

RESEARCHING BUILDINGS AND HOUSES

This reference guide provides an overview of the types of records from the City of Vancouver Archives that relate to researching commercial and residential properties, including examples of specific fonds or collections. Please keep in mind that additional records may be found among the total Archives' holdings.

Records may be accessed either through record requests submitted for retrieval from our secure storage, self-serve microfiche access copies in the Reading Room, or, if digitized, viewed as a digital copy from our online database. Record retrievals run Monday-Friday, 10:00-4:30.

General Tips:

- While this guide outlines a number of available resources for conducting building history research, *the relevant and commonly used records for most properties* are **water service records, building permits, fire insurance plans, property tax records and city directories**.
- The ***legal description*** is often used for property research. As the unique identifier for parcels of land, this number typically remains the same (perhaps with lots further subdivided) whereas civic addresses may change over time. Legal descriptions consist of three parts: the District Lot number (can be abbreviated as "D.L."), Block number, and Lot number. A Subdivision ("Sub") number is used in some cases.
- The ***names of some Vancouver streets have changed*** in the past, which may affect searching the address of a particular property. A valuable resource is the book, *Street Names of Vancouver* by Elizabeth Walker which provides an alphabetical listing of streets and avenues. Copies are available in our Reading Room or through the Vancouver Public Library.
- The ***Municipalities of Point Grey and South Vancouver*** (much of which included the current area of east Vancouver) were separate until they amalgamated into the City of Vancouver in 1929. Our holdings do contain records of these two earlier Municipalities, however, the available records are more limited.
- Most of the ***architectural plans*** at the Archives are for public buildings or other significant structures. Plans for residential homes may be available and can be searched from our online database or contact the Archives directly. Note that access to architectural drawings for standing properties is restricted under Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA) and permission is required from the owner. Elevation drawings or plans of demolished buildings are open for access. Please contact the Archives about accessing architectural drawings.

CITY RECORDS
ca. 1880s-present

Reading Room (microfilm) & Storage

City records used as primary sources related to City operations and departmental functions in connection to property matters. Particular suggestions for property research are:

- **Water Service Records ([COV-S294](#)) and Water Service Applications ([COV-S293](#))**
 - Used to find the date of the initial and subsequent water applications for determining the approximate date of the completion of a house or other building; water service records also provide the name of the applicant, legal description of lot, and sometimes details on a building's use; from 1888-1993
 - Accessed by a two-step process of first looking at the water service cards on microfiche wherein the property address provides the corresponding application number, followed by reviewing microfilm to locate the application record
 - Holdings also include water service records of the former municipalities of Point Grey, 1908-1928 ([COV-PG-S256](#)); and South Vancouver, 1914-1928 ([COV-SV-S230](#))
 - See below in reference guide for step-by-step instructions on accessing water service records from the Reading Room

- **Building Permit Registers ([COV-S385](#))**
 - Used for the date of the building application, the name of the permit applicant, estimated value of work and other details from 1901-1904, 1908-1947
 - Holdings include permit applications of the former municipalities of Point Grey ([COV-PG-S272](#)) and South Vancouver ([COV-SV-S234](#)) from 1912-1928
 - Arranged chronologically by permit application number; some records also arranged by legal description; some records have indexes to owner names
 - There is no direct source for obtaining a permit application number; the approximate date of construction can be found using water service records
 - See also the online Building Permit Database created by Heritage Vancouver Society for a searchable means of reviewing early permit records (p. 8 of guide)

- **Property Tax Records (multiple COV series)**
 - Used to identify the assessed values of land, assessed values of improvements to properties, and the name of the property owner that tax year
 - Holdings include both tax assessment rolls and tax billing statements within the current Vancouver municipal boundaries from 1880-2005
 - Please note that there are gaps in these records, most significantly from 1890-1929 for the City of Vancouver; holdings also include records for Point Grey and South Vancouver
 - **Consult the property tax records finding aid guide** for more information on accessing these records

- **Building Permit Application Architectural Plans and Drawings ([COV-S393](#))**
 - Plans submitted as part of the building permit application and selected by the Archives for historic interest, including schools, theatres, apartment buildings, commercial properties, downtown buildings etc. from 1887-1999
 - Arranged by address
 - Note that this series contains minimal plans for single family homes

- **Sectional Maps (multiple series, eg. [COV-S508](#))**
 - Used for an overview of surveyed areas showing development history of neighbourhoods and to determine legal description of lots
 - Maps for former municipalities of Point Grey ([COV-PG-S247](#)) and South Vancouver ([COV-S674-: MAP 871](#)) are also available

PRIVATE SECTOR HOLDINGS ca. 1870-1980

Storage

Private records used as primary sources on properties, businesses and organizations, civic structures, prominent residences, and architects. Our holdings of private records, identified as "AM" (or formerly "Add. Mss." for "Additional Manuscripts") can be searched using our online database. Suggestions of related fonds are:

