

City Directories: Their Genealogical Value

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What are they?

A yearly glimpse of an ancestor's life showing residence, occupation, place of business, and possibly lifestyle

"City directories, like telephone books, are directories of names; they are also very valuable in genealogical research. However, they are not finding aids. They provide genealogical information and can be considered as original records (created at the time of the event by a house-to-house canvas) even though they were reproduced as printed books." (Printed Sources, pg. 7)

"In many cases the city directory predates the mandatory recording of other vital records." (Family Chronicle, March/April 1998, pg. 34)

What kind of information might they contain?

Name of employed individuals and heads of households

Young adults who have entered the work force but may still be living at home

Indications of a death, esp. a husband as the wife will be listed as "widow of"

Possible family conditions such as divorce when two people, known to be married, are listed at different addresses

Deaths occurring during the year prior to the publication of the directory

Husband's and/or wives' names

Names of those who may have moved and often where they moved to

Households owning telephones

Landlords' names

Lists of churches, cemeteries, societies, schools, local officials

Short history of city and/or map of town

Advertisements and listings of local businesses

"Advertisements in older directories can greatly enhance our knowledge of the times in which our ancestors lived and can create new possibilities for seeking additional records and sources of data." (Witcher, Ancestry Magazine)

Variant spellings of surnames

Ethnicity of some individuals

Identify photos

Find streets that no longer exist

Where do I find them?

Online:

Cyndislist.com

Ancestry.com

InternetArchive.org

Google Books

Library of Congress

HathiTrust.org

USCityDirectories.com

Fold3.com

Mocavo.com

and more

Offline:

Local public libraries where your ancestors lived

Family History Library (book, film and fiche)

State libraries and archives

University libraries

Library of Congress
Historical society libraries

How are they used for genealogical research?

Trace a family's whereabouts

To build families

Determine arrival in or departure from a certain location

Estimate marriages and deaths of family members

“The Years in which ancestors appear and disappear in directories lead to many other areas of research including census records, vital records, newspaper files, passenger ship lists, naturalization records and cemetery records.” (Family Chronicle, May/June 1999, pg 9)

Learn about daily life

Identify photos

Enhance your understanding of the place your ancestors lived

Help with census research or as a census substitute

Find streets which no longer exist

Follow migration trails by viewing the ads in the directory

How do I record directory information in my genealogy program?

Choose the facts Residence and/or Occupation and record information

Add the information to notes where it can be viewed as a timeline

Sources to Learn More

***Remington, Gordon Lewis. “Directories.” from *The Source* by Luebking, Sandra Hargreaves and Loretto Dennis Szucs, eds.

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~pubteam/TheSourcePDF/directories_final.pdf

**Creative Gene Blog: What's In A City Directory?

<http://creativegene.blogspot.com/2007/05/whats-in-city-directory.html> [This blogger has a whole series of blog entries on the different aspects of city directories. Definitely worth reading!]

*Robbins, Miriam J., “Welcome to the Online Historical Directories Website”, scroll to bottom and click on Articles. There is a list of articles (some out of date links) all relating to city directories. <https://sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectoriesite/Home/articles>

[Analyzing City Directories](#) - from the Board for Certification of Genealogists - Skill Building - May 1996

Ancestry.com. “Start Hunting! Six Things to Find in City Directories”

https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com/Content/researchAids/city_directories.pdf

Crandall, Ralph J. Ph.D. “The Value and Scope of City Directories.” *Ancestry Magazine*. Jul/Aug 2001, pages 51-54. <http://tinyurl.com/yafapoqy>

Luebking, Sandra Hargreaves and Loretto Dennis Szucs, eds. *The Source*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry Incorporated, 1997, 382-410. [Note: Chapter 8: Directories-available online at Ancestry.com's Wiki]

Marks, Kenneth R. “Researching City Directories: How to Use Internet Archive.” YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=YiRxbOkT_f0 [Note: There are many YouTube videos on using directories for research; this is just one but this one explains how to use it with Internet Archive which is probably a new website for many.]

Meyerink, Kory L., editor, *Printed Sources*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry Incorporated, 1998.

Meyerink, Kory L., AG. "The City Directyory...Census Substitute, Census Supplement, and So Much More." <http://studylib.net/doc/7788713/cdbibliography> [Ed. Note: this URL does work but it has to be copied and entered just as it is printed]

"RootsWeb's Guide to Tracing Family Trees: Guide No. 20: City Directories and Newspapers." <http://www.rootsweb.com/~rwguide/lesson20.htm>

Sittner, Kathi. "City Directories." Ancestry Magazine-7/1/1995, Jul/Aug 1995, page 26-27. <http://tinyurl.com/ybcasxb7>

Witcher, Curt B. "Using Directories for Genealogical Research." Ancestry Magazine-9/1/1996, Sep/Oct 1996, pages 30-33. <http://tinyurl.com/ycqw7cd9>