

Celebrating the 200th Anniversary of the Ontario Legislative Library

In its 200-year history Ontario's Legislative Library has operated in numerous locations, survived many fires, and is currently embracing the digital age. In celebration of this significant milestone, the author briefly traces the library's development, examines the challenges it and other legislative libraries have encountered as they fulfill their non-partisan role to support the work of parliament, and finally notes recent trends in their operations

Monica Cop

In 2016, the Ontario Legislative Library is celebrating its 200th anniversary. This occasion offers an opportunity to reflect on the Library's rich history and to examine the evolution of how it and other legislative libraries across Canada deliver their services.

The earliest incarnation of the Ontario Legislative Library dates to the late 1700s in the Province of Upper Canada. It began with a small book collection to assist elected officials in their jobs as legislators. However, it was on April 1, 1816 that the Library of the Province of Upper Canada was formally established. On that day, An Act to appropriate a sum of Money for providing a Library for the use of the Legislative Council and House of Assembly of this Province was passed and provided £800 for the purchase of books and maps for a Library. This was only nine years after the founding of the British House of Commons Library and 16 years after the creation of the Library of Congress in the United States.

It was not until 1827 that law student Robert Baldwin Sullivan was appointed as the first Librarian. At that time, the Librarian was required to be in the Library only when the Legislature was in session, which was just nine weeks per year on average. Interestingly, Sullivan used his free time to be called to the bar, campaign for an uncle's election campaign, carry on a

legal practice, and even become Mayor of Toronto. The subsequent pioneering Librarians included William Winder, a medical practitioner and a member of the "Bully Boys" guerrilla group that fought in the Niagara Peninsula during the War of 1812, and Alpheus Todd, a man who had started working at the Library as a 15-year-old indexing prodigy. During these early days, the Library struggled to maintain its collection numbers reportedly due to the failure of members to return books, the frequent moves of the Legislature to makeshift accommodation as a result of several fires, and the resulting poor conditions in which the books were kept.

Following the establishment of the Province of Canada in 1841, the library collections of Upper and Lower Canada were amalgamated to form a Legislative Assembly Library and a Legislative Council Library. The changing locations of these new legislative libraries mirrored the frequent moves of the Legislature: from Kingston (1841-43) to Montreal (1844-49) to Toronto (1850-51) to Quebec City (1852-55) to Toronto (1856-59) to Quebec City (1860-65) and finally to Ottawa (1865 onwards) ahead of Confederation. Some of these moves were again as a result of fires, which unfortunately continued to be commonplace.

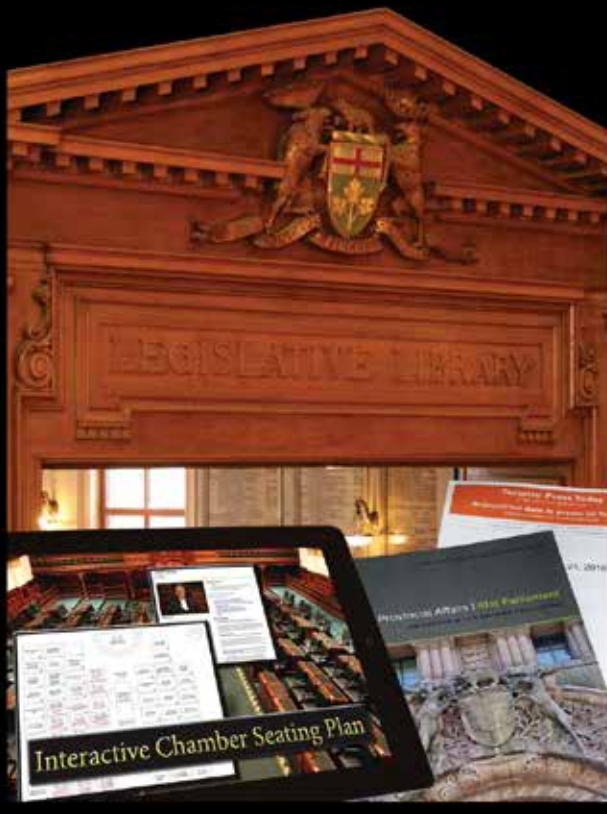
By 1865, the collection of the Province of Canada's legislative libraries consisted of almost 55,000 volumes. That year, the collection was moved to the present-day library structure in Centre Block on Parliament Hill in Ottawa and became the basis for the present-day federal Library of Parliament. The newly created provinces of Ontario and Quebec were financially compensated for the loss of their collections and soon embarked on re-building them. By 1896, the Ontario Legislative Library's collection numbered almost 50,000 volumes and by 1908, almost 90,000.

