



VANCOUVER **HERITAGE** FOUNDATION

RESEARCHING HERITAGE BUILDINGS

So you want to learn more about the history of a heritage building?

In this guide, we will cover where there is existing research and how to access original and digitized records.

Additionally we will touch on several concepts important to researching in a modern world.

When researching a specific building, take all of these aspects into consideration for a wholistic history of a building and its stories.

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Purpose of Research

- To provide basic information about heritage sites from primary and secondary sources.
- To educate users on the heritage, documentations and personal history of a site.
- To present a summary that is a starting point for understanding the layers of a site.
- To source all findings for organization records and provide reference to information provenance.
- To provide a resource for the general public including individuals of all ages and education levels including locals, tourists, professionals, newcomers, students, teachers, and more.

Help VHF!

Two of Vancouver Heritage Foundation's projects ([Heritage Site Finder](#) and [Places That Matter](#) Community History Resource) are supported by volunteer researchers. Please consider sharing anything you find about the featured sites.

Getting familiar with research guides

Read over this guide and other relevant guidance to understand the big picture before jumping into the research process. Read through the list of resources and start thinking about what you might want to use. Consider also if you would like to make a visit to the [City of Vancouver Archives](#) or simply do research online.

[Discover your Home's History](#) | City of Vancouver

[Reference Guides](#) | City of Vancouver Archives

[Genealogy and Family History](#) | Vancouver Public Library

[Research your Home's Heritage](#) | North Shore Heritage

[Research Guide for History](#) | UBC

Helpful tips as you start your research

Municipal History

Before 1929 there were three separate municipalities in the current-day city of Vancouver: Vancouver, Point Grey and South Vancouver. There were also holdings of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) or crown lands. If you are having difficulty finding information in the general listed resources, it could be due to the address being in one of these other jurisdictions. I.e. UBC is not part of City of Vancouver.

Legal Description vs. Street Address

The legal description of a site includes the block and lot numbers. These generally do not change. Street addresses, however, often change over time – both the street names and numbers.

Accuracy of Information

Much of the research that exists within city files, online websites or in printed books may include misinformation or omissions. Some historians have shared thorough research, but otherwise, approach findings with a critical eye and an open mind.

Please note: information and records you are hoping to find simply may not exist, not yet be digitized, or may be behind pay walls.



Refining your search

You can find a lot just from an initial internet search using the site address or other key information.

See if research has already been conducted and find easily accessible sources. You may come across secondary sources, like books or blogs, that contain information to help refine your search and directions to primary sources.

Vancouver Heritage Foundation:

- [Heritage Site Finder](#)
- [Map Guides](#)
- [Places That Matter](#)
- [Reading Room](#)

Online:

- [Every Place Has a Story](#) | Eve Lazarus
- [Past Tense Vancouver](#) | Lani Russwurm
- [When an Old House Whispers](#) | James Johnston
- [Vanalogue](#) | Christine Hagemoen
- [Changing Vancouver](#)
- [Building Vancouver](#)

Print:

- "Exploring Vancouver: the Architectural Guide" by Harold Kalman and Robin Ward
- "Building the West: Early BC Architects" by Don Luxton

Other notable print authors:

- John Atkin
- Aaron Chapman
- Michael Kluckner
- Bruce MacDonald
- Chuck Davis
- Eve Lazarus



Basic Search

Through your preferred search engine, first try searching the address - you may learn helpful information such as alternate addresses, year built, and names of architects or builders.

You might also find recent updates such as real estate listings with current interior images, newspaper articles and documents from the City of Vancouver, including council reports which pertain to sites on the [Heritage Register](#).

For a full list of history resources:

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

What's the source?

What is the difference between a primary and secondary source? Your research may take you through many different types of documents so it is important to know how to approach them. Secondary sources may be easier to access but primary sources may contain more detailed information.

Primary sources...

are the direct evidence or first hand accounts of events without secondary analysis or interpretation. A primary source is a work that was written or created at a time that is contemporary or nearly contemporary with the period or subject being studied.

- [City Directories](#)
- [Building permits](#)
- Photographs
- Maps and architectural plans
- [Archival newspapers](#)

Secondary sources...

analyze or interpret a historical event or artistic work. Secondary sources often base their theories and arguments on the direct evidence found in primary sources. A secondary work for a subject is one that discusses the subject but is written after the time contemporary with it.

