

Effective Use of City Directories

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In the course of their research, family historians use a variety of sources as they reconstruct their families and ancestry. Those sources vary, almost as much as our ancestors themselves. Some sources are only helpful, and sometimes only exist, under certain situations, such as specific places or time periods. Census records, for example, are a mainstay of 19th century American genealogy, but have very little use in German or French research. In America, tax records are more useful at certain times, and for certain places. It almost seems that some records exist to help us with particularly difficult research situations.

Well, in the opinion of many genealogists, what could be more difficult than searching for ancestors in a large city, where many people may have shared the same name, few persons owned land or bothered to probate their estate, and where people moved frequently? Wherever there were large populations, the newspapers could not begin to mention all (or even very many of) the marriages or deaths. Local histories could not profile even a small percentage of the residents. Many residents were not recorded in the churches, and if they were, which ones? There were just so many different churches!

Take heart! In the midst of all this gloom, there is a very significant record that almost tailor-made to the situation. It is one that identifies almost every household every year; helps to distinguish different persons of the same name; is easy to access, easy to read, and alphabetically arranged! In fact, it is one which, when used carefully, can reveal more about an ancestor or his family, than many other records upon which genealogists commonly rely. Of course, we are talking about city directories. Those virtually annual censuses (listings) of a city's population are just waiting there ... waiting for you to take advantage of the wealth of information they contain.

City directories are your window to the life, society, conditions, sources, and, most of all, the residents of the cities of America. They provide an amazing amount of detail which may just help you find the key information you are seeking. Whether your family members were dirt poor immigrants trying to scratch out a living in a teaming metropolis, second or third generation city dwellers "moving on up" the social ladder and finding increasing success with the multiple opportunities of the city, or if they were the movers and shakers who made decisions that affected the lives of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of city residents, city directories will help you find and document them.

With improved access due to the Internet, city directories are receiving more attention. However, most discussions are brief articles, often showing how a directory search helped solve a research problem. This is all very helpful, but it is time for a more extensive, detailed understanding of these very significant and user-friendly original source records.

History of City Directories

Although a group of Dutch magistrates in New Amsterdam (now New York City) compiled a list of residents by street in 1665, the first true, separately published city directory in America first appeared more than a century later in 1785. It was preceded by some scattered attempts to list city residents privately, such as a 1752 list for Baltimore, or as part of a larger publication, such as the 1782 list for Charleston in a statewide almanac. However, it was appropriately in Philadelphia, the young country's largest city at that time, that two different individuals issued competing directories in November 1785.

Not to be outdone, New York City's first directory appeared the following year. Before the turn of the century, directories had also appeared for Boston (1789), Baltimore (1796), and even Hartford (1799). Including the Charleston offerings, the nation now had directories for its five largest cities, and a new industry had been born.

Early directory publishers provided this service as an auxiliary to their regular occupations, be they postmasters, school principals, business men or involved in other trades. The most common publisher was the local newspaper editor, who had access to a printing press, and of course was very interested in the local residents, for they were his customer base. By the mid-1800s, full-time directory publishers had appeared in the major cities. Often they would issue directories for several different cities within a region, with dates of issue staggered throughout the calendar, so their resources could be used virtually year round.

By the latter 19th century, city directories had become big business. Large companies opened offices in various cities to provide directory services, and names like R. L. Polk became part of American consciousness. Directory publishers even formed a trade association to help promote the publishing of quality directories, to guard against fraudulent publishers and canvassers, and to provide year-round work for competent canvassers.

In an effort to appeal to more subscribers, publishers added more and more features over the years. Certain features became standard fare in most directories. Others never seem to have caught on, or to have proved their worth to the users. Some of the imaginative features included lists of Civil War soldiers who served from the city, death dates for persons who had passed away during the preceding year, and notations of removals from the city, often indicating where the resident settled. While genealogists would love to have had these features in all directories, we are grateful when they do appear, and they remind us that no two directories are alike. Each may offer features not seen elsewhere and hence should be carefully scrutinized for helpful information.

Eventually, with the growth of mega-cities in the early 20th century, it became financially unviable for commercial companies to publish directories for a few of the largest cities. Increased availability and use of phone directories also diminished the perceived value of the traditional city directories. The last regularly issued directory for New York City (Manhattan and the Bronx) was published in 1925. For other boroughs, it was even earlier. Queens was stopped after 1912 and Brooklyn after the 1913 directory.

There was, however, one last directory issued for New York City, with the assistance of the WPA. For Manhattan (with Richmond), directories were issued in 1931 and 1933, while Queens and Brooklyn directories appeared in 1933. In these cases, government "make work" projects of the depression provided a kind of "underwriting" for the commercial publisher of the directories.

Apparently, the last directory for Chicago was issued in 1928, and there were many missed years prior to that publication. Los Angeles directories seem to have stopped in the 1940s, although directories for some suburban areas are still in publication.