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Ontario Legislative Library 1816-2016

For 200 Years You've Asked, We've Answered



A new legislative building at Queen's Park in Toronto was constructed between 1886 and 1893 and the Ontario Legislative Library was placed on the mezzanine floor of the west wing. Ironically, in 1909, the year that work began to build a north wing to house a modernly designed Library, a fire broke out in the west wing destroying the existing Library except for 10,400 volumes. This required yet another drive to re-build the Library's collection. The effort was spearheaded by the long-serving Librarian, Avern Pardoe, who was also one of the visionaries of the new north wing Library.

The north wing was completed in 1912 and was furnished with fire-proof features including state-of-the-art steel stacks, marble floors, metal window frames, and a long hallway connecting the Library to the main building with retractable steel doors located at each end that would prevent a fire from spreading from the main building to the Library and vice versa. More than 100 years later, the Ontario Legislative Library continues to occupy the north wing of the Legislative Building and, thankfully, these features fulfill their purpose to this day.

Between 1912 and 2016, the Library has changed in many ways. Over the course of these years, the Library has adopted technological innovations to improve its services, including acquiring a microfilm reader in 1953, renting a Xerox copier in 1974, beginning to subscribe to online databases using the Library's first computer in 1978, and obtaining a word processor in 1979 and fax machine in 1989. With the advent and growth of the Internet, the Library launched pages on the Assembly's Internet website and began launching informational products online in 1998. Needless to say, the Internet has significantly changed how information is created, found and disseminated.

For the past decade or so, there has been a trend across Canada's legislative libraries to improve access to resources at clients' point-of-need, which has included digitizing collections, enhancing databases, and creating reference documents such as research guides. Digital titles, excluding databases, now comprise about 26.5% of the Library's collection. Because of this digitization trend, physical volume counts are no longer an adequate marker to assess a library's reputation. With so much information now available at point-of-need, reference questions asked by clients tend to be more complex, requiring more extensive research and analysis.

Official Anniversary Banner

Besides adopting new technologies for existing services, the Ontario Legislative Library has also introduced additional services over time. The Camp Commission, an all-party commission chaired by Dalton Camp in the 1970s, studied the functioning of the Library and how it could be improved. Among the recommendations made in the Commission's 1973 report and implemented within a few years was to create a research service and to restrict the Library's services to the Legislature. Until then, the Library had served the entire provincial government as well as the general public. The Legislative Research Service was established in 1979 to provide research and analysis to members and legislative committees. In 1986, the Library started Toronto Press Today (TPT), an early morning clipping service covering the three daily Toronto newspapers. While the Library also provides Ontario-wide news clippings via e-mail subscriptions, the printed copies of TPT continue to be a staple for members and staffers at Queen's Park.



Fragment of the Library's ironwork with the provincial crest.

In the last several years, the Library has been improving accessibility to its building facilities and to its online catalogue. It is working towards being fully accessible in all respects in the coming years. In 2014, the Library published its first ever comprehensive overview of current provincial affairs to act as a primer for new and returning Members, entitled *Provincial Affairs: An Overview for Ontario Legislators*, 41st Parliament. A collection of two-page background papers on forty-three topics in eight policy fields with accompanying data visualizations, it has received glowing feedback.

Legislative libraries across the country have adopted varied service approaches depending on local needs. For example, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador and the Northwest Territories currently offer reference and research services to their local civil service and to the general public while prioritizing the work of their respective Legislatures. In the Northwest Territories in particular, the legislative library is a source of information to all users given that the territory does not have any university libraries. Many legislative libraries, including those in Nova Scotia and

Alberta, also provide news clippings services but they are only distributed electronically. The legislative library in Manitoba and the Library of Parliament in Ottawa offer services in several locations to best serve their clients.

In order to enhance the services they provide, the libraries came together in 1975 to found the Association of Parliamentary Libraries in Canada (APLIC). The association is a collaborative forum through which members share knowledge and access to legislative information. In 2013, APLIC launched the GALLOP Portal (Government and Legislative Libraries Online Publications Portal). Pan-Canadian and bilingual in nature, the portal stores electronic publications produced by Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial governments and legislatures. At the time of its launch, there were over 320,000 publications dating back to 1995.