- Online blogs
- print books
- Modern newspapers
- Databases*

*Databases can be used for organizing both primary and secondary sources.

Source Integrity

Adapted from [University of British Columbia](#)

Evaluating information sources might be the most integral step in research. Remember we are only human and errors may exist at the historical source, through interpretation years later, or even purposeful fabrication.

Use these questions to analyze materials and to assess how reliable they will be for your research.

- Is the author clearly identified and do they have the credentials for writing on the topic?
- Can factual information be verified through references to other credible sources?
- Is there a date stating when the document was originally created; is it clear when the source was last updated, revised or edited?
- Why was the source created - to educate? sell a product? advocate a viewpoint?

Wondering how things are named today?

Pay attention to new street names or lanes nearby. These add to the layers of place names; from Indigenous names, to pre-amalgamation streets and their changes, to current naming practices (mainly for new streets and civic assets).

- [Civic Asset Naming Committee Reserve List](#)
- [CBC interactive page and video](#)



Whose stories have been told?
Whose stories are missing?

You may have found some difficulty in researching your building but have you thought about if information has purposely been erased, left out, or under-researched?

Data sovereignty in relation to historical research

Very broadly, this means who owns and controls information. The legislation governing data in Canada is the [Access to Information Act](#).

We encourage you to think critically and sensitively when researching topics especially related to Indigenous and other marginalized peoples. Whose stories have been told through the land and buildings you are researching? And who owns and manages the resources where this information is stored? How does colonialism impact these community's access and rights to their own information and opportunities to tell their own stories?

Resources:

- [First Nations Information Governance Centre](#)
- [What is Indigenous Data Sovereignty and why does it matter?](#)
- [Indigenous Data Sovereignty](#)



Keep in mind

- This guide is not exhaustive and resources found here are primarily applicable to Vancouver B.C.
- Vancouver Heritage Foundation is not a research or archival based organization. We have collected these external research resources as an approachable starting point for our volunteers and patrons.

STEP BY STEP RESEARCH

Now that you are more familiar with the basics of research and sources, let's look at what information you can seek and where to find it.

We will give you a step by step outline of where to research the granular information about a site, expanding outwards to eventually look at the neighbourhood. We have listed the major resources that are most helpful in finding each piece of information, including a basic **How To** for each. These resources are hyperlinked in **red bubbles**. Additional resources are linked in bullet point lists. Remember, resources found here are not exhaustive of what is available and some may be more or less helpful on your research journey. You may even find yourself "down a rabbit hole!"

Please note again, that these resources are managed externally and assistance with accessing information should be directed to the resource owner or manager.

1. [Trace the address information](#)

2. [Identify origin information and key construction dates](#)

3. [Learn more about the building's material history](#)

4. [Identify architectural style and key elements](#)

5. [Learn about the people and business of the site](#)

6. [Discover the neighbourhood and local Indigenous history](#)

1. Trace the address information through the site's history

Some sites keep the same address over time; others change street number or even street name. It's important to have the correct address information from the beginning so that your search will be fruitful and accurate. These two resources can help you check this information, including finding out the legal land number.

The legal land number is made up of the "District Lot Number," "Block Number" and "Lot Number." This number typically doesn't change over time and can help to identify that a property you are searching is the same across different resources.

VanMap | City of Vancouver

VanMap is a data map of the City of Vancouver.

How to: Use the search function to find property information for a specific address including the lot, block number and legal description. The layers on the right-hand side show or hide specific map features.

For historical research, the most useful layer is the 1912 Goad's Fire Insurance Map (under the section "Aerial Imagery") that can be used to check the lot and block numbers in the year 1912. Finding the lot number will help to check the accuracy of information from other sources.

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

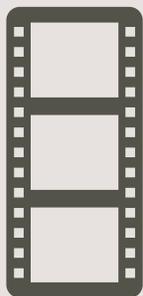
More information about the 1912 Goad's Fire Insurance Map can be found [here](#).

Street Names of Vancouver by Elizabeth Walker

Available online, this book details the history and changes of Vancouver's Street Names. Like in the research example below, finding the correct historical street name is important.

How to: The book goes through the streets alphabetically. You may use the index on the left-hand side to navigate, but some may find it faster to use Ctrl-F to search for the relevant street name.

