

Search old city directories for gems on residents, streets and an ancestor's business

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A valuable tool for genealogist's researching the Toronto area are city directories.

Ranging from 1834 to 2001, the directories vary in content, but typically contain an alphabetical directory of inhabitants; their occupations and addresses; a business directory; and a street directory listing the inhabitants.

Some include additional sections such as township or suburban directories.

As an example, the York Commercial Directory, Street Guide, and Register, 1833-4: with Almanack [sic] and Calendar for 1834, as the name implies, is fascinating reading and contains a great deal of general information. If one of your ancestors ran a business, look for an advertisement.

Digital Archive Toronto City Directories, 1797-1899, is available online from the Toronto Public Library and the eBooks can be viewed in PDF format.

The direct link is http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/search.jsp?N=38579+4293411967+4293412209&Ns=p_pub_date_sort&Nso=0

Included in this eBook collection is York, Upper Canada Minutes of Town Meetings and Lists of Inhabitants 1793-1823, Christine Mosser editor, (Metropolitan Toronto Library Board, 1984) and contains a transcript of the earliest lists of Toronto's inhabitants for the Town of York and York Township, Scarborough and Etobicoke. The original manuscript is one of the most prized possessions in the library's history collection.

The year 2001 was the last one Polk published the Criss Cross Directories. Hereinafter, phone books are an alternate choice, but are not as useful.

Today, phone books have become of even less value with the prevalent use of cellphones as cellphone listings are not included in phone books or 411.

A complete run (1834-2001) of the Toronto Directories can be found at the Toronto Reference Library, Second Floor (volumes and microfilms); North York Central Library, Sixth Floor – Canadiana Collection; the City of Toronto Archives (both have microfilms and stacks volumes); the Archives of Ontario has a run 1834-1983 (microfilm and library.)

The Library and Archives Canada (Ottawa) has the richest collection of Canadian directories.

Keep an eye on their website for the digital "Canadian Directories Collection "

The digital collection covers up to 1901. While it presently does not include Toronto, county and provincewide directories should not be overlooked.

Of note, Early Canadiana Online has some Toronto directories digitized and with a Toronto Public Library card, you can access it for free through the Toronto Public Library's online catalogue.

These include some obscure directories such as The Medical Directory of Toronto and suburbs (R. G. McLean, 1903).

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Front cover of Brown's Toronto city and Home District directory 1846-7.