RESEARCH GUIDE:
Using the Renfrew County Land Records

What can you learn from the land records here?

If you own or are researching a property in Renfrew County, the land records here at the Arnprior & McNab/Braeside Archives can help you find out its history from the very first owner until about 1970, including owners, value at different times and more. In many cases, we have original deeds and other documents related to the property.

If you are researching your ancestors, the land records will only help if (a) they owned property and (b) you know where that property was. In a perfect world, you would know the township, concession or range and lot number if the property were rural or the town/village, plan number and lot number for a property in a built-up area. *Street or postal addresses do not identify properties in the land records*, but they can often point a researcher to the right concession or plan number. If you only know the township or town, you are unlikely to find the land records helpful. There is a partial exception – if the property is in Arnprior or McNab Township, we might have it indexed by name for some dates.

How the countryside was divided up and ownership recorded.

The basics of land holding in Ontario were established shortly after the British conquest of Canada in 1760. All land was presumed to be Indian Land until acquired by the Crown. By law, only the Crown could 'purchase' Indian Land, though such purchases were often little more than outright theft. Once acquired by the Crown, the land had to be surveyed before it could be transferred – by grant or sale – to private ownership. In this province, surveys generally preceded settlement.

Rural property

The basic unit of territorial division was, and is, the **township**[1]. London's instructions to Governor Haldimand in July, 1783 directed him to have land surveyed to accommodate refugees from the American War of Independence. The instructions suggested that townships fronting on navigable rivers have 2 – 4 leagues of frontage and be 3 – 5 leagues deep, otherwise they should be "run square or in

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[1] Until Upper Canada was created in 1792, they were technically seigneuries, because that was the land tenure system throughout Canada, renamed Quebec in 1763. The incoming English-speaking settlers called them townships from the beginning.

such shape and in such quantities as shall be convenient and practicable."[2] Later governors received similar directions.

Government-appointed surveyors divided the township into **lots**, the basic units of land ownership *and registration.* In the earliest townships the standard lot was 200 acres[3]; this went down gradually over time and many Renfrew county townships were surveyed with 100-acre lots. Every township contains several hundred lots, so they have to be organised for record-keeping purposes. The standard method is to arrange the lots in rows, roughly a mile wide, called **concessions,** with road allowances dividing concessions. Those allowances, when opened as roads, are often called "lines" or "concession roads". In some counties like Lanark, concession roads are confusingly called concessions on maps and road signs. They are not; they are roads and the land between them is the concession. Township roads other than concession roads are normally called "side roads".

The concessions run perpendicular to one of the township boundaries, called the base line. In some counties, all the township baselines are parallel to each other, so the concessions all run the same way. That is not true of Renfrew; for historical reasons the easternmost townships have baselines that run east-west(ish), while those to the west have north-south(ish) baselines. Concessions are normally numbered. On survey maps concession numbers are normally printed in roman numerals, so as to avoid confusion with lot numbers. Concessions can be assigned (capital) letters instead of numbers, often following the numbered concessions[4].

Many Renfrew County townships have all of their lots laid out in concessions. Others also include **ranges**[5] of lots. Unlike arrow-straight concessions, ranges are rows that curve to follow natural features like shorelines or man-made ones such as colonisation roads. Renfrew county examples include the ranges along the Bonnechere River in Bromley and Admaston townships and ranges in several townships of road lots on the Ottawa-Opeongo road. Ranges have names or letters, rather than numbers.

Whether it is part of a concession or of a range, **each lot or part lot in a township has a unique two-part identifier**: its group (concession number[6] or range name) and number within the group. For part lots the number will have an additional qualifier, e.g. 'NW ¼ of lot x, concession Y'. If the property of interest to you is rural, the two-part identifier with any qualifiers is all you will need to find its records. Feel free to skip the next section. If it is in a built-up area, read on.

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[2] A league is 3 miles, so the dimensions given could produce a township of anywhere from 54 to 180 square miles. In good agricultural territory, most townships were closer to 100 square miles (64 000 acres) and a ten-by-ten-mile square was the ideal. In areas with little arable land, like much of Renfrew County, townships are often larger.
[3] Because of hills, streams and the like, lots were rarely exactly 100 or 200 acres. Most commonly they were slightly smaller than the target size.
[4] This is not always true. For example, concessions A and B in Alice Township are parallel to the base line and extend the full width of the township, at its far boundary.
[5] Ranges are also called fronts when they consist of shoreline lots. Ranges on either side of a road may be called concessions A and B if those names are not used elsewhere in the township.
[6] The concession number sometimes has a qualifier. Westmeath Township has three each of concessions 1 and 2, and two of concessions 3 and 4, distinguished by a geographic qualifier.