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)



Let's get visual: Historical photo resources

- [VPL Photos of BC and the Yukon](#)
- [Open Library Digital Collections UBC](#)
- [City of Vancouver Photo Archives](#)
- [BC Archives Collections](#)
- [A Pictorial History of Grandview](#)

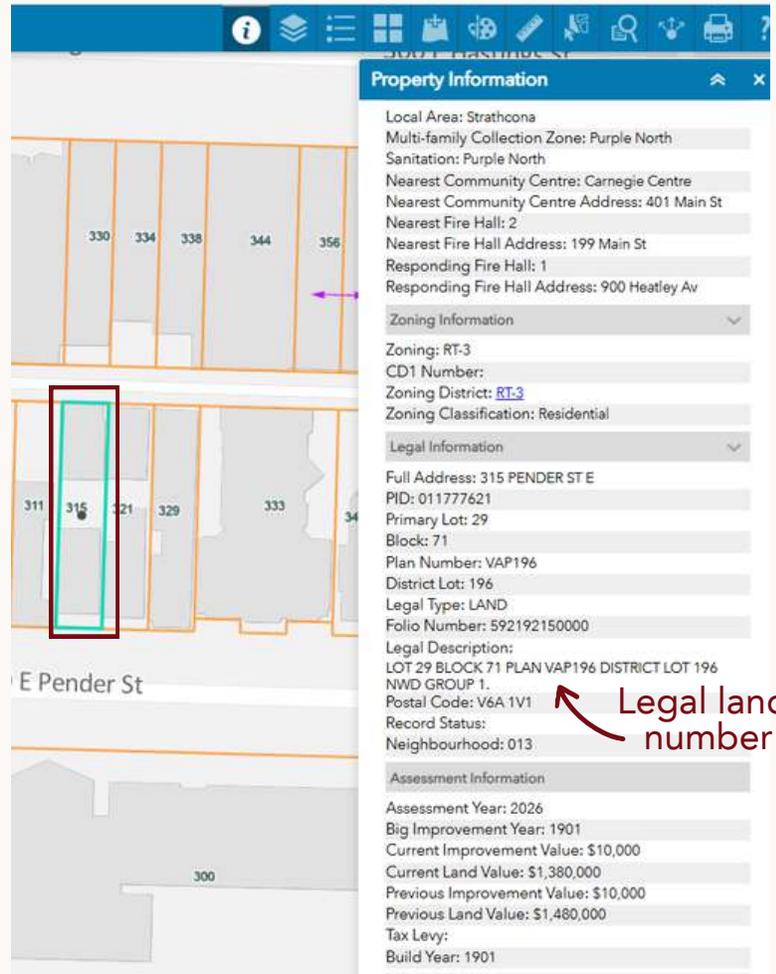
Research Example: 315 Pender Street

What we see:

- No historical permit can be found
- 315 Pender shows up in the historical directories in 1908
- VanMap lists the build year as 1901

What we actually found:

- Pender Street used to be called Princess Street - 315 Princess Street shows up in the 1901 directories
- A 1901 permit for 317 Princess Street corroborates the lot number and resident name as the neighbour of 315 Princess Street in the 1901 directory
- The resident who lived at 315 Princess Street in 1901 listed this as their address as far back as the 1895 directory
- Based on this information it's possible the current building at 315 Pender Street was built as early as 1895 and could explain the lack of building permit as permits were not archived before 1901



- VanMap may have pulled the 1901 "build year" from a record correlated to the "Significant Improvement Year" such as a water permit

Block number

Street name pre-1908

2. Identify origin information and key construction dates for the site

The date of construction of the current property on the site can typically be found using the VanMap search tool, but the following resource can also help you confirm structural details and learn about some people associated with the building or site, like the architect or historical owners. You may also find information about alterations, additions, or use, changing over time.

Vancouver Building Permits | Heritage Vancouver Society

A collection of historical building permits digitized by Heritage Vancouver Society.

How to: First read the [FAQS](#) that go over how to search the database and the limitations on what records are available. Search by address, associated names, by block and lot number to find permit information. When searching the database check that the address details are consistent with the legal description from VanMap.