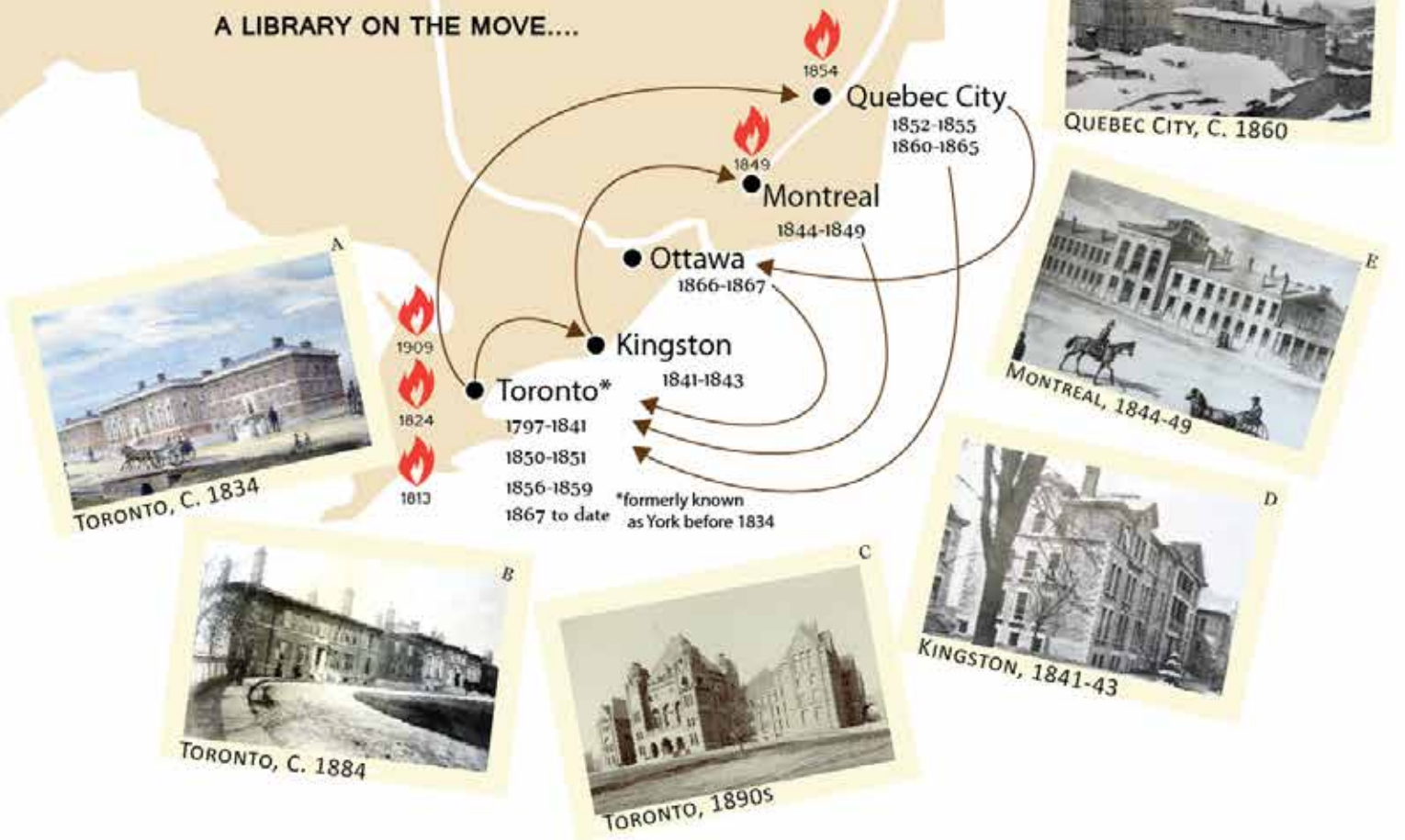
The predecessors of the Ontario Legislative Library participated in exchange programs of locally acquired publications between libraries across the Commonwealth dating as far back as the 1880s. APLIC continues this valuable tradition of sharing resources and publications between libraries.

The Ontario Legislative Library has come a long way since its founding 200 years ago. The common thread running through its history, like all the legislative libraries in Canada, has remained consistent: a commitment to providing high quality, non-partisan, and confidential service to their elected officials. Individually and together, the libraries are assisting our provincial and federal legislators to find and analyze the information they need to do their jobs in an environment of developing technologies. As the technologies change, so will our libraries. Who knows what the next 200 years will bring?

**The historical information used in this article was drawn from the book, A Credit to this Province: A History of the Ontario Legislative Library and its Predecessors, 1792-1992 by Fiona M. Watson (Toronto: Ontario Legislative Library, 1993). Information on the services offered by other legislative libraries and noted trends in information management was drawn from a request for contributions to the APLIC listserv.*

The Ontario Legislative Library: Celebrating 200 Years of Moves, Fires and Innovation

A LIBRARY ON THE MOVE....



LIBRARY INTERIORS IN TORONTO



1850-51



1875-92



1893-1909



1912 to present

Graphic by Julie Anderson

Sources:

A Credit to this Province, by Fiona Watson.
Built to Last: the Legislative Library Celebrating 100 years in the North Wing of the Legislative Building, by Susanne Hynes, Joanne Robertson and Elias Chiddicks.
From Ashes to Steel: Rebuilding the Library and its Collections, by Susanna Hynes.

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