Although city directories are still published today, in many areas they are no longer annual, but have been reduced to every two years. In some metropolitan areas, multiple volumes are issued. For example, in the Salt Lake City area, one volume is issued for Salt Lake City proper, every two years. In the intervening years, a separate volume is issued for the suburban areas, which actually have a larger population than the primary city.

Scope and Purpose of City Directories

Just who was included in a directory was a matter determined by each individual publisher, and it varied, not just from city to city, but over time in the same city, and by the same publisher. Some directories listed just the businessmen of a city. However, the chief purpose of a city directory was as a tool for businessmen. A tool that would help him identify his customers and potential customers. Hence, it was to the customer's benefit, and therefore to the publisher's benefit, to list as many persons as possible. Indeed, publishers often bragged (in their preface) about the number of names in their directories.

Remember, directories were not issued for our use. What use, therefore, did the actual customer make of them? A typical business in a city in the nineteenth century often extended some form of credit to its customers. Therefore, having a handy list of the addresses of the residents would make it easier for them to contact a customer, even if they moved within the city, about a balance due. For that matter, a listing in the directory was a useful tool in determining if credit should be extended to a new customer. Especially if the customer's name appeared in the past couple of directories, the business could presume a certain level of stability, and therefore credit-worthiness.

For companies that arranged delivery of their goods, a directory would provide them with the address of their customer. Indeed, with middle initials, and occupations, a directory could help the user (then and today) distinguish between two men of the same name. The directory also quickly became an advertising medium. Publishers learned they could place advertising banners in the margins. (No, the Internet did not invent ad banners.) In the classified list of businesses, and even in the residential portion, they could charge extra for placing a listing in bold typeface. In fact, today's "yellow pages" phone directories are a direct descendant of city directory business listings.

So, just who did the publishers list in the residential portion? Well, that varied over time. In order to be of value to their customers, they wanted to list as many useful names as possible. At a bare minimum, this would mean the homeowners in the city, or, more likely, the head of each household (including widows). In addition, since many families in the city actually rented, rather than owned their residences, publishers would list the principal tenants or the major lessees in each apartment. Some directories would list the head of every family, even if there were three or more families in one apartment. Of course, each publisher established rules regarding who they would list, but it was up to the canvassers to actually determine the name(s) to be listed for each address. Just like census takers, some directory canvassers were more diligent and careful about their job than others.

Over time, an increasing set of residents appear in the directories. By the middle of the 1800s, almost any adult male living in the city (or at least employed and living in the city) was a candidate for a listing. Widows were also usually listed. By this time, many directories also listed men who did not actually live in the city, but were employed in the city. In such circumstances, the listing would indicate the town where he lived, in addition to his work location. Obviously, that information came from the business, not a canvasser of the suburb. Hence, a New York City directory might have a listing such as:

Smith John, manager Smith & Jones Tapestries, 120 Broadway, h Hoboken

Thus, such an entry requires the researcher have some geographic knowledge; at least enough to know that Hoboken is a New Jersey suburb, not a street in the city.

By the last third of the century, single adult females were being listed in many directories. To be sure they needed to be gainfully employed, often as a stenographer or teacher, but it appears that their employment status granted them a listing. By the end of the 19th century, most directories were also listing the names of wives, in the same listing with their husbands. A wife's name often appeared in parenthesis immediately after their husband, the head of the household.

By the early part of the 20th century, student's names also appeared, with the "occupation" of student as a descriptor. These were typically post-secondary students, such as those at colleges or trade schools, although the schools are never identified. As telephones became more common in the 20th century, directories added phone numbers to the typical listing.

Despite this description, the listings varied more than we researchers would like. The earliest, simplest listing included just the name of the resident and his (seldom her) address. Soon his occupation appeared. The next element to appear was the work address. Different publishers also used different abbreviations. Therefore, check the list of abbreviations (near the front of the directory), to learn if "r." means resides, rear or rents.

Sometimes a person may be listed twice, because different canvassers learned about him from his employer, as well as through a residential visit. You will recognize such duplicate entries because the information is similar, but not exactly the same. Often the name is spelled differently, or sometimes, one of the addresses is expressed a bit differently.

Of course, just because a person should have been listed in a directory does not mean that he (or she) actually was. If they were a common laborer, living with a friend or relative (i.e.: they were not the principal tenant), or an immigrant who did not communicate well, or they had recently moved, and the person answering the canvasser did not know them, or for any of several more reasons, they may not be listed in any given year. Take heart! Most directories were eventually published each year. A person who was overlooked one year, may well be included the next.

Most directories claim to have been created entirely new each year, from a fresh canvass of the entire city. They did not simply take the current copy of the directory with them on their rounds and update the listings. Hence, a family who never moved or changed occupations may appear differently each year. The name may be spelled differently, the occupation may vary, or the name may not even appear for a couple of years, all because one canvasser did his job differently than a previous one. One German locksmith in New York City is variously described, in successive years and at the same address, as a locksmith, machinist, smith, ironworker, and then locksmith again.

