

GenGuides | CITY DIRECTORIES

by Genwriters | Who Lived Where and When?

City directories are a valuable yet often underutilized resource in genealogy research. They can provide solid clues for ancestor tracking and contain information about the community in which your ancestors lived. The first city directories began to appear in American cities in the late 1700s and became commonplace by the end of the nineteenth century when rural citizens as well as urbanites had their own directories. City directories gained popularity in the 1800s. They were created primarily for the business community to help businesses learn about and contact their customer base and to advertise.

The amount of detail in city directories can vary between publishers and locales. Details can vary between publication years of one city's directory. Regardless, a city directory attempted to gather the names of all inhabitants of a city or town. Researching city directories enables a genealogist to make comparisons between successive editions and track those elusive ancestors more frequently than census enumerations allow.



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HOW TO USE CITY DIRECTORIES

- ✓ City directories can be used to fill in the gaps between census years by showing the movement of families during the ten-year gap between census enumerations.
- ✓ Because city directories were commonplace at the end of the nineteenth century, they can be used to fill in the 20-year gap between the 1880 and 1900 federal censuses due to the missing 1890 federal census in most areas.
- ✓ City directories often provide employment information by indicating each employed person's job title and address of employment.
- ✓ City directories provide street addresses of citizens living in a town or city. Many census enumerators omitted noting street names and house numbers on the 1900 and 1910 federal census forms. City directories can fill in this missing information.
- ✓ Directories give historical information about the community in which your ancestor lived. Many city directories have information about churches, civic organizations, government entities, and a directory of businesses. This data is usually located in the back of the directory and can provide valuable background and social history information.
- ✓ You might be able to close in on a death date when you find spouses together in one year's city directory and the wife listed the following year as a widow.

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- ✓ A city directory can confirm your ancestor was in a particular place at a particular time.
- ✓ By examining chronological city directories, you can close in on an estimated immigration or migration date.
- ✓ City directories can help you locate the nearest church, school, or cemetery to your ancestor's home.
- ✓ Many city directories have maps of the towns and surrounding areas. Directories for large cities might contain ward maps. Don't overlook the possibility of this extant information in the city directory in your hands.
- ✓ Unlike census enumerations, names are listed in alphabetical order in city directories. For that reason, city directories have not been indexed, nor do they need to be.

INFORMATION TYPICALLY FOUND IN A CITY DIRECTORY ENTRY:

Name of head of household

Name of wife

Names of children in the household
(Sometimes only those children who were working are listed.)

Street name and house number

Occupation of everyone in the household

Work address for each person employed outside the home

A WORD OF CAUTION

As with any compilation resource, city directories should be used with caution. Information contained within their pages must be analyzed and scrutinized against other sources. A few points to keep in mind when using city directories:

Be sure to read the publisher's introduction. There can be valuable information here about how data was gathered for the tome, who is included and who is not, the timing of the polling of the citizens, and when the next issue might appear.

Accuracy may be an issue. The source of data might be door-to-door solicitation or the information may have been retrieved from voter registration rolls.

The year on the cover of city directories is most often the publication date, which is not necessarily the year the information was collected. Keep in mind that a city directory carrying a date of 1896 was most likely assembled during the previous year (1895). Try to determine the date the community was canvassed for the city directory you are examining.

Abbreviations are used in city directories to save space, and therefore printing costs. Be sure to make a copy of the legend that accompanies the city directory or you may get home and wonder what all those abbreviations really mean.

If you can't find your ancestor in a city directory, don't forget to check the back of the directory for a listing of those names received too late for inclusion in the alphabetical listing.

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WHERE TO FIND CITY DIRECTORIES

City directories are found in a variety of repositories. Many original copies of city directories have weathered the years and can be found in local repositories in your research area. Ideally, the city directories for your research area have been microfilmed. More and more digitized images are appearing on the Internet making them more accessible than in the past.

Before searching for city directories in your research area, you might want to first determine if one existed for the area. City Directories of the United States of America, a web portal located at on the web at <www.uscitydirectories.com/>, attempts to identify all printed, microfilmed, and online directories, and their repositories, in the United States. This site will answer these questions: *Does a directory exist for a locality? If it does, where can it be found?* The site is searchable by state.

LIBRARIES ♦ Many local public and academic libraries hold city directories in their collections. To find a library in your research locality, the Library Spot web site at <www.libraryspot.com/librariesonline.htm> is an excellent starting point. After you locate a library, a quick check in their online library catalog will identify the extent of their holdings. You might, also, contact the library directly via email or snail mail to ask if they have city directories in their holding. Not all libraries catalog all items.

SOCIETIES ♦ Local historical and genealogical societies may have back issues of city directories and will make copies of requested pages, often for a nominal fee. To locate an

historical or genealogical society in your research area, visit the state pages at the U.S. GenWeb Project located on the web at <www.usgenweb.com/>. Most state pages include a list of societies with contact information and links to their web pages.

FAMILY HISTORY LIBRARY ♦ The Family History Library in Salt Lake City has many microfilmed city directories in its holdings. The online catalog can be searched at <www.familysearch.com> and the microform can be loaned to your local Family History Center.

CYNDI'S LIST ♦ The City Directories section at Cyndi's List, <www.cyndislist.com/citydir.htm>, has links to general information about city directories, to libraries with city directories in their collections, and to digitized images of city directories on the Internet. Cyndi's List is definitely worth a visit.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS ♦ A list of city directories held by the Library of Congress is available on their web site at <www.loc.gov/rr/microform/uscity/>. Searchable by state, the list contains thousands of city directories for all fifty states. This site is a valuable resource to identify if a city directory does indeed exist for your research area. Unfortunately, city directories at the Library of Congress are available for on-site searching only in their Microform Reading Room. The staff of the Library of Congress is unable to perform searches; however, they will provide a list of freelance researchers upon request.

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Many digitized city directories are available free on the Internet. How do you find them? Try Google <www.google.com/>. Type the following phrase, replacing the name of your city or town for the word "locale" in the search string: "locale city directory". Add the name of your state as well as the name of the city if the result provides too many "hits." Try it. You might get lucky. The following online city directories were "found" using this strategy:

BOSTON CITY DIRECTORIES

<dca.tufts.edu/features/bostonstreets/people/directories.html>

1840-41 BROOKLYN [NEW YORK] DIRECTORY TRANSCRIPTION

<yeoldedirectoryshoppe.com/1840Brooklyn.html>

ST. CLAIR COUNTY, MICHIGAN, CITY DIRECTORIES, 1871 - 1900

<www.sccl.lib.mi.us/michroom.html>

BUNN'S DIRECTORY OF NEENAH, WISCONSIN, 1905

<www.neenahlibrary.org/citydirectory.htm>

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS, CITY DIRECTORY, 1902

<www.uis.edu/archives/1902directory/polkinintro.htm>

CLAY COUNTY, MINNESOTA, ATLAS AND DIRECTORY, 1933

<www.info.co.clay.mn.us/History/1933_rural_directory.htm>

TRENTON, NEW JERSEY, CITY DIRECTORIES, 1844, 1859, 1877, 1881, 1882, 1900, 1920

<www.trentonhistory.org/directories.htm>

OSHKOSH, WISCONSIN, ONLINE CITY DIRECTORIES

<www.oshkoshpubliclibrary.org/citydirs.html>

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, CITY DIRECTORY TRANSCRIPTIONS AT U.S. GEN WEB

<www.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/pa/philadelphia/pcdyear.htm>