[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

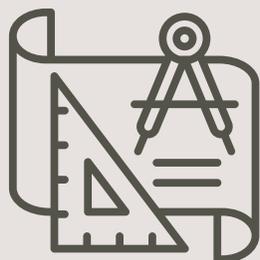
What other information does this permit help us find:

- Guiseppe Alonzo is listed as the resident for this address in the directories
- He is also listed as the builder - [newspaper articles](#) corroborate him as a carpenter
- He owned 3 lots and built this house on the two western lots - "a double lot" which is still intact today

District:	Vancouver	Submit corrections on this entry
Permit:	B-25407	
Owner:	Alonzo, G.	
Architect:		
Builder:	Owner	
Legal Address:	DL: HT Block: 15 Sub: Sec 34 Resub: Lot: 32, 33 & 34	
Date (Y-M-D):	1929-04-13	
Street Number:	2609	
Street Name:	6th Avenue E	
Value:	\$4,500.00	
Remarks:	Dwelling/House; New;	
Reference ID:	VN-192910033-1	

3. Learn more about the building's material history

At this stage you can use the information you may have learned about the architect and now can search for their biographical details. Or use information about alterations to the building's exterior to try to source images from before or after the change.



Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada 1800-1950

A comprehensive resource of biographical information about architects in Canada. Note: As of 2026, this website is no longer active and we have linked it through the Wayback Machine, therefore some information may not be up to date.

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

How to: If you were able to identify the architect or builder of a site, search by last name to find additional details, such as other significant buildings that they may have had a hand in designing or building.

City of Vancouver Archives

An extensive collection of archival records related to Vancouver's history, some of which are available online.

How to: Can be used for finding photographs that show how the exterior of the building has changed over time, but there is much to discover depending on the site. Make sure to search for materials available online by setting "digital object available" to "yes" in the advanced search. Note: Other materials are only available in person.

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

4. Identify architectural style and key elements

You might try to determine the style of house or building, or simply learn some of the architectural vocabulary to describe the exterior elements.

Vancouver House Styles Hub |
Vancouver Heritage Foundation

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

A resource that details common house styles in Vancouver with images, descriptions and social history.

How to: Click on the style of home that shares the most features with the property you are researching. You may wish to use archival photos from the City of Vancouver Archives for reference. Each entry describes the specific features of the building style; you may use these to inform your research.

In Vancouver there are few 'pure' examples of styles...



Builders and architects have drawn from many sources of inspiration, and over the years houses have often been changed to fit the needs of the people living there. Updates may have mixed styles of windows, cladding and even shape of a home. In these cases, identification can be based on the building's main characteristics, even if not all features match exactly. This is one reason why looking at features like roof style and form of a building are good places to start.

5. Learn about the people and businesses of the site

Using the historical address, further your search for people and businesses associated with the site over time. You can find owners or tenants, occupations of tenants, and more.

The British Columbia City Directories are a good place to get started, but for more in-depth research and to find more information on communities whose histories are not well-represented in archival records, see the additional resources on [page 17](#).



City directories were what existed before telephone books, and typically included lists of addresses with occupant information, a businesses inventory, and advertisements.

British Columbia City Directories 1860-1955 | Vancouver Public Library

This is an extensive resource that may take some getting used to – so take the time to look over the instructions on the main page and explore!

How to: Find the year the house or building was erected in the index on the left-hand side and browse the associated street number directory to find the names or businesses associated with the site. Some years have Vancouver-specific directories and others have general British Columbia directories, but both will reliably have information about the Greater Vancouver area.

Going year-by-year will allow you to track changes in the address and the occupants or may also direct you to deaths, marriages or other relations.

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

Research Example: 315 Pender Street

Recalling our earlier example, let's look at the resident information in the directories. Notice the abbreviations pointing to their status, occupation, etc.

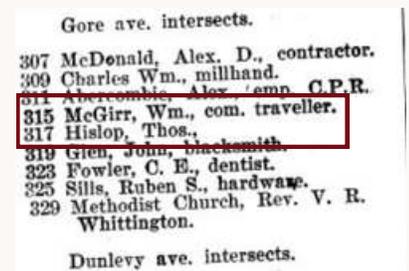
From the 1908 Directory:

- This is the first instance "315 Pender Street" appears
- "Andrews Mary J widow" is listed as the occupant



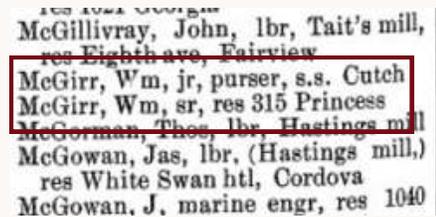
From the 1901 Directory:

- Under "315 Princess Street," "McGirr, Wm., com. traveller." is listed as the occupant
- 317 Princess Street lists "Hislop, Thos.," as the occupant - a permit for this address corroborates the legal land number, confirming 315 Princess and 315 Pender are the same lot



