *Old Town Toronto: A Heritage Landscape Guide*. They include “the land from Victoria Street to the Don River and from Queen Street to the Esplanade” (p.1). (For more on the way the Guide has shaped this survey, see the section following.) At times I have pushed the western boundary to Yonge Street.

Historical Period. Adriana suggests that geographical boundaries take precedence over a specific historical period since one potential aim of the website may be to document the development of historical sites over the years until the present. However, for the purposes of this report I have not investigated current development projects within the Old Town.

Theme. The focus of this research is on locations and buildings.

Format. While traditional research sources have been considered, I have particularly emphasized digital and online resources. Materials in this form are already suited for website inclusion; furthermore, researchers could benefit from the resulting aggregated links.

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### 3. General Overview of Resources

The following are brief overviews of the current status of general research resources on the Old Town. However, I begin with a very specific resource, the Heritage Landscape Guide, as it deserves special mention.

#### ***Old Town Toronto: A Heritage Landscape Guide***

Old Town Toronto: A Heritage Landscape Guide was produced in 2001 by the Citizens for the Old Town and the Heritage Resources Centre, University of Waterloo. It was apparently intended to be widely available to tourists and history enthusiasts interested in the Old Town, and to be kept updated to this end. This appears not to have happened, as the only available copies appear to be reference-only at the Toronto Reference Library and are working versions. The booklet does not appear to be available online or an electronic edition either.

This is unfortunate because the Guide is a concentrated and yet accessible introduction to the Old Town. It is just detailed enough to provide an accurate and engaging picture of the history and development of the area without being overwhelming. One of its most useful features is its division of the Old Town into discrete sites. These subdivisions are useful aids to organizing an otherwise complex topic and could be a boon to explorers of the locales.

The Guide is now in need of updating. It does not reflect various developments that have taken place since 2001, most notably the refurbishment of the Distillery District and the recognition of the Parliament Buildings site. It also does not reflect the new reality of digital communication: a modern version would, for example, give URLs for sites open to the public.

#### **Physical Collections: Primary and Secondary Sources at Archival Repositories and Libraries**

Not surprisingly, the principal collections of materials on the Old Town are housed by the City of Toronto Archives and the Toronto Public Library's Toronto Reference Library. These institutions continue to add to their holdings, especially as private collections are donated. For example, the Larry Becker Collection, a large collection bequeathed to the archives in 1999, is still being processed. Both the Archives and TPL are places where municipal and public records may be accessed.

The Old Town researcher should not, however, discount the numerous smaller archives belonging to various cultural organizations and business across the city. Any of these may house little-known records related to the Old Town, although often their holdings are not indexed online. As yet, there appears to be no comprehensive listing of Toronto archives. The closest approximation to it results

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from searching the Ontario Historical Society's Heritage Directory database for the GTA and then for "Toronto". This search result is replicated on the CD accompanying this report.

Organizations with histories firmly rooted in the Old Town are the most likely to house relevant materials. (A good example would be the Archives and Museum at St. James Cathedral.) Because of the city's prominence in Canada's history, larger archives such as the Archives of Ontario and Library and Archives Canada can also be fruitful research sources.

Repositories are making increasing efforts to digitize important documents and images. As such projects advance, it is worth checking online catalogues frequently for new digitization projects, exhibits, and scanned items. Section 4 gives some examples of these resources.

### **Digital Sources**

This is an opportune time for Old Town Toronto to gain its own heritage home on the internet. While heritage organizations are committed to preserving physical places, they also recognize that for many (if not most) researchers, the web is now the first choice for preliminary research.

Digital heritage resources are proliferating. Heritage related content can include organizational websites, catalogues, databases, indices, virtual exhibits, and image files or transcriptions of primary sources. An Old Town listing of such resources can be found in Section 4.

Three trends are worth noting, along with a concluding caveat.

Digitization of primary sources. Libraries and archives are endeavoring to make some of their most important or popular historical documents and images available online through their electronic catalogues or exhibits. The benefits of doing so include accessibility and preservation: online scans not only allow distant researchers to view important documents, but they also save the documents themselves from damage caused by frequent handling. Fortunately TPL and the Toronto Archives have digitized a large number of historical records (photographs, maps, artwork, and documents) relating to Old Town Toronto. For some examples, see Section 4.

The rise of the online history enthusiast. Because of the plethora of online resources and the availability of digital tools for manipulating them, interested citizens are recombining online data in new ways. At times their efforts can result in websites that are more focused and so easier to use than those of large organizations. Again, for some examples, see Section 4.

