



GEN-FIND RESEARCH ASSOCIATES, INC.

Notes on Alberta Records and Searching Them

For general enquiries, it is a difficult task to institute an in-depth search without knowing a place-name for your ancestor when researching the British Columbia, Alberta, Most records are arranged by the vast majority of these are regional archives and circumstances we have a few indexes that, at minimum, distribution of the family constitute pre-1900 pioneer ancestor might be priority, to locate the family, covered by the minimum Your chances at success are know a town name or to isolate the search better.



Figure 1 - Map of Canada

Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. town or district locations and housed in a multitude of libraries. In some minor limited province-wide will provide us with a name and most of these information; at best, a located. This is always first and these index searches are advance retainer we request. much better, however, if you provincial district by which

If you do know a place-name, you'll receive some research and additional research suggestions based on information you've supplied. In this case, the minimum retainer covers evaluation of your information, a preliminary research plan, implementation of some basic research strategies and evaluation of those research results in the Report.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Alberta is located in western Canada, bounded by the provinces of British Columbia to the west and Saskatchewan to the east, the Northwest Territories to the north, and the U.S. state of Montana to the south. Alberta is one of three Canadian provinces and territories to border only a single U.S. state and is also one of only two provinces that are landlocked.

The first people in Alberta were the Plains Indians and to this day form an integral part of the population throughout the province. “After the British arrival in Canada, approximately half of the province of Alberta, south of the Athabasca River drainage, became part of Rupert's Land which consisted of all land drained by rivers flowing into Hudson Bay. This area was granted by Charles II of England to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1670, and rival fur trading companies were not allowed to trade in it. After the arrival of French Canadians in the west around 1731, they settled near fur trading posts, establishing communities such as Lac La Biche and Bonnyville. Fort La Jonquière was established near what is now Calgary in 1752.

The region was a prime habitat for fur-bearing animals and much interest by voyageurs and fur-trappers ventured into the province. The Athabasca River and the rivers north of it were not in HBC territory because they drained into the Arctic Ocean instead of Hudson Bay, and they were prime habitat for fur-bearing animals. The first explorer of the Athabasca region was Peter Pond, who learned of the Methye southern rivers into the rivers north formed the North West Company with the HBC in 1779. The NWC occupied the northern part of Alberta territory. Peter Pond built Fort Athabasca on Lac la Biche in 1778. Roderick Mackenzie built Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca ten years later in 1788. Mackenzie, followed the North Saskatchewan River to its northernmost point near Edmonton, then setting northward on foot,



Figure 2 - Alberta within Canada

which he followed to Lake Athabasca. It was there he discovered the mighty outflow river which bears his name—the Mackenzie River—which he followed to its outlet in the Arctic Ocean. Returning to Lake Athabasca, he followed the Peace River upstream, eventually reaching the Pacific Ocean, and so he became the first white man to cross the North American continent north of Mexico.

The extreme southernmost portion of Alberta was part of the French (and Spanish) territory of Louisiana, sold to the United States in 1803; in 1818, the portion of Louisiana north of the Forty-Ninth Parallel was ceded to Great Britain.

Fur trade expanded in the north, but bloody battles occurred between the rival HBC and NWC, and in 1821 the British government forced them to merge to stop the hostilities. The amalgamated Hudson's Bay Company dominated trade in Alberta until 1870, when the newly formed Canadian Government purchased Rupert's Land. Northern Alberta was included in the North-Western Territory until 1870, when it and Rupert's land became Canada's Northwest Territories.”¹

In 1871, began the federal government policies towards Western Canada for its inclusion in the federal collective. This involved the development of a national police force, a sea-to-sea railway, and a settlement policy for the region. By 1882, the prairies were divided into four districts for improved administration: immediately west of the Province of Manitoba were the Districts of Saskatchewan and Assiniboia dividing the southern two-thirds of present day Saskatchewan; the District of Alberta which occupied the same part of the present day province; and covering the northern portion of both provinces was the District of Athabasca. The entire area made up the Northwest Territories with its administrative centre, or capital, in Regina.

As settlement increased, local representatives to the North-West Legislative Assembly were added. After a long campaign for autonomy, in 1905 the district of Alberta was enlarged and given provincial status.

¹ 'Alberta' in *Wikipedia – The Free Encyclopedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alberta#History> extracted on 4th April 2011.

MAJOR RESOURCE COLLECTIONS:

Considering that the prime settlement took place between 1885 and 1914, and that the majority of these settlers were homesteaders, this is the practical place to begin one's search in Alberta.

Homestead records are well maintained, cover predominately the period of 1885 to 1930, and an index will assist those in locating early families to the area. Rarely, will they provide names of all family members though, more often not however, they will generally provide details of settlement, where, when, how they arrived and from where – search elements all important to further extensions of the family forward and reverse.

