

**A Guide to Researching a Heritage House in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Niagara
Township and the Villages of Queenston and St. Davids**
Joy Ormsby 2006

PREREQUISITES:

(a) The lot number of the property

This can be found on the tax assessment notice under “Legal Description”. Some notices also show a plan number and/or a registered plan (R.P.) number indicating a specific part of a divided lot. The use of plan numbers began in the late 20th Century. They are helpful if you wish to search backwards from the current owner to the original Crown Grant. The more interesting option is to search forward from the Crown Grant to the current Owner.

(b) Patience!

PROCESS:

Step 1

Search the abstracts to create a chain of ownership from the Crown Grant to the present. The result of this search provides a working outline.

Abstracts record all transactions involving land in the order of their registration dates. The early ones are in books; the more recent ones are in loose-leaf.

To search forward: Find your lot number in Abstract Book I, which organizes lots in their numerical order, and records transactions from the 1790s to about 1865. Copy the information either by printing from the microfilm (see Appendix C – copied from Town of Niagara Book I, p.14) or by hand (see Appendix D – hand copied from Town of Niagara Books I and II for lot 49). All information in the abstracts is important. For example, the instrument number and the date of registry are necessary to find a specific indenture that you may wish to examine. Repeat the process for subsequent Abstract Books (II -VI) and the loose-leaf contemporary records.

Abstract Books I and II for both the Town and the Township are available on microfilm at the Niagara Library (Reels 150 & 161). All Abstract Books and loose-leaf pages are available at the Niagara North Registry Office in St. Catharines on film.

NB

(i) There are separate books for Niagara Town and Niagara Township

(ii) Land South of John Street and East of King Street was not part of the Town until 1816. Many early properties in this area including the Dickson and Randwood estates are included in “Instruments with no lot numbers” (see Appendix A & B – index pages).

(iii) Land known as Niagara Harbour & Dock Company Property, East of King Street and North of Picton Street, and the four acre blocks East of King Street and South of Picton Street (collectively known as the New Survey), were not part of the Town until 1823.

(iv) Searching a Dock area property requires extra care because lot numbers changed. This caveat also applies to Queenston Village. The Village was “carved out” of Township lots 4, 5 & 6. The Crown Grants for these lots are included in Niagara Township listings. Sales of Village lots are listed under Queenston Village in the abstracts (see Appendix A & B for relevant pages). In addition, note that lot numbers in the Village changed in 1931. Lot boundaries of Township lots 4, 5 & 6 changed slightly c. 1850 and no Registry Office entries for the Village from 1807-1818 survived.

(v) The least difficult lots to search are those in the Old Town (numbers 1-412). Their numbers do not change and since none was more than one acre, divisions are relatively few. However, since some of them were frequently traded, it is advisable to look for a possible note directing you to the next appropriate page for your lot number either in the same abstract book or in the next relevant abstract book.

(vi) Township lots are more time-consuming because original lots were 100 acres (50 chains x 20 chains), giving more options for division of the land. Recording of the instrument number and registration date is therefore very important because you may need to find the actual instrument (indenture) in order to obtain the exact location and description of a particular severance.

(vii) Though abstracts rarely refer to a building, they may provide, in addition to a list of owners and dates, clues to the existence of a building. A mortgage and/or a considerable increase in price at a subsequent sale often indicates the addition of a building. However, if other properties in the area experienced a similar rise in price, inflation may be the cause. The transaction (i.e. not the registration) date provides an approximate time to check newspapers and municipal assessment rolls for the addition of a house to the property.

(viii) Some land title vocabulary and abbreviations

B & S	Bargain and Sale (i.e. Sale)
Deed	Conveyance and Real Estate
Grant	Transfer of property that does not include a true dollar payment but may include conditions
Grantor	Makes the Grant
Grantee	Receives the Grant
Q.C.	Quit Claim (i.e. release of any claim to the property)
A.M. or Ass. Mtg	Assignment of Mortgage
D.M.	Discharge of Mortgage
L.S. Pen	Law Suit

w.o.l.	With other land
a.o.l.	And other land
Et al	And others
Et ux	And wife

Step 2

To add detail to the outline provided by the abstracts, look at the relevant indentures. They generally provide the occupation and the place of residence of the parties involved, and often give a detailed description of the boundaries of the lots. Except for Wills (Probate), they seldom mention specific buildings. The phrase “together with all the houses, out houses, woods, waters and water courses” is standard ‘legalese’ and does not indicate the presence of any of the itemized features. Wills generally provide the best “value” for time spent.

Indentures registered in Abstract Books I & II are available on microfilm at the Niagara Library. The Niagara Historical Society has hard copies of most deeds for Books II & III (specifically #164 (Jan 1868) to #17751 (Dec. 1955) for Niagara Township and #91 (Dec. 1867) to #9470 (Dec. 1958) for the Town). Copies at both the Library and the Museum are \$1 per page. The Niagara North Registry office no longer stores actual deeds, but may have them on film.