- **Fire Insurance Plans**
 - Maps created by fire insurance companies showing details on individual properties, including type of construction, number of storeys, positioning of building on lot and lot features such as location of driveways, oil tanks and fire hydrants
 - Consult our **fire insurance reference guide** for more information
- **Major Matthews Collection ([AM54](#))**
 - See Series 23 - Topical and categorical files ([AM54-S23](#)) for subject files containing compilations of notes, correspondence, pamphlets, and ephemera
- **C.B.K. Van Norman fonds ([AM755](#))**
 - ca. 3,000 architectural drawings created by local architect Van Norman for commercial and residential properties, from 1930-1955
 - Architectural drawings are under restricted access; see details on p. 1 of this guide
- **Townley, Matheson and Partners fonds ([AM1399](#))**
 - ca. 5,000 architectural drawings, photographs and other records related to various projects in Vancouver and around B.C., including proposed designs never constructed, from predominantly 1919-1974
 - Architectural drawings are under restricted access, see details on p. 1 of this guide

PHOTOGRAPHS ca. 1860-1990

Online & Reading Room (photo binders)

City and private photographic records used for showing houses and other buildings, streets, and neighbourhoods. A large amount of photographic material has been digitized to search, view, and download directly from our database. Suggestions of related records are:

- **Major Matthews Collection ([AM54-Series 4 - Collected Photographs](#))**
 - Photographs available online from the Archives' database or access prints can be viewed in the Reading Room
- **City of Vancouver Archives Photograph Collection ([AM1376](#))**
 - Photographs available online from the Archives' database; a smaller amount of access prints can also be viewed in the Reading Room
- **City of Vancouver Heritage Survey 1978 - photographs ([COV-S535-F4](#))**
 - Photographs showing buildings and streets from various neighbourhoods
- **City of Vancouver Heritage Inventory 1986: Photograph Survey ([COV-S639](#))**
 - Photographs showing buildings, schools, parks, and monuments from various neighbourhoods

CITY DIRECTORIES 1860-1996

Reading Room

Annual directories produced by private firms listing names of residents, properties, and business listings. Directories can be used to determine names, addresses, years of residency, and occupations of Vancouver residents (some years are B.C. directories). Please note that directories were compiled by private firms for business purposes so they are convenient and broad in scope, but not authoritative and there are demographic omissions. Directories can be reviewed as bound books as well as on microfilm in the Reading Room.

See also our reference guide on city directories for more a more detailed overview. City directories for the years 1860-1955 have also been digitized and can be viewed online through the Vancouver Public Library.

NEWS CLIPPINGS ca. 1860-2005

Reading Room (microfiche)

Used for information about businesses, organizations, individuals and families, architects, City development issues etc. Clippings are accessed by microfiche and can be searched by either card indexes or finding aids available in the Reading Room. Search headings such as individual names, clubs, businesses, ethnic and religious groups, subject etc. There are four sets of microfiche, each with its own alphabetical sequence:

- Major Matthews Collection (AM54-Series 17- News clippings) 1860-1970
 - See card index
- City of Vancouver Archives News Clippings Collection 1972-2005
 - See card index
- Pacific Press I and II ca. 1930-1985
 - See finding aid binder

BOOKS ca. 1920-present

Reading Room & Storage

Secondary sources used for information on the history of City planning and development, architecture and local architects, prominent buildings, and neighbourhoods in Vancouver. The Archives' has its own reference library collection that can be accessed when visiting the Archives. Some general suggestions are:

- City of Vancouver Archives Library Collection
 - *Building the West: The Early Architects of British Columbia* by Donald Luxton (NA 748 .B84 2003)
 - *Exploring Vancouver* by Kalman et. al (NA 747 .V3 K34 1993)
 - *Street Names of Vancouver* by Elizabeth Walker (FC 3847.67 W34 1999)
 - *The Greater Vancouver Book* by Chuck Davis (FC 3847.3 .G73 1996)
 - *Vanishing Vancouver* by Michael Kluckner (FC 3847.7 .k68 1990)
 - *Vancouver: A Visual History* by Bruce Macdonald (G 1174 .V3 s1 M32 1992)
 - *Vancouver Architecture, 1886-1914* by Mills and Sommer (NA 747 .V3 M5 1975)

Instructions for Accessing Water Service Records

Water service application records provide the date of the initial and subsequent water applications for individual properties which help indicate the approximate date that a structure was built. Application records also list the applicant's name, generally the owner or sometimes architect or name of the builder. Besides also showing the civic address and legal description, there may also be further details about the property.

Water service application records are primarily available from the self-serve access copies in the Reading Room. The water service record cards are used first to look up the appropriate application number to the corresponding property. Once the application number has been identified, the specific application can be found.

Water service record cards	MCR 21 (microfiche)
Water service applications - Vancouver	MCR 26 (microfilm)
Water service applications - Point Grey	MCR 55 (microfilm)
Water service applications - South Vancouver	Storage

NOTE: When removing microfiche or microfilm reels from the cabinet, please insert a marker in its place. When finished, items can be returned to boxes on top of the cabinets for staff. Please - do not re-file!

Water service record cards are available on microfiche (MCR 21). Cards are divided by streets, avenues east or avenues west and then each card has a range of range of address organized numerically. Note that address may be split between odd and even numbers and there are some discrepancies in the number ranges.

