12. Enhancing Your Family Story - Adding Detail Using City Directories

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What is a City Directory?

Similar to phone books of the recent past, city directories list residents of a particular area and are usually published annually or biannually. The first city directories in the United States were published in Philadelphia in 1785. More cities were added through the rest of the 19th century, and by mid-century, they gave more information than just names and addresses. They might include information about the community churches, clubs, and organizations. They sometimes even include lists of deaths with the age of the deceased, family members, births in that year, and where former residents moved. (See Family Tree, Taylor, Maureen A., "The Genealogist's Guide to Directories").

What was the original purpose and history of a city directory?

They were a guide for businesses to find customers. The earliest ones may only name property owners, employed individuals (most excluded women), and socially prominent members of the community.

Types of directories:
Business directories: City directories may have business information within the main listings or in a separate section, but business directories only listed businesses. They are usually arranged not alphabetically, like a city or house directory, but by categories, such as dry cleaners or furniture stores, or in the case of one of my great grandfathers, cigar merchants. For many of these, the business had to pay to be a part of this directory and thus, they are not all-inclusive. They are also not available for all areas.

Criss-Cross Directories: This is a type of reverse directory. You look up the address to find the occupant. It contains both addresses in sequence (arranged alphabetically by street within zip codes), and phone numbers in numeric order. These can be helpful in tracing the history of a residence.

Trade directories:
"You also might find a directory of businesses in a single category that covers the entire county, such as *Seeger and Guernsey's Cyclopaedia of the Manufactures and Products of the United States* (several editions of which are available free through Google Books) or *Farley's Reference Directory of Booksellers, Stationers, and Printers in the US and Canada* (published since 1886; with various editions available on Internet Archive). Professional directories, which usually cover the whole country, list prominent professionals and tradespeople such as railway workers, doctors or lawyers." [1]

Telephone directories:
View the first phone book, from New Haven, Connecticut, dated 21 February 1878
(2 yrs. after Alexander Graham Bell made his first successful phone call) online at OldTelephoneBooks.com (http://www.oldtelephonebooks.com/pages/first_phone_book). It is a single sheet with 50 business subscribers and no addresses or phone numbers.

Helpful Historical Notes:

1- Many city directories include outlying rural areas, sometimes in a separate section.
2- Until the 1960s African Americans might have been included in a part other than the main section of the directory.
3- Early directories used cross streets because there were no house numbers, therefore it is very helpful to use maps in conjunction with your search.
4- Information for directories pre-1861 was obtained through a mailed questionnaire. If the subject didn't return their forms, they weren't in the directory.
5- Public sources were used to obtain information for directories after 1861 and there could have been more than one directory published within a city with different information in each! Make sure to check for more than one directory, especially in large cities.
6- Sometimes an address is listed with an "Old" Street name because street names changed over time.

City Directories Today: Bresser's, a common business directory, has an online presence in over three hundred US markets which offer unlimited access to

- Telephone and address information for your market area.
- Select key characteristics - locations, neighbors, and demographics.
- Identification of homeowners by the month they purchased their homes.
- Maps of customer locations to create delivery routes.[2]

Bresser's is only one of the city directories available today. Many others are found in the "City Directory Report," in the EDR LightBox, City Directory Super Library.[3] These online directories are available to businesses who pay to access your information for marketing purposes. Although they are not readily accessed by genealogists today, they will become important resources in the future.

[1]Taylor, Maureen A. "The Genealogist's Guide to Directories,"
https://www.familytreemagazine.com/records/directory/city-directories-genealogy/, Family Tree Magazine, Yankee Publishing Inc, 2022.
[2] Bresser's Information Services, "Online Directories."
[3] EDR Lightbox, "City Directory Report," database (https://edrnet.com/prods/city-directory-report: accessed 20 November 2019).

L. O. C. = Learning Opportunity Challenge: Start with recent ancestors and create a year-by-year timeline of addresses between known census records.

Why are they valuable to you as a family historian?

Directories include a summary of local information that can add to your family story including
- Brief local histories and historical context
- Street guides and location boundaries, sometimes full maps
- Population counts of the local city and sometimes surrounding areas
- Fire and police departments
- City and county officials, including courts and federal officers
- Local churches, with a separate list of clergy, by name
- Cemeteries
- Schools, Universities, sometimes with their staff members
- Hospitals, orphanages, homes
- Lodges, social organizations, and clubs, sometimes with members
- Local newspapers
- Places
- Occupations
- Women
- Neighbors and other relatives

(Adapted from Legacy Tree Genealogists, Legacytree.com, https://www.legacytree.com/blog/city-directories, "Helpful Hints for Searching City Directories)

Where can I find them?