Although directories will not include every body you would find in a census (notably women and younger children), you will find some persons in a directory who were not listed in the census. Prior to 1850 of course, the census only lists the head of each family. A directory from this time period may well list other gainfully employed adults. Therefore, if you find a relative in a city directory, but cannot locate him in the associated census records, look for other persons with his surname in the same ward in the census records. Pay particular attention to persons in the census whom you cannot identify in the directory. Perhaps the name you found in the directory is the representative for that address in the directory, but is not the head of the household in the census. Take the neighbors from the census listing and seek them in the directories. Determine if any of the census neighbors live on the same street, or even the same address, as the relative in the directory. If so, then the person you found in the census with the same address as the relative in the directory may well be living with the person in the directory, and you may have just found another relative.

This process can even work if you cannot find others of the same surname in the same area where the relative appears in the directory. Try seeking his neighbors in the census, to learn if he might be an additional adult male in the census. Now, finding the neighbors may take some work, since directories of that time period do not arrange listings by street. Using the directory information, determine in which ward the relative lived. Then, searching the census, find a few unique names in that ward. Now you seek those same names in the directory to learn where they lived within that ward. Repeat this process until you find the area of the census that includes the street where the relative appears in the directory. Then, copy a couple of pages from the census, and find as many of those names as possible in the directory. Eventually you will find the page where your relative's neighbors lived, and perhaps even persons at the same address as your relative. These families could be close relatives, and would therefore suggest additional search protocols.

There are other reasons why a person listed in a directory may not be in the census. Perhaps he died before the census was taken, or he lived outside of the city (even outside of the state; as some cities are near state boundaries) and was not, or did not live outside census entries from other localities.

Even persons in directories after 1850 may be omitted from the census. Perhaps they were not home when the census taker came, and he did not learn about them from the neighbors. Perhaps the census taker spelled the name very wrong (because the landlord provided poor information), and you can't recognize it in the census. Of course, a person may have moved into the city shortly after the census was taken, or moved out before. This is why it is important to learn when the city was actually canvassed for the directory.

Watch for late listings. Often published at the end of the list of residents, they may carry the title "Names received too late for insertion." This page (sometimes two) includes two types of listings (not distinguished from each other). Some are names of persons at addresses where the canvasser had not obtained an answer earlier. Others are persons who had recently moved into the new address. They may be new to the city, or a long-time resident who moved. In any event, if the family you are seeking is not in the regular listing, check out this page.

Content of City Directories

Most people think of city directories as simply a list of the names and addresses of the residents of a city. That is in large part true only because the vast majority of pages are dedicated to listing the householders and principal tenants in the apartments. However, the typical directory included much more information about the city. Such information can be critical to a family historian's research success. In addition to the list of residents, consider the following typical contents of a nineteenth century directory:

- Publishers introduction
- History of the city
- Street directory
- Ward boundaries
- Map of the city
- Abbreviations
- Directory of churches
- Directory of cemeteries
- List of city officials
- Classified list of businesses
- List of fraternal and social organizations
- City laws or ordinances
- Calendar of events
- Reverse, or Criss-cross listings

Much like the web sites of today, this information may have been considered ancillary to the chief purpose of the directory, but the publisher included it, "free of charge" in order to promote the additional uses and encourage additional visitors, hoping they will spend more time and/or money at that web site?



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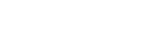
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Introduction

As with any published book, if there is an introduction, take time to read it thoroughly. Most directory introductions are only a page or two, but can provide helpful material. Sometimes the publisher will, directly or indirectly, mention a competing directory. This is your cue to seek out a copy of that directory. Sometimes they will indicate how long since the last directory was published. Of perhaps greatest importance, they may indicate the date or month when the directory was published, which indicates when the canvas was made.

An introduction may alert you to changes in the city's street numbering system, or additions to the city. Over the years, many cities incorporated suburbs into their city limits. Most directory publishers restricted their canvass to the city limits. When the city grew, they had to increase their canvass. The result is that a family may appear for several years in the directory, then disappear. They then appear again years later at an address different from their previous address. In such cases, it is often the case that the family moved out of the city limits, and then later the city incorporated that area, so they were back in the city. This can have an affect on how you conduct research on that family, since it will usually affect which church they attended, where they bought land, and where they were buried.

Street directory

Street directories are a crucial part of any city directory. They usually consist of a list of streets within the city, and under each street is a list of the streets that cross that street, as well as the street numbers on both sides of the street at each such intersection. This information can help you pinpoint the location of a relative to a specific ward, and often to one or two census districts. Thus, a city directory can be used as a kind of census index, for cities where a person does not appear in the census index.

Using street directories, you can often determine where the nearest church, school, or cemetery was located. You can also learn just how far away others of the same name lived. Often they may have just been around the corner, but, with different addresses, you may never have realized their proximity.