Land in Western Canada was surveyed and distributed according to a system called the '*Grid System*' whereby land was evenly divided vertically by meridians and then ranges every set six miles, numbered from west to east starting at each meridian. These were then further divided into townships horizontally about every six miles starting at the 49th parallel (Canada-US border) and these further divided further into sections – 36 per township. The even numbered sections, except for sections 8 and 26, were designated as homestead land. "A free homestead was a way to acquire land under the *Dominion Lands Act* of 1872. For a registration fee of \$10 an entry could be made for a free homestead of 160 acres with the option to purchase a further 160 acres as a 'pre-emption' or a 'purchased homestead'. Entry could be made at a Dominion Land Office by males over the age of 18 years or widows who were the sole head of a family with minor children. It was thought that this would be enough land to support a family and would attract a large number of settlers to Western Canada. The applicant had to live on the homestead for at least six months in each of three years or on a farm within nine miles of the homestead owned and operated by an immediate relative. Within three years they had to break and cultivate at least 30 acres of land, construct a substantial house and fence part of the land. If they were not a British subject, they had to become a naturalized British subject before receiving the patent. The patent was the official certificate sent to the homesteader that enabled them to receive the title to the land at the Land Titles Office which served that location and allowed the homesteader to finally use the property as collateral. Pre-emption was a further 160 acres of land adjoining the homestead that could be purchased for \$3 an acre once the homestead patent had been received. The homesteader had to cultivate 50 acres of land, reside in a house on the pre-emption, at the homestead or with a relative within a nine-mile radius of the pre-emption for at least six months of each year before they qualified to receive the patent for this portion. A purchased homestead was a further 160 acres of Crown land that could be purchased by the homesteader for \$3 per acre. It too had to be located within a nine-mile radius of the homestead. A one-third down payment was required with the balance to be paid in five equal payments. The same rules applied as those for a pre-emption."²

Further, **vital statistics**, the civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths have been collected in the province since ca. 1853, but these records are certainly not complete before 1905 with the inception of the province. Even in these early years the records are not necessarily complete much before the 1920's, as people often failed to comply to the *Vital Statistics Act*. There are a few birth records dating back to 1853 along with marriages and deaths back to 1890, though these are scant and sporadic with their collection and survival rate. All of the District Indexes to these civil records to the 1990's are open to public inspection onsite at the Provincial Archives of Alberta (Edmonton). There is a full index of surviving births, marriages & deaths to 1905 while after that they are organized by place; therefore it is necessary to know where in Alberta the event took place and approximately when. Please note that the Provincial Archives does not hold records for every year, nor have they for every community in Alberta. Records not held by the Provincial Archives are still in the custody of the Office of Vital Statistics for Alberta. As non-residents, for copies of the actual original documents however, you will need to contact Registry Connect, Authorized Agent for the Government of Alberta, Office of Vital Statistics, P.O. Box #386, Edmonton, Alberta T5J

² Clifford, Darlene; 'Saskatchewan Land Records' in *Tracing Your Saskatchewan Ancestors: A Guide to the Records and How to Use Them* (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Genealogical Society, 2000), edited by Laura M. Hanowski; p. 80.

2J6. The provinces extracts can be very informative if successful in locating the correct entry. Remember that there are regulations on who can access copies of these documents and these are strictly followed.

As noted above, the Provincial Archives of Alberta also hold some early official registrations of marriages taken place in Alberta from 1890 to 1907 that were originally in the custody of the Vital Statistics and these can prove to be very informative. As well, the Alberta Genealogical Society has produced a comprehensive compilation indexing all vital records to 1905 titled "*Alberta Index to Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths 1870 to 1905*", and a substitute birth index of sort with a compiled document showing a complete surname listing of related records which were prepared for pension purposes, the title of which is the "*Proof-of-Age Documents in Alberta - A Surname Index 1863-1969*". Both resources may be accessed through the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Family History Centres, the Provincial Archives and are held as well by many other Canadian repositories. In addition, the Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery Archives as well as the Red Deer & District Archives hold some early civil registers on births, marriages and deaths for a couple of rural areas in their regions.

Many early **district civil registers** are also at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. A name index for birth, marriage and death registers, comprising the period 1886 to 1982, is arranged chronologically, then alphabetically. District Registrar's registers for birth, marriage death, comprising the period 1895 to 1987, are arranged alphabetically by place. As these records fall under the same regulations as all vital statistics, similar restrictions exist. The registers cannot be copied, however a transcript can be obtained for a small fee.

Before 1905, when the province was known as part of the Northwest Territories, **church registers** may be the only viable source for baptism and marriage information. Finding church registers in Alberta is not a straight-forward task: A) religious affiliation must be determined, B) then the name of a local church the family may have attended, C) next whether the church still exists, and D) where its registers are now located. Registers may remain at the original church, they may have been lost, or they may have been sent to another local church or to a church archives. It takes some historical research to reach a likely objective. In some cases the records we want may only be at a distant archive. Some historical church records have been housed at the Provincial Archives though this is not a comprehensive collection for any of the ecclesiastical bodies. The United Church of Canada (Northwest Conference) have their archives onsite at this institution in Edmonton and so you will find the bulk of these records there (ca. 1830's to the present). The Provincial Archives also houses records for the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (ca. 1880-2000); the Anglican Church of Canada (c. 1870-ca. 1990); and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ca. 1895- ca. 1990). For other church bodies one will need to consult elsewhere.