- Family Search-Click Search, Catalog, Subject, City Directories, subject or place
- Ancestry.com, "U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995" has over 1.5 billion records, and you can hit them all at once by using the "City and Area Directories" collection. This collection is enormous, but it doesn't have everything.
- Fold 3
- My Heritage: https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-90100/compilation-of-published-sources
- Heritage Quest
- Internet Archive -begin with a basic search of city director or county directory
- Google Books-sometimes only show a snippet but can point you in a direction you may not have found otherwise.
- Linkpendium http://www.linkpendium.com/
- Cyndi's List http://www.cyndislist.com/directories/
- Don's List http://www.donslist.net/PGHLookups/DirM.htm

- If you can't find what you are looking for, call a library or genealogical society in the place your ancestors lived.
- The country's largest city directory collection is at the Library of Congress.
- The Family History Library in Salt Lake City has directories on microfilm, but they no longer rent out microfilm so focus on digitized collections available at a local Family History Center.

L. O. C. - Contact your local library or historical society to see what directories they have. OR use the library online resources to access a site you can't access at home.

Tips for Using City Directories:

1-Start at the beginning and review the cover and opening pages.   Below is a key to common abbreviations from Family Tree Magazine. Understanding these is an essential first step to understanding the clues you find. Each directory may have its own key, so take the time to explore it.

Common Abbreviations in City Directories [4]
• *b* or *bds*: boards, boarder

• *bkpr*: bookkeeper	• *lab*: laborer	• *res*: resides
• c or *cor*: corner	• *mdse*: merchandise	• *sch*: school
• *carp*: carpenter	• *mer*: merchant	• *off*: office
• *ch*: church	• *mkr*: maker	• *own*: owns, owner
• *clk*: clerk	• *nec*: northeast corner	• *sec*: southeast corner
• *col* or *col'd*: colored	• *nwc*: northwest corner	• *swc*: southwest corner
• *dom*: domestic (often used for a housewife)	• *phys*: physician	• *t*: tenant
• *fcty*: factory	• *prop*: proprietor	• *wid*: widow
• *gro*: grocer	• *r*: rents, rooms, resides	• *wkr*, *wks*: worker, works
• *h*: house, householder		

[4] Ibid, Family Tree

2-Try searching for multiple years.

If you can't find your people in two consecutive years, keep trying in the next year. Not all directories were published every year. Don't stop in the first directory within a single book, often many locale directories are within one book.

Work backward, year by year for each year your ancestor lived. Keep track of each mention of them, details of the listing, and source of information.

3- Use directories to find more records:
- The head of household is usually listed with the last name first. The spouse is listed in parentheses next to that. An "h" stands for home. These clues can lead you to look for **property records, deeds, etc.**
  - What if you know your ancestor was an immigrant and you find them in a city directory for the first time? That can give you a clue of a date to look for the **immigration papers.**
- If you are looking for **church records,** for example, look in the directory for churches they might have gone to.
- Maybe you know they were a member of a Masonic lodge, for example, that is sometimes indicated, and you can look for **-club and association memberships**
- They often show the person's **occupation or employer**, which is another great detail to add to your family story. If you already know your ancestor's occupation through a census, you can use a directory to find out more about their business.

L. O. C - Make a chart tracing your ancestor's occupation and employer for at least ten years. Go one step further and look up their place of employment in a local business directory.

Tricks for making the most of your research:
- Use surname, maiden or married names for your research subjects
- Use spelling variations and wildcards
- Skip forms and browse whole directories, indexes may not always be reliable-some skip entire sections
- Review additions, corrections and removals sections-these are added often right before or after publication
- Search street indexes which are in alphabetical order
- Use old maps in conjunction with Google Earth
- List the research subject with their addresses for as many consecutive years as you can.
- Make a chart for all the same surnames you find within each page of the directory.
- Use an Excel spreadsheet using different filters to see the data and record it at the same time using filters. See YouTube Genealogy TV, with Constance Knox for great instruction.   [Extract Ancestors from City Directories Using Ancestry or FamilySearch into Excel Spreadsheets](#)

L. O. C. - Break a Brick Wall using a City Directory!

More Resources:
Lee, Devon Noel. "How to Magnify Hidden Stories in City Directories,[www.FamilyHistoryFanatics.com](#), "Building A Heritage, OGS Annual Conference Syllabus, 2019.

Legacy Tree Genealogists. "Helpful Hints for Searching City Directories,"Legacytree.com, [https://www.legacytree.com/blog/city-directories](#).

Taylor, Maureen A. "The Genealogist's Guide to Directories," [https://www.familytreemagazine.com/records/directory/city-directories-genealogy/](#), Family Tree Magazine,Yankee Publishing Inc, 2022.

Tenant, Amie Bowser, "City Directories for Genealogy When There's Been a Loss of Vital Records," [https://thegenealogyreporter.com/?s=city+directories](#), The Genealogy Reporter, August 23, 2017.

[Using City Directories to Find Clues to Bust Genealogy Brick Walls](#) Family History Fanatics.