Ward Boundaries

Equally important are the descriptions of ward boundaries. Wards are the jurisdictional unit used in most city records. From draft records to death registrations and census to voter lists, persons were identified by their ward of residence. A few city directories indicated the ward in the street directory. More commonly, you will find a few pages, often near the street directory, with a description of each ward. These descriptions can be difficult to read. You will be most successful if you can find a map of the city (see below), and plot out the key wards near the relative's address.

The census used ward boundaries as part of their method of dividing a city. For the censuses taken in 1850 and later, the census office compiled books of enumeration district descriptions, which identify what geographic areas were in which census districts. In cities, these districts are always described as certain portions of existing wards. Knowing in which ward a family lived, allows the researcher to review the enumeration district descriptions, to learn where to seek the family that is not readily recognized in a census index.

Census indexes also use ward boundaries to identify where an entry appears on the census. By searching the directories before using the census index, and knowing in what ward a family lived, the researcher can choose the most likely index entries. This is especially helpful with common surnames.

City Map

Every family historian knows the value of maps in their research. They are even more crucial in a city where people moved frequently, and others of the same surname lived just blocks away. A map helps you to keep straight who is where, and how close they were to churches and other important locations. Many city directories included a map of the city when they were published. Unfortunately, those maps were separately included, sometimes in a pocket in the back of the directory. They were not bound into the directory. Therefore, they have long since been separated from most directories researchers use.

Microfilm copies of directories (discussed below under Access) may include a map with some (but not all) directories. Major repositories of city directories, and major research libraries, will also have maps from the city directories.

Directories of Organizations and Institutions

Most city directories also include a separate listing of major organizations and institutions within the city. Perhaps the most important for most city research are the lists of churches and cemeteries. Church listings are arranged according to denomination, and sometimes indicate the ethnic orientation of a specific congregation, such as Irish rather than Italian Catholic, or German in contrast to Scandinavian Lutheran churches.

Since American church records can be difficult to access, researchers need all the assistance these listings can offer. By searching these listings for the time period your family lived in the city, you will know what parishes existed for your family's denomination at the time when their children were baptized, or when the parents died. You will also learn the location of the churches, which allows you to choose which ones were closest to where the family lived.

Even if the church listing does not indicate the ethnic orientation of a parish, the name of the pastor may be a significant clue. Reverend O'Malley certainly was preferred by Irish Catholics over Father Gucci, whom the Italians supported in droves.

If you don't know which church your family preferred, these listing can be helpful as well. If you can identify a marriage record for a family member, and a minister conducted the marriage, he may be listed with his church in this section of the directory. You will have then learned the church where the family married, and hence where there may be other records as well.

Cemetery listings are another important part of city directories. While many city institutions from the 1800s may still exist in the city today (such as churches), cemeteries may not still be located in the city. In some cities, land was at a premium, so cemeteries may have been moved further from the center of the city, often to locations never associated with the persons buried there. Knowing what cemeteries existed in which locations when a relative died will help you decide which ones to search first.

Another major group identified in directories is the local newspapers. Newspaper research can be very difficult in a city, as newspapers came and went frequently. Some cities had several rival newspapers, as well as specialty papers which focused on a certain religious denomination or ethnic group. Identify which newspapers were published in the city when your family lived there. Then you can approach the local library or historical society about back copies of those papers.

Reverse Directories

A much more recent component of modern city directories is the reverse or "criss-cross" directory. This is a section (sometimes a separate publication), which lists the residents in street and house number order. Much more prevalent after the early part of the 20th century, you must know a person's address to use this portion of the directory. Of course, you get that address from the main section of the directory. The importance of this section is two fold. First, it usually lists the homeowner under the address, not just persons who lived there. This can help you when tracking ownership records. Indeed, you might learn that the house where grandpa lived all his life was not owned by him; but by his uncle, or other relative. It may even be a person whose name you do not recognize, leading to more research, and perhaps additional relatives.

Second, from such a directory you learn the names of neighbors. Some of those neighbors may be a married daughter, sister, or favorite niece. If you are trying to locate a person who has moved from that location during the last 20 or so years, some of those neighbors may still remember your relative. Perhaps they may know where they moved to. Perhaps they still exchange Christmas cards.

Competing Directories

Profit margins were apparently slim in the directory business, but they were there. And, in American society, someone else always believes he can do a better job of a particular task than the current incumbent. Consequently, from time to time, competitors established (or tried to establish) a better directory in any given city. Sometimes they succeeded, and eventually took over the directory business for a city, or bought out the earlier publisher. Often they did not succeed, because of the loyal following the established publisher had developed.

The situation is analogous to today's telephone yellow pages, with competing companies trying to get a portion of the revenue that advertisers spend on their phone ads. It is also similar to today's commercial census indexes: additional companies enter into the market trying to create a better index or directory, and thereby take business away from a competitor. Did the businessman really need a second city directory? Do we really need a second index to the 1870 census of Tennessee? Well, that depended on the quality of the first production.