Town, village and suburban property

Land records based on 100-200 acre lots are not much use when town properties are typically 50 by 100 feet or even smaller. Town plots, made up of relatively tiny lots, were sometimes laid out in the original surveys of Ontario townships but much more commonly towns and villages were created out of existing township lots. For instance, the Act that created the Village of Arnprior in 1862 defined the village as comprising "The North-east half of Lots Numbers two, three, four and five in the thirteenth Concession; Lots Numbers two, three, four and five in the fourteenth Concession: and Lots Numbers three and four in the fifteenth Concession of the said Township of McNab in the County of Renfrew." Six lots and four half-lots for a whole town site.

By the time the Act was passed, some of those original McNab lots had already been divided up for sale by their owners. The process was as follows. A surveyor is engaged to develop a **plan** of subdivision of one or more existing lots, creating smaller numbered lots separated by street allowances. When the plan is approved by the municipality and accepted by the Land Registry, it is given a plan number and a new land record series is established for the lots created by the plan. To repeat the warning given earlier, *lot numbers are not related to street addresses*.

The process of sub-division can be repeated. That is, a lot created by Plan 7 may later be further divided by Plan 22 and so on. At every stage, new numbered lots are created, together with a new series of records. Over time, a given spot on the ground may have several different lot and plan numbers and be recorded in several abstract indexes. Urban lots can also be split more simply into, for instance E and W half-lots. This does not create a new record series, just a 'qualified' record as it does for country lots.

The same two-part identifier system applies to urban properties as to rural. The only difference is that the plan number replaces the concession number or range name.

Land records

The records here in the Arnprior & McNab/Braeside Archives are physical, not digital. They are in two parts:

- Filing cabinets filled with thousands of original documents such as deeds, called **instruments**. These are organised by township or town and by the serial number assigned when they were filed, starting with 1 and continuing as high as needed.

- Huge register books called **abstract indexes[7],** recording for each lot every transaction from the original Crown sale or grant onward, including the serial numbers of instruments. Each lot has its own page, or pages if there are many transactions. Even if parts of a lot are sold, transactions for all parts will continue to be recorded on the same page. Severing a lot into parts does not create

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[7] Abstract Indexes are often called *Land Books* or just *Books.* Heavily-used books eventually became unusable, so their contents were duplicated in *Copy Books* and the originals retired. Copy Books constitute much of our research collection, but in many townships and villages the original books got so little wear that they never needed to be copied.

new lots; only a Plan can do that.

For townships, the books are arranged by concession and lot number, Book One starting with Concession One, Lot 1. Typically, alphabetical concessions and ranges follow the numbered concessions. Other lands, e.g. road allowances and islands, often come last. For towns the books run from Lot 1 on the lowest-numbered[8] plan to the highest-numbered lot on the highest-numbered plan. How many books will depend on the amount of sub-division.

We have abstract indexes for all 37 of the historic townships of Renfrew County. Some townships are covered in a single book; others use as many as four. We also have abstract indexes for 36 hamlets, villages, towns and our one city, Pembroke. While most of these places are still on the map, many have been absorbed by neighbours or faded from memory.

All abstract indexes and instruments are irreplaceable historic artefacts. Please wear the gloves provided and handle the documents carefully.

How to find a property in the records

To use the land records, you will need to visit the archives; there is no online access. Once you are here:

For properties anywhere in Renfrew County the ease of finding records depends on how much information you have.

1. *If you know the two-part identifier* for a lot of interest, a volunteer will bring you the appropriate abstract index and help you find the page.
2. *If you know the first part of the identifier* – the concession, range or plan number – plus another item of information like a name, we can still fetch the correct abstract index for you to search. There are rarely more than forty or so lots in a concession or range, so a search is relatively quick.
3. *If you don't know the concession, range or plan but you can find the property on a map*, we have reference maps of all townships that show the concessions, ranges and lots. For the Town of Arnprior, the wall map in our reading room shows the boundaries of the plans.
4. *If all you have is the street address of a town property elsewhere in Renfrew County*, you will have to rely on the cross-references our volunteers have compiled over the years and which are included in the township/village notes in the *Finding Aid to Renfrew County Land Books* to identify the correct plan. These finding aids are more or less complete, depending on the locality. The Town of Renfrew remains a significant challenge, as does Pembroke.
5. *If all you have is a name,* for Arnprior and McNab Township <u>only</u>, we have *partial* indexes of property owners' names that might be of help. The McNab index covers the whole township, but shows only the first owner of the lot and the owner in 1861. An update to include all owners to 1975 is under way; it can be accessed on request. Indexes for Mansfield and Sand Point show only the second owners of the lots. The Arnprior index, on the other hand, includes all owners from 1825 to 1970 within the area west of the Madawaska River and north of William Street.

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[8] Lowest-numbered, or earliest if un-numbered. The first plan of a village will have an instrument number but may not have a plan number.