The first totally complete (or as complete as possible) federal **census** for the province was in 1901. However, returns for earlier decennial enumerations, as part of the Northwest Territories, are available for 1881 & 1891 as well. To-date only one further fairly comprehensive index released later was that done in 1911. All returns have been completely indexed, microfilmed and digitized. No further federal census returns exist currently past 1911 other than a western prairie Census (for the now known provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) taken in 1906 and again in 1916. A further important census for the 20th century and which has some availability is a 1940 War Registration Census. Unfortunately the latter is not open for public inspection. Should you know place of residence where the subject was at the time of the enumeration in 1940, Statistics Canada (Ottawa) will search the return for you for a fee and provide you with an abstract of that entry. All of these provide some excellent information by which to extend information on families, however. Some of the major communities also have listings of historical local censuses' taken for their areas and these should be investigated in local archives or at the Provincial Archives. Many of these date prior to entry into Confederation (1905) and some well into the 1980's. In addition, you will find collections of regular Tax Rolls to about 1971 and Voter's Lists to about the same period for public access. Directories, always of use, extend to the late-1990s for the major communities in the province.

Never forget as well the importance of **will & probate records** which date in this province from ca. 1884. For the most part one will need to know the applicable Surrogate Court Judicial District where the documents would have been filed as all will and probates are kept in these local judicial districts, however assistance on this can be obtained through the Succession Duties Department Office in Edmonton who has a master index list of all historical probates for the entire province. The Provincial Archives also has one for their holdings. Files of less than about 30 years old will still be in the custody of the local court. To locate a particular file, it is necessary to know where in Alberta someone was living at the time of his or her death. It is important to remember that not everyone had their estate probated on death - only if they had significant property to be distributed.

Lastly, of great importance, there are thousands of small cemeteries in the province many of which have had their **monumental inscriptions** (including headstones) transcribed. The local/regional/provincial genealogical societies have conducted the majority of this work and they should be consulted for more details on possible inscription recordings. A great number of the city cemeteries have not been recorded, however, and in both cases you should consult the local government body for interment register details on the subjects of interest. Remember, that most records of this nature of less than 25 years are generally not released to the public and it is at the discretion of the cemetery board to do so or not.

Besides these records, there are a host of other important sources that are available to the public which should be consulted further. The most important of these are the following, though the list is certainly not exhaustive:

- 1). Land Records (Crown Grants, Petitions, Abstracts, Deeds, School Land, CPR Land, Municipal Land, Grants to Veterans of NWMP/Boer War/WWI/ NW Rebellion/Métis)
- 2). Funeral Home Records
- 3). Local Directories, Atlases, & Histories
- 4). Municipal Records
- 5). District Papers (Pre-1940's)
- 6). Ships' Passenger Lists from 1865 (Chronological, not Indexed)
- 7). British Military Records for North America
- 8). Hudson Bay Company Record Collection (1873-1930)
- 9). Newspaper Collections & Manuscript Material
- 10). Education and School Records
- 11). Divorce Records (ca. 1867 - present)
- 12). Health and Social Service Records
- 13). Immigration and Naturalization Records
- 14). Employment Records
- 15). Association and Union Records
- 16). Business and Trades Licensing Record Collections
- 17). Election Records
- 18). Legal & Court Documents
- 19). Railway Records and Related Collections
- 20). Non-Textual/Photographic Collections
- 21). Family Histories and Biographies

Information concerning Alberta best known to start a search in Alberta:

- A). Approximate Date of Immigration into Canada & Arrival into the Region
- B). Name of Subject
- C). Name of Subject's Parents or Children (or both, if known)

- D). Approximate Dates of Birth, Marriage, & Death of either Subject, Parents or Children
- E). Place of Residency and Periods of Occupation
- F). Forms of Employment or Occupation (if known)

SUMMATION:

Pre-1905 information in Alberta will sometimes be difficult to obtain but is always worth trying for. Some information prior to this period will come from federal records and prior to 1882 most success in information may be by way of basically the Hudson Bay Company Record Collection as many of the settlers in these earlier years were connected to the fur-trading aspects of this organization in some capacity. Of course, much of your success in any genealogical research will depend upon how prolific your ancestors were in documenting their existence from locality to locality.

For a more in-depth discussion of the available Alberta source records, please obtain a copy of the article by Brian W. Hutchison, CG, FSA Scot, titled "How to Begin Your Research in Canada - Part I - Alberta" printed as part of a series for the now-defunct magazine "*Family History Newsletter*" (Oshawa: Parr's Publishing, 1997). A copy of this publication may be purchased online from GEN-FIND Research Associates, Inc. by consulting our online GEN-Store site. Also, please consult GEN-Store for other wonderful publications for sale that we feel are exceptionally relevant to your search in this area. They will provide more background information on many of the resources and repositories covered herein as well as many others not addressed in these notes.

GEN-FIND would be happy to work with you privately on your custom search needs of these and other records in simplifying your project objectives. Please contact us today to further discuss those interests!

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