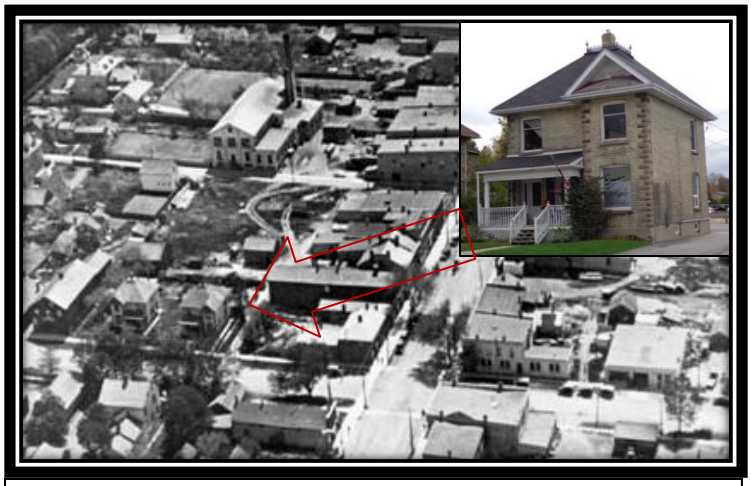
Heritage Research Notes: Aerial Photographs

Benefits of Aerial Photographs:

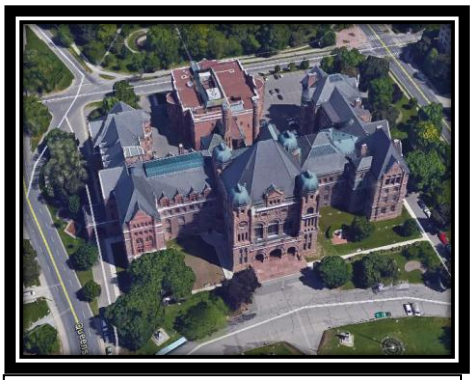
Although infrequently used in heritage research, aerial photos provide such useful information as: a property's current overview of built and landscape features; the presence of structures, including additions, at the time of the photo; the evolution of landscape features; and the historic context of a building or landscape. Sometimes, if the aerial photo is oblique (taken at an angle), architectural features such as verandas may be visible. Recent aerial photo sites contain a function that can be used to calculate rough building dimensions.



Kincardine Downtown - 1920 Source: Archives of Canada, A030554

A Brief History of Aerial Photography:

Although humans have long sought to take broad landscape photographs, often from the tops of buildings and church steeples, it was not until World War I when flight and photography proved their combined value. Following the war, pilots used their skills to take oblique views of many towns in southern Ontario. The military, which was responsible for topographic map production, began a systematic aerial photo reconnaissance of the country to aid in map production. Gradually, when big projects, such as new highways or land development, were undertaken, aerial photos were utilized. Similarly the Province used such photos for forest inventories and some municipalities commissioned aerial photos. More recently, satellites are providing high resolution images that can be used to identify buildings and landscape features. They have also been adapted to provide three dimensional views of some cities and selected buildings beyond those cities.



Ontario Parliament Buildings – 2015
Source: Google Earth – 3D Cities

Sources of Aerial Photographs:

For current aerial photos, Google Earth and Microsoft Bing are a good source although some municipalities (e.g., Region of York – York Maps) provide higher resolution recent aerial photos. Some on-line sites, such as Toronto Archives, have older large scale aerial photos. The provincial and federal archives have oblique aerial views from 1919 through the 1920s of many towns in southern Ontario. The provincial archives has forestry resource aerial photos from the mid 20th century. The federal government's National Airphoto Library (https://neodf.nrcan.gc.ca/neodf_cat3/index.php?lang=en) found on the National Earth Observation Data Framework Catalogue contains aerial photos from the 1920s through to recent years for most parts of the country. This is a somewhat cumbersome source to use, but once mastered (you should establish an account with this source before selecting photos), it can provide a wealth of photos at various scales and for various years.

Things to be aware of when ordering aerial photos:

For aerial photos taken from a plane, the height of the plane dictates the level of detail; obviously a lower flight level will produce more detailed photographs. Further, the later the aerial photo, generally the better the picture; those taken after 1940 are better in quality than earlier photos. The time of the year may affect views of landscape features and buildings especially if trees are in full leaf and shroud buildings. Finally, when ordering from the National Airphoto Library, it is important that the site for which you are ordering the photo not be on the edge of the photo. The following photos show the Sharon Temple site in the village of Sharon in the Town of East Gwillimbury from 1927 to 2015.