A businessman buying a directory would likely choose just one, as it cost him money to buy the directory. We researchers have the option of using both, just as we should with census indexes. Even if you find a relative in a city directory, if there is a competing directory, search that as well. Competition, by its nature, encourages the publishers to add different features, in an effort to say, "Ours is better!" Perhaps one includes the wife's name. Perhaps the other includes the home address of persons who only worked in the city, and lived in the suburbs.

Competing directories seldom lasted more than two to three years. The margin was just too slim for two directories to succeed in the same location for very long. One or the other would withdraw, or buy out the competition. However, where they exist, take advantage of it for your research.

Business Directories

Some city directories are not actual lists of residents. Rather, they only identify the businesses within the city. Hence, these are usually described as "business directories" in which the listings are classified by the nature of each business, rather than alphabetically by name. Such directories are less common in America than they were in Europe and Great Britain (where many directories were just business directories). Sometimes they are housed with, or part of, microfilm collections with residential directories, so be careful as you use such collections not to try using a business directory like a regular directory.

Their use is much different. You cannot use them to learn who lived where in the city, or to search for your surname. However, if you know a relative's occupation, you can search the listing for that, or related occupations. If he is listed, you will generally learn the location of his business, not his home. Most listings are for the owner of the occupation, and for much of the 19th century, business owners lived very near their store front. If so, this may locate him in the city, but the vast mass of common laborers, even if engaged in a trade, will not be listed in business directories.

Accessing City Directories

Pleasantly, city directories are one of easiest records for a family historian to locate. One often begins with the library or historical society in the city of interest. They, or a nearby academic library, have often tried to obtain and maintain a complete collection of directories for that city. These are generally still in paper format, but be cautious when using them. Since directories were designed for only one year's use, the paper was inexpensive, and therefore often thin and acidic. Thus, these books fall apart easily, or the pages tear. Compound that with oversized, weak bindings, and regular use over the years and it's a wonder some have survived at all.

Another excellent location is the state library or historical society for the state where the city was located. A visit to the Montana State Historical Society in Helena revealed a very large collection of directories for cities all over the state. Yes, Montana does have cities, although they are not the large cities we often associate with directories. Montana has nine cities with populations between 10,000 and 85,000 (1990 census), and there are city directories for all of these cities at the state historical society. See the discussion of smaller cities below.

Other major research libraries also collect city directories, even for cities outside of their regular coverage area. The best single collection of directories is at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. Other excellent collections include the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.) and the Wisconsin State Historical Society (Madison).

Fortunately, researchers don't need to travel very far to use city directories. Many are available on microfilm. During the 1980s, Research Publications, now part of [Primary Source Microfilm](#) located and filmed thousands of directories for hundreds of U.S. cities. Directories published prior to 1860 were published on microfilm, while later ones were published on microfilm. For the pre-1860 directories, they used a bibliography created by Dorothea Spear (see bibliography below) which identified all known city directories. For later years, they researched and created their own list. Using copies at the American Antiquarian Society, the Library of Congress, and other places, including major public libraries, they created a comprehensive collection for many cities.

Their various segments of recent years include directories for 1901 through 1935 for some 350 or more cities, which is certainly a significant number. A list of those cities is included on pages 388 through 392 in *The Source* (see bibliography). While they continue to microfilm early city directories as they locate them, they are now producing films of directories through 1960. Their collection (or parts of it) is available at many research libraries, including the Family History Library.

However, even as their collection approaches 12,000 directories, it does not include all cities in the country. For example, the Family History Library collection of directories includes some that are not in the Research Publications/Primary Source Microfilm series. They have collected, and microfilmed, literally thousands of directories from smaller cities as well. In most cases, their collection is not comprehensive for any given city, there are often only five to ten directories for a city, but it is a place to begin your search.

You will also find some bibliographical works have reprinted older city directories. Usually they appear over several issues, but this may be a useful way to find smaller directories. Use the Periodical Search Index (PERSI) to find transcribed or abstracted information from city directories.

City Directories on the Internet

A growing number of old city directories are appearing on various Internet sites, making access even easier. On some sites, the text of the directories (usually the residential listing portion only) is available as electronic text, making them very easy to search. Others have posted images of the original pages. Most websites with directories are free, but the largest collections are on subscription sites.

However, there is no one Internet site with an overwhelming collection. Indeed, most online city directory collections, even those with hundreds of directories, only have a few directories for each city. This makes it difficult to search consecutive years, which is the best way to maximize the information in city directories (see "Using City Directories"). County and city genealogy sites, such as those that are part of the U.S. GenWeb network often list the online directories for their localities. For those seeking a broader list, there are a few websites that strive to monitor the posting of residential directories online. Their links are the handiest way to locate large collections of directories.