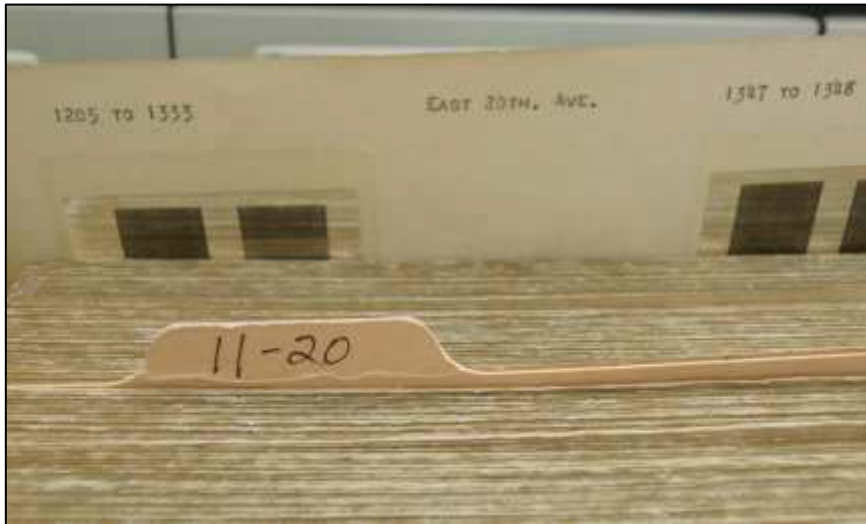
1. Go to the drawer of the Microfilm cabinet that contains **MCR 21**.



Streets, arranged alphabetically, are followed by avenues in numerical order

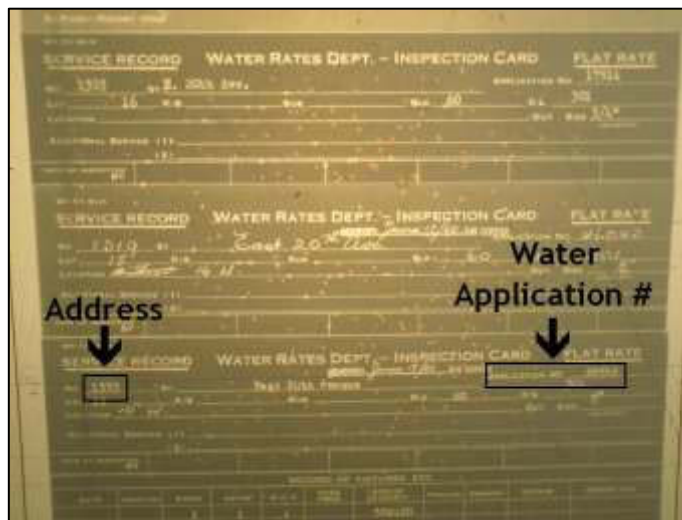
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2. Look up the address of your building of interest. The microfiche are arranged by street name or avenue number. If your address happens to be missing, try checking the microfiche cards before and after the address range you seek.



Microfiche for 1333 East 20th Avenue

3. Looking at a microfiche, identify the application number associated with the building. Make a note of this number as it is next used to look up the water service application.



Water service record card for 1333 East 20th

4. In some cases, the application number will begin with a prefix of either “SV” (South Vancouver) or “PG” (Point Grey). SV applications can be accessed through the South Vancouver Municipality finding aid (COV-SV-S230), while PG applications are available on microfilm (MCR 55). Applications without a prefix are MCR 26.

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5. Locate the corresponding microfilm reel by the range of application on either MCR 26 or MCR 55. If the application number falls under South Vancouver, the COV-SV-S230 finding aid provides a listing by application numbers ranges and date range. These records are held in storage and can be retrieved by staff.



MCR 26 microfilm—look for your application number

6. When viewing the microfilm, each reel contains application records arranged in numerical order by application number. Scroll through the selected microfilm reel until you find the appropriate application record.

Water service records with the location of the application number marked in red

Other Online Resources

Building Permit Database

The Vancouver Heritage Society offers an online [Building Permit Database](#) to search the Vancouver permit records for the years 1901-1921 as well as pre-amalgamation records of Point Grey and South Vancouver up to 1928. This volunteer transcription project compiled information from the building permit records held by the City of Vancouver Archives. The online database allows for searching by various filters such as year, legal description, address, and name of owner or architect as well as by City.

Project work is ongoing and more records are continuously added to the database. See the Society's website for more information.

VanMap

[VanMap](#) is an online GIS (geographic information systems) mapping tool by the City of Vancouver that serves a variety of functions related to property, City amenities, and transportation data. Useful for building research to quickly determine 1) the legal description and 2) the year a structure was built for a property site. VanMap offers a search function that can be set to an Address Search. Once found (highlighted in green), a report can be generated that will provide these details for an individual property.

VanMap also includes a map layer of the 1912 Goad's fire insurance plan. See our [fire insurance reference guide](#) for more information.

Search our holdings: <https://searcharchives.vancouver.ca/>

Please contact the Archives for further questions about our holdings
or to discuss a research topic with an archivist

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