

# at home with history

Learning about your home's past can be fun and rewarding.

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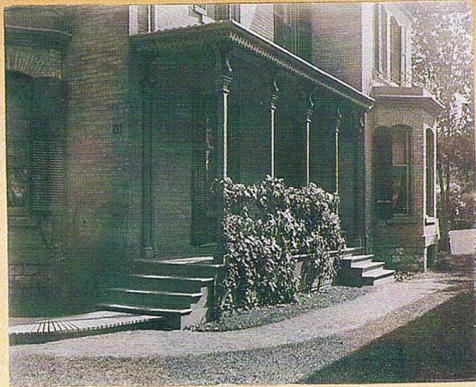
When James Johnstone moved into his 1908 rowhouse in Strathcona in Vancouver, he was intrigued by its history and that of the neighbourhood. He searched the city archives and found that Japanese, Jewish, Russian and Chinese immigrants had lived in the area. And, in the '40s, the grandmother of Jimi Hendrix had a place around the corner from his house. James put that information in a book and gave it to his neighbours at Christmas. "It's a passion that started as a hobby," he says.

A former Japanese language interpreter, translator and tour guide, James now works as a house genealogist and has his own company called Home History Research Services ([homehistoryresearch.com](http://homehistoryresearch.com)). Clients range from private homeowners and a local developer to the Vancouver Heritage Foundation

and a film company producing a documentary on The Clark House, a local landmark. Depending on the budget, he'll create a chart of who lived in the house and where they worked, check the building permits to see who built the house and for how much, and do a historical search to find out what was happening in the area during a particular time period – something that those who live in homes that are even 50 years old would find interesting. James believes he's on the cutting edge of a trend. "A huge genealogy boom has now been transferred to buildings," he says.

Bruce Elliott, a history professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, and his future wife bought their house in 1999. "I knew how to do a title search," says Bruce, "so to satisfy curiosity as much as anything, I went down to the





53 Wellesley St. 1900



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land registry office. The first deed belonged to an architect who had built the house for his new bride in 1916.” The architect was Hugh Richards; his son, now in his 70s and still working as an engineer lives close by. Bruce also discovered that Maplelawn Garden, the public garden at the end of the street where he proposed to his wife was the same one in which Hugh was married eight decades before Bruce and his wife had their wedding there, too.

Not all houses have such happy stories. After moving into a Gothic Revival house in Barrie, Ont., Leslie and Scott Millson Taylor learned from older neighbours that 86-year-old Maude Bonney had been murdered in the living room in September 1977. However, instead of being scared off by the news, their fascination grew. Su Murdoch, a Barrie-based historical consultant, drew on various sources including tax assessment rolls, newspaper files, county directories and the local cemetery, when preparing a 25-page report for the couple, and turned up the fact that Leslie and Scott’s two children were the first children to have ever lived in the house.

Aside from the intriguing social history, Leslie and Scott were also fascinated by some of the house’s architectural details. It featured a trefoil design identical to the one on Trinity Anglican Church in Barrie that they attend, as well as a bargeboard with inverted staves like those Leslie saw on a ring belonging to her grandmother.

Developer Brad Alberts, who is a client of James Johnstone’s, and president of Vancouver’s Inter Urban Land Corporation, which specializes in restoring old buildings, says, “A written history of the house and its previous owners definitely adds a certain cachet.”

## EXCAVATING YOUR HOME’S PAST

In some ways, researching your home is like undertaking an archaeological dig. There are many steps involved, and while rewarding, it’s time consuming. It’s also why professional home researchers charge anywhere from \$500 to \$3,000 and up for their services, which range from a simple search at the land titles office for names of previous owners to finding out more in-depth information like where they worked and perhaps where they were buried. To find a researcher, check with your local historical association or contact the Canadian Association of Professional Heritage Consultants ([caphc.ca](http://caphc.ca)), which provides biographies of its members. For DIY sleuths, here are some tips.

**Visit your local land registry or land titles office** for a current legal description of your lot, which will give you names of past residents.

**Search old tax assessment rolls,** city directories, early maps, the index to births, marriages and deaths in the

library newspapers, and the cemetery for other names and events.

**Seek out previous owners** or their relatives, and invite seniors in the area over for a chat. An oral history can be one of the most important sources for a researcher.

**Ask your local historical association** about workshops or publications. Check out our list of useful places to start your DIY research.

### NOVA SCOTIA

#### Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia

[www3.ns.sympatico.ca/heritage.trust](http://www3.ns.sympatico.ca/heritage.trust)

#### Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library Research Guide

[parl.ns.ca/pages/guides/architecture.html](http://parl.ns.ca/pages/guides/architecture.html)

### QUEBEC

#### Heritage Montreal

[heritagemontreal.qc.ca/hm\\_en/prote\\_en.htm](http://heritagemontreal.qc.ca/hm_en/prote_en.htm)

#### Amis et propriétaires de maisons anciennes du Québec

[www3.sympatico.ca/maisons.anciennes](http://www3.sympatico.ca/maisons.anciennes) (French only)

### ONTARIO

#### Historical Society of Ottawa

[ncf.carleton.ca/hsottawa](http://ncf.carleton.ca/hsottawa)

#### Community Heritage Ontario

[heritageontario.org](http://heritageontario.org) (occasionally holds workshops on researching heritage buildings)

#### City of Toronto Archives

[city.toronto.on.ca/archives/yourhouse.htm](http://city.toronto.on.ca/archives/yourhouse.htm)

### MANITOBA

#### City of Brandon Heritage

[city.brandon.mb.ca/heritage/titlepage/indexpage.html](http://city.brandon.mb.ca/heritage/titlepage/indexpage.html)

#### City of Winnipeg’s Planning

#### Property & Development,

#### Heritage Conservation

[winnipeg.ca/ppd/historic/historic.stm](http://winnipeg.ca/ppd/historic/historic.stm)

### SASKATCHEWAN

#### Saskatchewan Architectural Heritage Society

[sahs.sk.ca](http://sahs.sk.ca)

### Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation

[cyr.gov.sk.ca/index.cfm?page=24](http://cyr.gov.sk.ca/index.cfm?page=24)

#### City of Regina’s Heritage

[regina.ca/content/info\\_services/urban\\_planning/heritage.shtml](http://regina.ca/content/info_services/urban_planning/heritage.shtml)

#### City of Saskatoon’s Heritage

#### Research Guide

[city.saskatoon.sk.ca](http://city.saskatoon.sk.ca) (choose “h” in the alphabetical search; click on “heritage conservation” until you get to “Heritage Research Guide”)

### ALBERTA

#### City of Edmonton Archives, Researching Your Home

[edmonton.ca/portal/server.pt](http://edmonton.ca/portal/server.pt) (type “researching your home” in the search box)

### BRITISH COLUMBIA

#### Vancouver Heritage Foundation

[vancouverheritagefoundation.org](http://vancouverheritagefoundation.org)

#### City of Vancouver Heritage Conservation Program

[city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/heritage](http://city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/heritage)