[DistantCousin.com](#) has posted more than one hundred directories from about 40 different states on their website. Although there are seldom more than one or two per city, the dates often come well into the 20th century. Their index search identifies each directory where or a specified surname appears.

[City Directories Online](#) bills itself as "a guide to finding city directory records on the internet." It primarily refers users to other sites, notably Ancestry.com and DistantCousin.

The most significant online collection of city directories is found at Ancestry.com. It began several years with an effort to create a kind of substitute census (although partial) for the destroyed 1890 census. For their "1890 Federal Census Substitute Project," Ancestry digitized and uploaded directories for hundreds of cities covering a few years on either side of 1890. Since almost half of America lived in cities by 1890, this is a valuable collection for this time period. Of course, the 1890 directories did not list young children, but by that date, many included wives and adult children still at home.

Ancestry has recently expanded their city directory collection by adding more than 1,000 new directories. Many of them are for eastern states, and often, again, there are only a few per city. The date ranges are broad, with several dating to the 1930s, and some to 1960. As this new collection grows to encompass more of the country, it will become increasingly valuable, especially for the post-1930 era.

Popular [Cyndi's List has a useful page about city directories](#) with links to articles about their use, as well as links to many transcribed directories.

[Genealogy Today has a City Directories page](#) with brief articles and links to some transcribed directories.

An earlier effort by Primary Source Microfilm to post some of their city directories online has been abandoned. Presumably, some time in the meantime, this excellent and important collection of residential research will be available through the Internet. In the meantime, the above suggestions will help Internet savvy researchers find at least one or two directories for cities of interest.

[City Directories of the United States of America](#) is an ambitious effort to identify and "catalog" all known city directories, in any format, throughout the country. They proceed by analyzing the collections of different repositories, and have surveyed many already. This site is a very useful way to learn of the existence of directories for even the smallest of cities.

Another way to learn what directories are available on microfilm is to check the Library of Congress's article on "[U.S. City Directories on Microfilm in the Microform Reading Room](#)" which summarizes the film holdings of the library, and is based on the Primary Source Microfilm collections. There is a page for each state, which lists cities and available years.

Researchers wanting to learn more about city directories have access to several articles on the Internet. Most are fairly brief, but perhaps their greatest value lies in the brief research examples and success stories most of them include.

Kathleen W. Hinkley's article, "[Analyzing City Directories.](#)" was originally published in OnBoard (May 1996) and is available on the Board for Certification's website in their "Skillbuilding" section. It teaches some important ways of looking at the information in multiple directories.

Ancestry.com has published several short articles over the years, both in their print magazine and their online newsletter about city directories. The following are available on their website:

- "[Using Directories for Genealogical Research](#)" by Curt B. Witcher
- "[City Directories](#)" by Brian G. Andersson
- "[City Directories](#)" by Kathi Sittner
- "[Using Ancestry.com: City Directories](#)" by Juliana Smith

Using City Directories

The above discussion has already suggested many ways to use a city directory. Following are some additional thoughts that should prove useful.

Variety of Content

Consistency is not a hallmark of city directories. Competing companies introduced different features, and expressed similar features differently from city to city, and over time. Search directories even if you think you already know all about your family, including where they lived. For example, the 1925 Cincinnati, Ohio directory identifies the state from which the residents came. Some directories include a notation the year a person disappears indicating to where they had moved. Several directories, for a few years at least, added death dates for residents who had passed away during the previous year.

Pay close attention to the variations which may exist with a city directory when researching in a city where you have seldom done research. Abbreviations may be different, features may vary, and even their location in the directory will be different. Some directories begin with the list of residents, with all the supplemental information at the back. Others include the extra features up front, and it may be 200 or more pages before the residential listing begins.

Be certain to find and use the maps published with the directories. As noted above, they are seldom still found with paper copies of directories, but may appear with some film copies. Be certain to ask at the repository where you are using the directories about the existence of maps. These are very useful tools to help you understand where different city features were found, and where your family lived.

Be sure to search all known spelling variations for your family, both the surname and the given names. Some directories include "see" references reminding the user of alternate surname spellings. Don't stop there. Your previous research has alerted you to other versions, be sure to check. This is especially crucial for immigrant families, whose name may have been mutated by foreign pronunciations.

Identification of African Americans

An example of the way directories vary from city to city is the manner in which they distinguish between black and white residents, sometimes using a star or other non-specific symbol. On rare occasions, a directory may have had a separate section for black residents.

A survey of various cities illustrates the different ways of indicating a person's race. Fourteen southern cities' directories, dated about 1880, were examined for the way they treated the black population. During this time period (after the end of slavery), none of the surveyed directories included a "colored" section at the back of the directory. Three cities (New Orleans, St. Louis, and Montgomery) gave no indication of the race for any resident.

The other eleven cities simply indicated "persons of color" with an abbreviation in the regular alphabetical listing. These cities included Atlanta, Charleston, Kansas City (Missouri), Little Rock, Louisville, Memphis, Mobile, Nashville, Norfolk, Richmond, and Savannah. The symbols or abbreviations used included the letter 'c' six times (four in italics), 'col'd' was used three times, and * was used twice.