Increasing fragmentation and change. When information multiplies it tends to fragment. On the internet this can mean that navigation levels on websites multiply and become harder to find, that broken links can become all too common, and that quick web searches do not necessarily yield high-quality or comprehensive results.

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All three of these factors mean that active curation of online content is important. Websites need to be evaluated for accuracy, authority, and adherence to copyright law; sites with related content need to be aggregated to aid researchers; and hard-to-find content needs to be searched out and showcased.

## **Bibliographies**

It appears that an exhaustive and annotated stand-alone bibliography of the Old Town and its history has not yet been compiled. To produce one is an exacting scholarly undertaking beyond the scope of this report. However, bibliographies assembled in any of the classic histories of Toronto are good stand-ins.

A detailed bibliography of the history of Toronto as a whole has been assembled by Carl Benn (see Section 4), but it covers works published after 1990 and was last updated in 2007. The Heritage Landscape Guide references some important bibliographic sources. In Section 4 of this report, I provide online links to some of the best bibliographies in which Old Town references may be found.

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## 4. Sample Search Results

This section relates the results of three searches for Old Town material.

### 4.1 Digital research resources 4.2 Digitized images 4.3 Bibliographical resources

#### 4.1 Digital Research Resources

Following is the result of a detailed web search for quality online material related to the Old Town. For convenience it is divided into the following categories:

- Searchable Databases
- Digital Exhibitions
- Online Maps and Public Records
- Research Guides
- Websites of Historical Sites

#### Searchable Databases

Note: The general catalogues of archives and repositories have not been noted here.

City of Toronto's Heritage Property Search

<http://app.toronto.ca/HeritagePreservation/setup.do?action=init&region=S> This database maintained by the City of Toronto allows you to search Toronto and East York for heritage properties by address, ward, building type, district, architect, or building year. Only a few wards are within the boundaries of the Old Town.

The Ontario Heritage Directory Online

[http://www.ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/en/Start-Browsing\\_122](http://www.ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/en/Start-Browsing_122) This Ontario Historical Society database lists Ontario historical organizations, including archives, museums and historical sites. The search term "Toronto" yields both well and lesser known organizations and places to visit, a number of which relate to the Old Town. Phone numbers, email addresses, and URLs are provided for organizations, but beware a fair number of expired links.

Toronto's Historical Plaques <http://torontoplaques.com/> History enthusiast Alan Brown has assembled this informative and accessible way to search for and view Toronto's historical plaques. Each entry includes an easily readable photograph of the plaque,

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as well as extra background information about the site it commemorates and even photographs and a Google map of its location. An excellent alternative to visiting these sites in person, this website's "York" and "East York" sections are most relevant for the Old Town.

Toronto's Historical Artifact Collection Database <http://app.toronto.ca/gorms/culture/index.jsp>

The aim of the City of Toronto's artifact database is to allow you to search for physical items curated by the City's museums. Currently it covers the Larry Becker Collection only. The earlier the artifact, the more likely it originates within the boundaries of the Old Town.

## Digital Exhibitions

The number of digital-only historical exhibitions is increasing. Following are the web addresses of virtual exhibitions featuring themes connected with Old Town Toronto. The first five are the handiwork of the City of Toronto Archives and are hosted on its website.

Toronto in 1834 <http://www.toronto.ca/archives/1834.htm> This small exhibition of paintings, documents, maps, and excerpts from first-hand accounts explores what the capital of Upper Canada was like in 1834. It was created to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the City of Toronto in 2009. Zoom tools mean that exhibit items can be inspected closely.

The Textures of a Lost Toronto: John Howard's Documentary Art & Drawings 1830s-80s <http://www.toronto.ca/culture/howard.htm> This multi-part themed exhibit highlights documents produced by architect and engineer John George Howard. While only some of the maps, plans, and illustrations depict landmarks within the Old Town, the exhibit as a whole reveals the organic development of Toronto around that core thanks to the influence of planners like Howard.

The Earliest Known Photographs of Toronto

[http://www.toronto.ca/archives/earliest\\_1\\_earliestknown.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/archives/earliest_1_earliestknown.htm) This exhibition gathers together photographs and documents produced in the mid-1800s as part of Toronto's bid to become the capital of Canada. Many photographs depict parts of Old Town Toronto.

The Great Fire of 1904 <http://www.toronto.ca/archives/fire1.htm> Through photographs, maps, and other documents, this exhibit explores the aftermath of the Great Fire of 1904 which devastated much of an area adjacent to the Old Town. Special attention is paid to the fire's effect on Toronto businesses. The exhibit also includes fascinating film footage of the fire itself, unfortunately within a very small video space. (The same footage in a more watchable size



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has been uploaded by Library and Archives Canada at  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ETqEZ49oA4>.)

