LATER LIFE LEARNING

TORONTO'S ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY: HISTORIC STREETS
MARTA O'BRIEN'S GUIDE TO RESEARCHING BUILDINGS

I use the resources below to research buildings in Toronto:

Books & Websites
When I've photographed a building of interest, I see if it's mentioned in any of the many books I have about Toronto's architecture and history. I also search online, but I'm careful about my sources (e.g., real estate websites are notorious for giving wrong information about architecture or building histories). Check the credentials of anyone who has posted material.

Photographs
The Toronto Public Library's photograph collection is extensive and easy to search. At the top of their homepage, select "eResources & Research" then "Digital Archive." You can type in a building name, street name, or building type (e.g., school) for example.

On the Toronto Archives homepage, select "What's Online." It's trickier to find what you're after in their huge collection.

City Directories
These are like telephone books and were issued annually beginning in 1834. Except for the earliest years, they list the male head of each household by surname along with his occupation. Women are listed if they lived alone (primarily widows). Another section lists buildings by street address, and another section lists businesses.

City Directories are on microfilm at the Toronto Archives and in book form at the Toronto Reference Library. Many have been digitized as pdfs and are online through the Toronto Public Library website (just type "City Directories" into the search box on the home page).

Historic Maps
Maps are important for identifying changes in street names or layouts. Fire Insurance Maps show individual buildings. On the Toronto Archives homepage, select "What's Online" then "Maps" to see what's available online. There are more available at the Archives itself.

Building Permits & Property Tax Records
I only access permits and tax records when hired to do so. It's very time-consuming. Both are on microfilm at the Toronto Archives. A building permit can tell you who the architect or builder was, the value of the building, materials, size, and dollar value. They are filed by date issued (i.e., you have to browse within the year you expect to find the building you're researching, and may get to December before you find the one you're looking for).

Accessing tax records is a bit complicated, so it's best to ask for help form an archivist. For houses, property tax records list all occupants, their ages, occupations, and religions, plus if the occupants rent or own.