Searching some of the same cities, and several other southern cities, for various years from 1899 to about 1910 and later did reveal three cities with separate listings for some years: Columbia, S.C., began separate listings in 1904, and they continued at least through 1935. Charlotte, N.C. had separate listings at least in 1910, while Montgomery had such sections for 1910 through 1914, but afterwards returned to integrated listings. It is reported that Rome, Georgia also published separate sections, but that could not be verified.

However, during this same time period, the following eleven cities' directories were all integrated, using various indicators (with * being increasingly common): Atlanta, Baltimore, Birmingham, Chattanooga, Galveston, Jacksonville, Mobile, Nashville, Raleigh, Richmond, and Savannah. On the other hand, Hartford, Newark, and New Orleans provided no indication of race in their directories at that time.

In all cases, any directories identifying black residents (in separate listings or integrated) should not be understood as a comprehensive listing of black families in a given city. Many common laborers would have been omitted from these directories.

Indeed, separate sections in city directories were not uncommon. Some directories for major cities included significant suburbs in separate alphabetical sections after the larger city's coverage. County directories often had separate listing for each of the cities in the county, and then followed that with a directory of farmers or rural residents.

Of course, as historians and demographers know, the south was mostly a rural area until well into the 20th century. Prior to 1900, there were only about two dozen cities with regularly published directories in the Deep South, versus about 300 in the rest of the country. Also, far fewer blacks lived in cities in the 19th century than today. While directories are a tool for black ancestral research, it is important to know how a particular directory indicated that a resident was black.

Date Issued

One of the first things you should learn when using a directory is when it was issued. Knowing the year is not enough. Some publishers put two years on their title page, indicating the year issued and the year it expired (when a new one was planned). Others just used the year of issue, while others, seeking to look as new as possible (like modern almanacs or magazines), used only the year of expiration on the title page. Therefore, the "year" of a directory is not sufficient. Indeed, if you are using the directory as a springboard to other records, such as census or vital records, you should learn the month when it was issued.

The important information to determine is when the directory was canvassed, for the information can be no more recent than the canvass. If a man is listed in one directory, and his widow is in the next, you want to know when he died, and it was between the two canvasses. Most directories seem to have had a creation cycle of about one month. It was important to the publisher to get it issued as quickly as possible, so it was a current as possible. Promptness also enhanced the publisher's reputation, and his ability to collect advertising revenue.

In New York City, for example, "moving day" was May 1st, the day when many people would move to new rental residences. The publisher therefore began his canvas the next day, with the object of printing it by the end of that month.

Often this information is found in the publisher's preface or introduction. However, it is not always consistently given. Sometimes you need to read the introduction to several directories for that city, within a few years of your searches. Sometimes they will promote their ability to deliver on time; other times they will apologize for the delay, caused by unavoidable circumstances. The title page may indicate the month it was submitted to the Library of Congress. Some directories include a calendar, running, for example, from May to May. This suggests that the intended distribution month was May.

Breadth of Search

Search every year for which you can find a directory. This is one of the benefits of using a microfilm collection, rather than the sometimes spotty collection of a local repository or the Internet. It is amazing how much our ancestor's families changed in a relatively short period of time. By tracking an immigrant (or migrant) family back in the directories, you can learn approximately when they arrived in the city. Of course, persons were not always listed every single year, especially if they belonged to the common laborer class. Immigrants may have been in a city for a couple of years before they were in a position to be listed.

Sometimes an unknown relative will be living with a known family member, and will be so indicated by having the same address. Often this only occurs for one or two years, so you won't know of such a situation if you don't check every year. Searching every year will allow you to better pinpoint a father's death, as his wife may appear as a widow the next year. An unmarried man may appear for just one year with his future father-in-law, which could help you determine the year of the marriage.

As you search every year, don't stop searching just because the person you were tracing does not appear for a year. Many reasons exist why persons were not listed in any given year. They may have indeed moved out of the city, but perhaps they moved back in a couple of years. Sometimes they are listed under a different spelling, or they were residing with a friend or relative, and were not separately listed by their own name. Search forward a few years to be certain a relative does not re-appear. If someone is gone from a directory for five or more years, then you can be fairly certain that he left the city (either by migration or death).

Women of course may appear in a directory before they married (as single, working ladies), and then disappear upon marriage, yet they may have never even moved. A widow may disappear from the directory, but perhaps due to a re-marriage, not death or out-migration.

As a Census Index

Consider using city directories as a kind of index to the federal census records. While the federal census records are already indexed, most state ones are not yet done. Also, there are times when the index does not include a person, while a directory may. Using the appropriate tools (some of which are described above), you can locate a person in the census if you know their address. A number of street indexes area available for the 1910 census that makes this process fairly quick and simple when seeking families in that census.

