

LEE DICKSON GENEALOGY: Tap into the records of Toronto's earliest jails

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The first Toronto jail was built in 1798 to 1799 on the south side of King Street West near Toronto Street, Town of York; a rough log structure hidden inside a hewn cedar stockade. The Home District Gaol serviced the Counties of Peel, York and Ontario.

By 1824, a larger jail was built across the street at King and Toronto streets. This red brick building was surrounded on three sides by a 15-foot picket fence.

The earliest surviving Toronto jail register dates the end of 1837 through to 1843. Often prisoners were incarcerated out of basic need such as being old, sick, poor, mentally ill, disorderly or in debt. However, the most frequent crimes were assault and larceny.

In 1838, the register records the lion's share of crimes was high treason. The names of two outstanding citizens, Peter Matthews and Samuel Lount are recorded here as traitors participating in the Mackenzie Rebellion. Made an example of the rebel cause, their executions took place outside the jail in Court House Square on March 12, 1838. Thousands attended the hanging.

By 1840 a large three-storey structure erected on the north side of Front and Berkley streets served as the third Toronto Jail: it evoked the presence of a prison. The second jail was then used as the province's first Temporary Lunatic Asylum.

The fourth, the Don Jail, built between 1858 and 1864, is located to the east of the Don River on Gerrard Street East. The original building closed in 1977, but continued to house inmates in a 1958-built modernist east wing until 2013.

The Toronto jail registers and other related records span 1838 to 1989 and are a part of the vast holdings of the Archives of Ontario's Correctional Services Records of Ontario.

The Toronto jail registers (1838-1975) and indices to the jail registers (1859-1941) have been microfilmed and the earliest volumes are available to review in the archive's reading room. Information recorded in these registers is limited and includes: prisoner's commitment and by whom, crime, when discharged and how, sentence and remarks. Later registers contain additional information, such as religion, marital status, education and so on.

Administrative records of the Toronto Jail, RG 20-100, are outlined in the Archives Descriptive Database. This collection includes: jail punishment and statistical registers, log books, inmate case files, description books, committal, surgeon's sick prisoners and discharge registers, recommitments and prisoner's effects books among other interesting records.

Access to these records is governed by the Freedom of Information and the Protection of Privacy Act. Requests for access to records 100 years old or less must be submitted in writing to the Information and Privacy Unit of the Archives of Ontario.

Toronto Artist Lee Dickson has been a practicing artist since the '70s. She is also a professional general and visual records researcher and a genealogical specialist in Ontario Land Records and the United Empire Loyalists. She can be contacted at www.leedickson.ca and research@leedickson.ca



Toronto's first jail (1799-1827) was on King Street East on the south side at Leader Lane.



Toronto's fourth jail (1865-) on Gerrard Street East on the north side between St. Matthews Road and Broadview Avenue.