Should your person turn up, you will get the book and page numbers for all the lots he or she owned.

Once on the desired page you can read, transcribe or photograph the information. Because of their size, there is no way to photocopy a page of an abstract index. Blank forms for transcribing from abstract index pages are available on request.

How to read an abstract index page

A page in an abstract index is a list, in chronological order[9], of every transaction or event affecting the ownership of one particular lot, in whole or in part, beginning with the *Patent* by which the Crown transferred it to private ownership or the *Plan* by which it was created. Each transaction is recorded on a separate line and if the page is filled the list continues on an additional page. If the continuation page is not physically adjacent, a note will direct the user to the correct page number.

All abstract index pages have their records divided into the same fields or columns, with more or less the same headings, but they do not always put the columns in the same order. It seems that different suppliers of index books chose their own order of column headings. Often the right-most column on the page has no heading and is used for general remarks.

If the original lot has been divided, transactions involving all the part-lots will be intermixed on the same page unless they are included in a plan. The entry in the column **Quantity of Land** will specify which part(s) of the lot are included in the transaction, though it may be necessary to read the instrument for full particulars. If no quantity is shown, the whole lot is intended. Once a plan sub-divides some or all of the lot, all further transactions for the lands included will be in the new records series created for that plan.

Because the registry was exclusively concerned with ownership, the entries on an abstract index page will be transactions that change the ownership (e.g. will, bargain & sale) or make it subject to conditions (e.g. mortgage). Only land ownership is recorded, not buildings on the land.

Every record begins with the serial **Number of Instrument** of the supporting document, which Archives volunteers can use to retrieve the instrument itself if we have it. Patents do not have numbers. Many instrument numbers include a letter. This can be ignored; it refers to a book in which the instruments were once stored and is not used any more. Once it has been retrieved, you can read and transcribe the instrument. You can also have it photocopied or scanned by a volunteer, for a small fee. Bring a USB stick to save scans, or we can email them to you at no additional cost. You are not permitted to photograph instruments.

The next column gives the type of **Instrument**, usually in an abbreviated form. The type of instrument often determines whether or not it will be included in our collection. Patents were never stored in the

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[9] That is, chronological order of registry dates.

registry offices. All pre-Confederation instruments and all Wills were retained by the Province when other records were transferred to the Archives. Mortgage documents were normally removed from the registry when the mortgage was discharged. If a line is drawn through a record, e. g. a discharged mortgage, the instrument was removed at that time.

Many instruments simply are missing, for reasons we do not know.

Here are some of the common instrument types, their abbreviations and their meanings[10]:

Abbreviation	Stands for:	Means:
B. & S.	Bargain and Sale	An ordinary sale of land.
Q. C. D.	Quit Claim Deed	Usually the sale of a part interest in land.
M.[11]	Mortgage	Some or all of the lot is pledged as security for a loan.
D. M.	Discharge of mortgage	The loan has been paid off and the land is free and clear.
Rel.	Release	Someone gives up a claim on the land.
Plan	Plan	Creates a new record series[12] for the land included.
W.	Will	Some or all of the lot is distributed by a will.
D.	Declaration	Some important fact is sworn or recorded.

The next two columns give dates. The **Date of Instrument** (sometimes "its date") is when the document was created, generally the date of the transaction. The second is the **Registry Date**, when the instrument was filed and recorded in the abstract index. This is often months, even years, after the transaction took place.

The column headed **Grantor** names the owner(s) of the property going into the transaction. Whether they still own it afterwards depends on the type of transaction.

The **Grantee**, named in the next column, may acquire ownership of the property in a sale or inheritance or may merely acquire a claim on it, as in the case of a mortgage.

If the instrument is a Declaration, these and the remaining columns are used as space to record the nature of the declaration.

The **Consideration** column shows the sale price or the amount of a mortgage. There was no legal requirement to include the actual sale price in a deed, so many lawyers did not. In those cases, both the record and the instrument will show a consideration of "other good and valuable consideration and $2.00".

The **Quantity of Land** (or just "Land") column, already described, generally comes next. Sometimes, the record will say "and other lands" in this or the Consideration column, indicating that more than one parcel was included in a single transaction. The instrument, if available, will clarify which they are.

Remarks may be included in either of the previous columns or go in the last column, with or without a title.

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[10] For a full list, see the glossary on page 45 of *Ontario Land Registry Office Records: A Guide,* available in the reading room.

[11] A hand-written capital "M" can appear to be a capital "W". Read the rest of the line to see if it is a M̲ortgage or a W̲ill that is being recorded.

[12] For lots created by a plan, the plan will be the instrument of the first record. When a plan is the instrument in any other record it means all future entries for the land sub-divided will be recorded in a new series, under the plan number.