Twice in past research, a family did not appear in the census index for a large city, although they were in the directories. Making the effort to locate their address in the census (it has been a part of the census since 1880) revealed the problem. The census taker had reversed their names, with the first name in the surname position, and the surname in the given name's position. The indexer had indeed indexed them, but under the "wrong" surname, through no fault of her own.

Directories for Smaller Cities

As noted above, we tend to think of city directories when we are searching large cities, such as New York, St. Louis, or Atlanta. They are very important in those cities, since so many people can get genealogically lost in such large populations. However, many smaller cities often have directories.

The availability of a directory for a small city imparts a sense of importance to that city. Indeed, some cities are regional shipping centers for agriculture or local manufacturing. A directory can be a valuable tool for the genealogist searching smaller cities as well. It still functions as a substitute census, and it can still suggest who is living with whom. It still tells you about the churches, cemeteries, newspapers, and other institutions of the city.

One of the benefits of smaller directories is that a much smaller percentage of the population is missed or overlooked. If an adult was living and working in Klamath Falls, Oregon, he or she was likely listed in the directory. These city directories typically did not begin as early as those of larger cities. Many are 20th century publications only. But, they include all the features we have discussed in the larger city directories. You should probably look for directories for any city with 20,000 or more population, and even less if such a city was not a suburb of a larger city.

The Research Publications/Primary Source Microfilm collection (described above) includes many smaller cities, including twelve in post 1900 Montana for example, so it can be a good place to start.

Brief Example

City directories can be used in a variety of ways to learn more about a family. One research case focused on the William Evans family of Westchester County, New York. The 1860 and 1870 census had identified William as a successful merchant and immigrant from Wales, and had provided names and ages for his wife and children. From that information, it was obvious that the family should be in New York in the 1850 census. However, they did not appear in the 1850 census of Westchester County. Searching deeds in Westchester, the earliest deed for William Evans was dated in 1850, shortly before the census was taken. According to that deed, he lived in the eighth ward in New York City at that time.

Turning to the 1850 census for New York City, there were two William Evans in the 8th ward. He was the second of these references, based on how well that family matched the 1860 census. A carpenter lived with them, as did a young Irish couple, the husband of which was a clerk and likely worked for William.

In order to search for William's arrival record, and his naturalization, it is important to know how long he lived in the city. To accomplish this, one searches the city directories backwards, one year at a time. The 1849 directory included five persons named William Evans. One was specifically listed as a merchant, but at least two or three were in a merchant style business (two grocers and one butcher). According to a period map of the city, only one of the addresses was in the 8th ward, where the family appeared in the census. This was the grocer at 98 Charlton, whose business was at 318 Spring.

These two addresses are only a block or so apart, and both in the 8th ward. However, certainty came in reviewing the other names listed on the census with William. Some of them appeared in the directory with address in the same area, including a Joseph W. Rickland, a tea merchant, who lived at 329 Spring. The carpenter and young Irish couple who lived with him were not in the 1849 directory.

Tracing the 1844 entry backwards in the city directory, William was consistently listed at 98 Charlton as early as the 1844 directory. There were never any other Evans at that address, although the 1845 directory included a James G. Evans, a shoemaker, at 90 Charlton. He could not be identified in earlier directories. The 1841 directory has three William Evans. One was a medical doctor, one had a middle initial, G, and the other ran a porterhouse on Beekman. None of these seem to be the Welsh immigrant. Therefore, it appears that William arrived by 1844. This is important research information, for it would preclude immigrants who arrived after that date, or naturalizations significantly before that year.

Conclusion

Well, after all that, you probably think that city directories can do almost everything. No, of course not, but they do remain under-utilized by most family historians. They are:

- easy to use (alphabetical and printed)
- readily available (through libraries, on microfilm and on the Internet)
- comprehensive (designed to identify all the adult males in a location)
- full of names (listing 5,000 to 500,000 persons)
- good identifiers of people (occupations, addresses, wives, etc.)
- available for 200 years of history (from 1800 to 2000)
- created more frequently than most records (annually for most cities)
- an original record (created at the time families were living)

With all that, what more could one ask from a record? No, they don't tell you the father of the person (unless he is living there too). No, they don't tell you when the person was born (but sometimes they tell or suggest when he died). No, they don't put family groups together for you (but they often identify adult children, if they still lived near the parents).

All together, that sounds like a pretty good batting average for a single record. Next time you find an urban ancestor, consider using those city directories a bit more thoroughly. In fact, go check out your family tree right now for city dwellers. Then consider what you still want to learn about them. Some of that information may be available to you in a city directory.

Read More About City Directories

In addition to the online articles cited above, the following printed sources can aid your understanding and use of city directories.

Remington, Gordon Lewis. "Research in Directories" in *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, 3rd ed., Loretto Dennis Zwucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, eds., Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2006.

Spear, Dorothea, N. *Bibliography of American Directories through 1860*. Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1961.

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