

COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT

A local history group at the heart of Toronto



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Located at the heart of the City of Toronto, this local history group has a very large study area which extends roughly from Sherbourne Street on the east to Dufferin on the west, and from Wellesley Street to north of St. Clair Avenue. Like most local history groups, it began with a smaller focus but extended its studies to include other areas which had no heritage group to study and advocate for their protection.

Founded in 1983 and incorporated in 1987 as an Affiliate of the Ontario Historical Society, the group has its corporate and mailing headquarters at the Spadina Road Library, but operates out of offices in donated space at 719 Yonge Street where it maintains its research library, extensive files, and collections.

Members of CHP include teachers, planners, students, a professional researcher, an engineer, authors, and residents of the study area. A few members support the work of CHP from well beyond the boundaries of the city. Other individuals, while not being members, contribute to CHP's work by donating their time, financial support, and materials.

The Community History Project receives a small annual Heritage Organization Development Grant from the Ontario Ministry of Culture, but is mainly supported by its members who pay for much of the work out of their own pockets. CHP is a member of the Toronto Historical Association, and works co-operatively with heritage organizations across Toronto. As well, CHP works with many residents' associations in its study area, and with the BloorYorkville BIA.

The study area includes several historic areas which have been, and are, under assault by developers. These include Yorkville, the Annex, Deer Park, and parts of Seaton Village.

COLLECTIONS

Research Library: This library has been built by donations from members and others, with a few purchases made by CHP. It consists of several hundred volumes used constantly for research including the complete Dictionary of Canadian Biography, the Canadian Encyclopedia, Volumes 1 to 3 of John Ross Robertson's "Landmarks of Toronto", a number of historic and contemporary atlases, and a quantity of rare books. There are shelves of books devoted to aboriginal, French, and Irish history, and a large number of books about Canada as a whole. Set aside is a special collection of books about railway history slated for eventual deposit in a railway museum when the City of Toronto fulfills its promise of such at the John Street Roundhouse. Another special collection is of 19th and early 20th century books for children. A third special collection is of books about Toronto's military history, which includes some volumes about the history of the RCMP.

Special Collections: The most important of CHP's holdings are its Tyrrell Collection, which deals with Joseph Burr Tyrrell, Canada's last great explorer and the man who discovered the dinosaurs and whose observations led to understanding continental drift. This large collection consists of glass plate negatives and positives of the Arctic explorations and Tyrrell's years in the Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush. Two CHP members are converting the images to disc for future publication. CHP has a collection of militaria, a small collection about Ambrose Small, and assorted items related to the history of its study area, such as 19th century ice cream freezers, items of clothing, cream-top spoons, some tools and household items, a growing amount of material about now-vanished stores such as Eaton's and Simpson's including old catalogues, and a collection of material and items about the Gooderhams.

FILES

Within its offices, CHP has several classes of files. When the group began, it was agreed that a Building Inventory would be set up, with the focus on the oldest buildings, whether vanished or extant. This necessitated a parallel filing system of biographical material about people associated with the buildings or evolution of the area. It is expected that these files will never be complete as material is being added to them on almost a daily basis. Another filing system consists of maps and copies of maps with attention to the study area but city wide in scope. This collection includes a growing number of registered plans of subdivision.

A set of files frequently referred to as issues set up pressures within the study area are those dealing with the City's Official Plan, the Ontario Heritage Act, and the provincial Planning Act.

A large set of files deal with the Tollkeeper's Cottage, the tolling system in Ontario and elsewhere, and on roads and road-building.

Placed on deposit with CHP are the files of the ABC Residents' Association, and transferred to CHP's use and care are the files of the Maps Project which deal with historic sites across the entire city. Special groups of files deal with the War of 1812, the burial ground and buildings in the St. James block on King Street. Linked to specific areas are maps and files which deal with the Toronto waterfront and with the evolution of Yonge Street.

Recipes drawn from the study area were an early undertaking by CHP, and this collection had grown to include others from the 19th century. CHP has published two collections, and is preparing a second edition of its first recipe book.

PROGRAMMES

Research, advocacy, and public education are the primary activities of the Community History Project. Since governments have walked away from these duties, the work has fallen to the volunteer sector which takes up the slack to the limit of the abilities of each group. CHP is extremely active in all three respects. Research hunts down primary source material wherever it is to be found. CHP has a modest oral history collection to supplement archival research. The picture collection is linked to the Building Inventory and biographical files.

Advocacy is carried out with governments when these support redevelopment of sites which are important to the history of the city and country or are key to the character and stability of a given neighbourhood. CHP's guiding philosophy in advocacy is the public interest - long abandoned by governments.

Public education by CHP takes various forms: exhibits which are taken to public venues, research which is published in book form whenever financial resources permit, brochures which are given away free of charge at any and every opportunity, and through lectures and special programmes held throughout the year.

Membership fees and the annual HODGrant are inadequate in funding CHPs work, so several programmes are devised to raise funds each year. One of these is the annual Junque in June sale, while others recently held offered information on foods available to early settlers in the area.

CHP has designed 31 neighbourhood walking tours, a city-wide walking tour of Davenport Road, four local tours of the area around the Tollkeeper's Cottage, and a walking tour of part Yorkville Vaughan Plank Road. As well, CHP has for sale some self-guided walking tours.

CHP HERITAGE CENTRE

Because of the generosity of property owners, CHP has had office space, unlike the predicament most local heritage groups face. Over the years in its two locations, CHP has been able to assist over twenty organizations by providing meeting space. The CHP Heritage Centre became a full co-operative, gathering its own assets, developing its own programmes on behalf of its member groups. Co-operative activities with non member groups was also important. As the Community History Project maintained the facility some groups turned over their files and some assets to CHP, but all continue to share with each other, and to utilize CHP's holdings.

Groups which continue to meet in the CHP Heritage Centre include: The Toronto Military Heritage Association which financially supports CHP; the city-wide Maps Project which has turned over its files to CHP's care and the use of all; The Rousseau Project / Le Projet Rousseau which has extensive research and files on the founding period and its peoples and has turned these over to the care of CHP and use of all; and Our Waterfront which has maps and files on the waterfront for all to consult. Other groups use the Centre from time to time, and two book clubs pay a monthly rental fee for meetings.

The Centre is open to the public free of charge whenever volunteer staff is available, and offers exhibits about Toronto's history and character. The usual open days are Thursday through Saturday, but appointments can be arranged at other times.

Groups and individuals involved with the Centre and its groups are recipients of City and Ontario awards for their work.