From the 1895 Directory (names):

- Individual addresses are not listed prior to 1900, but looking through the name directories shows "McGirr, Wm jr" and "sr" listing "315 Princess" as their address



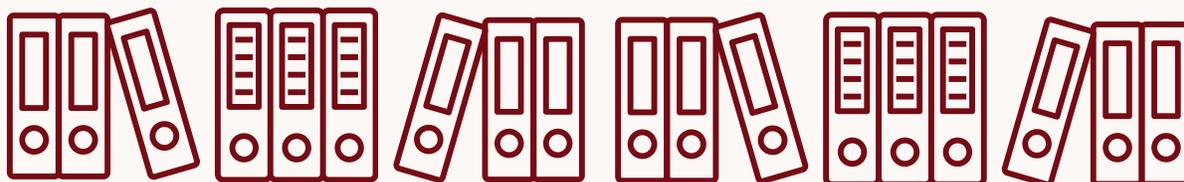
Historical newspapers can be a wealth of interesting tidbits of information. Try searching by address and names. You may find wedding or death announcements, sales ads, records of meetings, parties or construction. There are multiple ways to access historical newspapers, including through your VPL library card. BC residents can also access them for free through ProQuest: www.ProQuest.com



Additional Resources

These websites host specific archives and highlight projects that may connect to your research.

- [Black Strathcona](#)
- [BC Black Awareness Society](#)
- [Chinese Canadian Historical Society of BC](#)
- [Heritage BC Cultural Maps](#)
- [Jewish Museum - East End Stories](#)
- [Jewish Museum and Archives of BC](#)
- [Nikkei National Museum and Archives](#)
- [Nikkei Stories](#)
- [South Asian Stories](#)
- [SFU Special Collections and Rare Books](#)
- [UBC Special Collections](#)
- [Landscapes of Injustice Database \(Japanese Canadian Internment\)](#)



Geneology

If you wish to learn more about people or families, in the BC Directories go to “Vancouver Names” of a particular year. You can also check out these other resources.

- [VPL Genealogy and Family History](#)
- [Mountain View Cemetery Database](#)
- [BC Archives Genealogy Records](#)
- [British Columbia Genealogical Society](#)
- [Government of Canada Census Search](#)

6. Discover the neighbourhood and contextualize within local Indigenous history

Widen your lens and take a look at the surrounding area. Think about what contextual information you might include for someone unfamiliar with the city.

Consider also that Vancouver is located on the traditional, ancestral and unceded current territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), S_kwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətaʔt (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. The human history of this region dates back thousands of years, with names and stories tied to it.

Remember to be respectful of protocols when accessing resources featuring traditional Indigenous knowledge.

Public art, murals and markers often relate to lesser-known sites and stories too.



Indigenous Peoples History Resources

- [Musqueam Territory Place Names Map](#)
- [Musqueam Teaching Kit](#)
- [Tsleil-Waututh Nation](#)
- [Squamish](#)
- [First Peoples' Cultural Council](#)
- [SFU Bill Reid Centre](#)

For a full list of Indigenous resources, visit VHF's website:

[VISIT RESOURCE](#)

Areas of the City | City of Vancouver

A municipal overview of 22 distinct areas or neighbourhoods and some of the heritage and history associated with each.

How to: See the list on the left-hand side to navigate to specific neighbourhood info. Each individual page has a drop-down section that covers history and heritage — here you'll find the information most relevant to your research. See what landmarks may be nearby your site, provide context to nearby commercial streets, landscapes etc.



Vancouver Neighbourhoods | Further Exploration

- [Grandview Neighbourhood Database](#)
- [Mt Pleasant Heritage Group](#)
- [South Vancouver History: Ken McLeod's History of South Vancouver and John Oliver High](#)
- [When an Old House Whispers \(East End and Strathcona history\)](#)
- [VHF Places That Matter Community History Resource](#)

This document was produced by
Vancouver Heritage Foundation staff

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All rights are reserved to the sources we have cited.

Please contact us at mail@vancouverheritagefoundation.org if any information or links need to be updated.

Did you know?



Vancouver Heritage Foundation is not Vancouver's only heritage and history related organization? There are many other non-profits and organizations operating in the City as well as niche groups, clubs, and museums. All of us do complementary work that contributes to a diverse heritage fabric in Vancouver! For a list of local, provincial, national and international organizations visit our [website](#).