A Work in Progress: Preserving Toronto's Architectural Record

[http://www.toronto.ca/archives/workinprogress\\_intro.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/archives/workinprogress_intro.htm) "This exhibit highlights some of the many architectural records housed at the City of Toronto Archives, which span the period from the 1840s to the present. These records are a rich and fascinating resource since they document many facets of architectural design and implementation. The drawings, specifications, contracts and correspondence are of interest to anyone exploring the historical evolution of Toronto's buildings, and add to our understanding of the development of our city and its urban fabric."

Don Valley Historical Mapping Project <http://maps.library.utoronto.ca/dvhmp/index.html> "This project documents historical changes in the landscape of the Don River Valley. Drawing from the wide range of geographical information available for the Don River watershed (and the Lower Don in particular), including historical maps, geological maps, fire insurance plans, planning documents, and city directories, the project uses Geographic Information Systems software to place, compile, synthesize and interpret this information and make it more accessible as geospatial data and maps."

Sketches of Toronto <http://ve.torontopubliclibrary.ca/showcase/sketches/index.html> This exhibit produced by the Toronto Public Library turns a single book into an interactive experience. As you turn the pages of Alfred Sylvester's 1858 Sketches of Toronto, you can click the indicated areas of text to obtain more information about the featured topic. You can also zoom in to inspect this archival volume very closely.

Panorama of the City <http://ve.torontopubliclibrary.ca/panorama/index.html> Toronto Public Library here presents its own contribution to exhibiting the photographs taken in 1856-7 as part of Toronto's candidacy for the capital of Canada. One set of these photographs was intended to be assembled into a panorama of the city at the time; this exhibit stitches them together to reveal a bird's-eye view of Toronto's Old Town in the mid-1850s taken from the roof of the Rossin House Hotel. You can pan through the skyline and read more about the architectural features revealed.

Booze in Old Town Toronto

[http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/Search.do?ex=on&R=VE\\_1861&lang=en](http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/Search.do?ex=on&R=VE_1861&lang=en) The Enoch Turner Schoolhouse Foundation has produced this exhibit on the VMC ([virtualmuseum.ca](http://virtualmuseum.ca)) platform. It "explores how society attempted to find a balanced approach to booze, while the industrialized manufacture of it spurred significant developments in banking, railroads, shipping and more, with fiscal stability for its many employees." The exhibit benefits from

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a diverse selection of items, from photographs and engravings to advertisements, posters, invoices, labels and artifacts. This exhibit is a goldmine for documentary evidence on the Old Town's breweries and taverns.

Toronto in Time <http://citiesintime.ca/toronto/> Take a tour guide with you on your phone using this free mobile app for iOS and Android that "highlights the history of Toronto through 'then and now' photos, slideshows, trails, and historical stories for more than 150 sites." You can explore the city by themes (like "fighting for Toronto," "law and order," or "industry and commerce"), by area, or by themed walking trails. The Old Town is covered particularly well under the "Toronto's Commercial Heartland" trail and the "Industry & Commerce" theme. The material on the site can also be enjoyed on your personal computer.

## **Online Maps and Public Records**

Historical Maps of Toronto <http://oldtorontomaps.blogspot.ca/> History, map, and Toronto enthusiast Nathan Ng has assembled what is fast becoming a go-to source on the web for accessing the key early maps of York and Toronto. Although the digitized maps are largely available via the websites of various archives, Ng has collected these scans on a basic but user-friendly interface. Maps are conveniently grouped under four historical periods ranging from 1787 to 1902, and, importantly, source information is provided for each map.

Fire Insurance Maps <http://skritch.blogspot.ca/2012/04/goads-atlas-of-toronto-online.html> Another production by Nathan Ng, this site makes available good scans of Goad's Fire Insurance Plans (maps) for 1884, 1890, 1893, 1899, 1903, 1910, 1913, and 1924, as well as the Insurance Plan of the City of Toronto for the years 1880 and 1889. As Ng indicates, these digitized maps are also available via the City of Toronto Archives, but through a vexing interface.

City Directories <http://wherethestorytakesme.ca/toronto-city-directories/> Toronto genealogist and speaker Jane MacNamara has assembled this helpful chart with links to digitized Toronto City Directories at the Toronto Public Library. Online PDFs of the directories are currently available for most years prior to 1923. MacNamara also provides useful advice for searching these illuminating documents.

City Tax Assessment Rolls <http://www.torontofamilyhistory.org/taxrolls.html> A joint project of the Toronto Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, the City of Toronto Archives, and OntarioRoots.com, this website makes available the city tax rolls for 1853. The project will be expanded to include the Census returns for 1852 Township of York.