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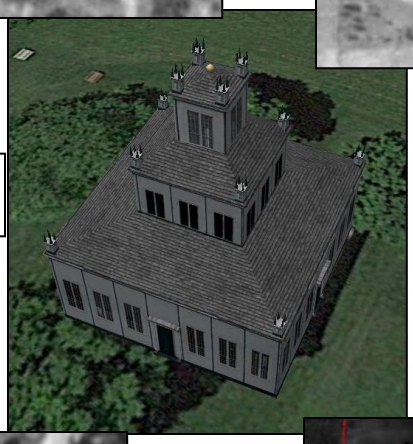
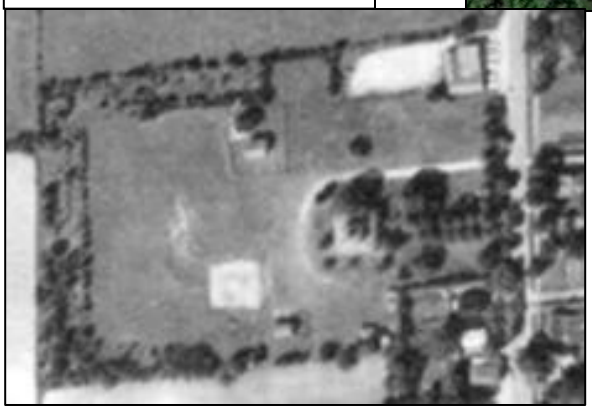
July 21, 1927 - National Airphoto Library; Roll No. RA18, Photo 046

1946 - National Airphoto Library Roll No. A10101, Photo 088

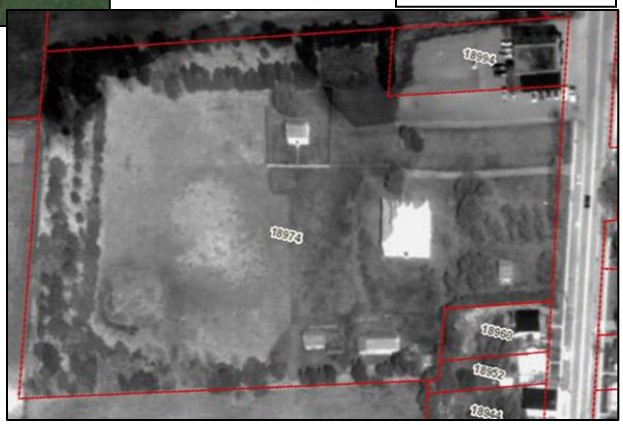


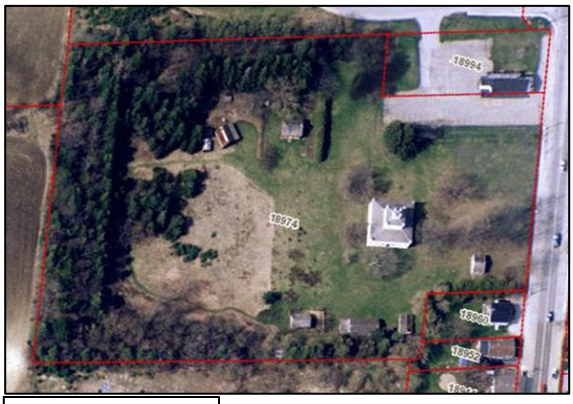
Google Earth – 2015 3D Buildings

1960 - National Airphoto Library Roll No. A17188, Photo 030

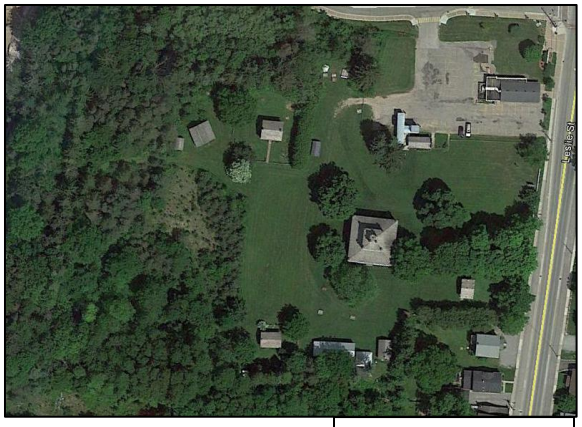


York Maps - 1970





York Maps - 2005



Google Earth, 2015