

The Archives of Ontario contain records of those admitted to Toronto's Lunatic Asylum

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If you have ancestors who lived in Ontario for several generations, chances are you will find someone in your family tree who was admitted to an asylum.

The first provincial Lunatic Asylum opened in the second Old Toronto Jail at the northeast corner of King and Toronto streets in January 1841. Referred to as the Temporary Asylum, it remained here until the opening of the magnificent white brick edifice designed by John George Howard in January 1850.

Over the years, the asylum's changed name several times. Today it is known at the Queen Street Mental Health Centre, which is housed on the same property at Queen Street West and Shaw streets; the original building was demolished in 1976.

The Archives of Ontario has in its possession the asylum's early records (1841 to 1998), which are fascinating review. The early patient registers are available on microfilm in the archive's reading room and contain information pertaining to the patient, including residence, nativity, height and colouring, marital status and number of children, type of disorder and cause, admittance and discharge or death dates and other details.

While the amount of information entered varies per patient, the collection reveals information about individuals not found in other records. It is a window into past mental care practices and the lives of these troubled souls. A partial index to the general registers (1841 to 1901) can be searched at <http://www.leedickson.ca/qsmhc-v1.html>

Once the general registers have been consulted and the patient's admittance number found, further records can be reviewed from off-site and require a day (or half a day if one can order the records before 10:30 a.m.) from the archivists. The archives' reference number for the overall collection is RG 10-268 through RG 10-276 and detailed descriptions of these records can be reviewed online in the archives' descriptive database at www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/access/our_collection.aspx

Of most interest to genealogists are: admission warrants and histories; patients' clinical casebook; clinical case files; patient registers and records of the medical superintendent. The records are governed by the Freedom of Information and the Protection of Privacy Act.

Written request for access to records 100 years old or less must be submitted to the Information and Privacy Unit of the Archives of Ontario.

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This 1868 photo shows the Lunatic Asylum, which was on the south side Queen Street West, opposite Ossington Avenue. The Archives of Ontario has records of people who were admitted to the hospital.