Step 3

Explore the Niagara Historical Museum’s fantastic collection of early plans, some of which show location of buildings.

(a) Recommended for the Old Town:

- (i) Andrew Gray 1810 – shows footprint of houses built pre-1810. None survived but there are a few post-1815 “rebuilt” at their original locations.
- (ii) H.H. Wilson 1812 & 1819 - show footprints of early post-Dec. 1813 buildings.
- (iii) Aeneas Shaw c. 1821
- (iv) Gustav Nicolls – 1833, includes Dock Area
- (v) Bonnycastle/Baddeley 1837 – records fabric of buildings
- (vi) 20th Century Fire Insurance Plans – limited selection but very useful for the Town and for the Dock area.

(b) Recommended for the Dock Area:

- (i) Royal Engineers Plan 1821
- (ii) Rykert Plan 1865
- (iii) Other Plans – e.g. 1790, 1802, 1819, 1823, 1851

(c) Recommended for Queenston:

- (i) Vavasour 1818
- (ii) Hawkins 1838 & 1856
- (iii) An 1859 plan shows some Village lots 1-17 and names their owners
- (iv) Blake Irwin 1931 CPI – shows present lot numbers and some buildings

(d) Recommended for Niagara Township:

- (i) Tremaine 1862 and Tench 1878 show buildings and name owners
- (ii) A few plans of individual lots are also available

(e) Recommended for the land South of John Street:

- (i) Two partial plans of the area are available, one showing owners from 1793-1801, the other owners in 1894. They do not mark buildings.

(f) Recommended for Chautauqua:

- (i) Niagara Assembly
- (ii) Chautauqua

Step 4

Municipal tax assessment rolls for the Town and Township often provide evidence of a building or buildings. Limitations are that the earliest available rolls are for 1848/49, that they are sometimes incomplete and that searching them is time consuming. However, most record the value of the land, the house (if any) and some information about the building (material (stone, wood or brick), number of storeys and, in some early assessments, number of fire places). All show whether a building is owned (F=freehold) or tenant (T) occupied.

Several interesting tenants have been found thanks to tax assessments. For example, US Confederates who lived in Town in the 1860s. Non resident owners are labelled N.R.

Some identify the usage of the building (e.g. hotel) and a few specifically note the replacement of an older house with a new building.

The assessed value of the land usually is listed separately from that of the building (H), and so is the value of the 'personal property' such as machinery or horse and carriage. V indicates a vacant house on site.

Most supply the name, occupation, religion of the head of household, and the number of children in the family.

An appreciable rise in assessment – if that of neighbouring properties remains stable – indicates improvements to an existing building, or a new building. A fall in assessment could follow demolition or destruction by a fire. Check entries for the following years and for neighbouring properties carefully.

Town assessments are listed according to wards – originally named for Saints (Lawrence on the East to Andrew on the West) and then from the 1860s – East, Centre and Western.

Township assessments are generally listed according to Township lot numbers, not necessarily in order. Occasionally names are in alphabetical order.

Early assessment rolls to 1899 are available on microfilm at the Niagara Library for both Town and Township (there are a few gaps). Post 1900 rolls are available in books at the Town offices (Planning Department).

Generally steps 1-4 will provide land owners from the Crown Grant until the late 1900s as well as dates of buildings and their value. There are rare occasions, however, when registry office data was destroyed (e.g. Queenston 1806-1818) and when grantees failed to register a purchase. The following miscellaneous sources may provide information missing in R.O. documents as well as additional material regarding owners and buildings.

Step 5 **Miscellaneous**

(a) Local newspapers – there is a good selection, dating from 1794 to mid 20th Century, at the Niagara Library. Use dates from R.O. abstracts or deeds to narrow the search for references to sales of property. Also check the Niagara Library filing cabinet cards, which record fires and other catastrophes.

(b) Church records – available at the Library. Burial dates, for example, are useful for finding obituaries in the newspapers.

(c) Census data – available at the Library

(d) Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Research Papers, etc – useful for major land owners, e.g. Samuel Street, James Crooks, Robert Hamilton.

(e) Architect's Drawings/Images – available in the Museum collection

(f) Gazetteers and Directories – limited use for Niagara. List businesses and residents with their street address (usually those who paid to be included). There are few available for Niagara.

(g) Images from the Museum collection – include early paintings, drawings, lithographs (1860s), and photos (post 1888).

(h) War Losses Claims – helpful for pre 1813 buildings. The Library has many local claims on microfilm.

Need Further Information?

Several general guides are available including:

- *The Use of Land Registry Offices for Historical Research* by John S. Hagopian in Ontario History, Volume 87, March 1995.
- *A Guide to Ontario Land Registry Records*, OGS 1994, Archives of Ontario Microfilm Interloan Catalogue.

- *Researching Heritage Buildings* by Margaret Carter, Ministry of Environment, Ottawa, 1983.
- *Title Searching in Ontario: A Procedural Guide* by Janet M. Globe. Butterworth, Toronto, 1982 (useful for definitions and for conversion of measurements).