

How to Magnify Hidden Stories in City Directories



Background

The first telephone "book" was published in February 1878 in New Haven, Connecticut with 50 names on a sheet of cardstock;¹ however, a certain type of book pre-dates the phone book. These resident lists involved frequent canvassing of a city or rural area for the names of individuals.

The Inhabitants of London in 1638, is considered the first encompassing city directory because it listed the names of individuals in 93 out of the 107 parishes in London.² From that date onward, city and county directories began as a directory of tradesmen in the 1700s in England, most commonly in London and Dublin. By 1792, England's city directories included heads of households in addition to merchants.

In the US, the first printed city directories are *Macpherson's Directory for the City and Suburbs of Philadelphia*, published November 16th, 1785 and *The Philadelphia Directory*, by Francis White, first issued 13 days later.

In 1786, the *Macpherson's Directory* received credit for numbering houses for the first time in American directories. Sadly, his numbering system assigned number in order as they appeared on one side of the street and then continued to increase as he went up the other side of the street. So house 20 could be across from house 350. Thus, this system was not wholly adopted.

Thanks to directories that focused on informing an area of where shops and tradesmen were located and eventually was a tool for sales personnel and merchants to contact the resident in the with purchasing power (adults, regardless of their head of household status) in a particular area, these books help us research our ancestors more frequently than census enumerations.

FURTHER READING

1. Zasky, Jason. "The Phone Book: The Curious History of the Book That Everyone Uses But No One Reads." *Failure Magazine*. October 17, 2010.
2. Sutton, Philip. "Direct Me NYC 1786: A History of City Directories in the United States and New York City." *New York Public Library*. June 8, 2012.
3. Vuolteenaho, Jani. "Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming." *Routledge*. Mar 2, 2017.

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Hidden Stories in City Directories



Where to Find City Directories

Many libraries, repositories, libraries, and genealogical societies have city directories in physical forms. Before you head to an off-line site, check out the books online. You might have to type:

[city or county] + "City Directory"

- Google Books: books.google.com/
- HathiTrust: www.hathitrust.org/
- Internet Archive: archive.org/
- The New York Public Library www.nypl.org/
- WorldCat: www.worldcat.org/

When the above turn up empty, turn to commercial and private online city directory

- Ancestry.com: search.ancestry.com/search/category.aspx?cat=135
- Fold3.com: <https://go.fold3.com/citydirectories>
- United States Online Historical Directories
sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectorysite/Home/usa
- Don's List: www.donslist.net/PGHLookups/DirM.htm

When all else fails, the go off-line and visit a physical site and handle the city directories.

What Can You Find in City Directories

City directories place your ancestor in a time and place with these possible details:

- Place of residence
- Occupation
- Employed women
- Home Ownership
- Spouses
- Place of employment
- Business names/address
- Place of Origin
- Religious Affiliation
- Race

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How to Search For Your Ancestors in City Directories

- In addition to a surname, search for ancestors under:
 - Maiden and Married Name
 - Potential name errors:
 - Given Name Swap (esp. for names like Lewis William or Harrison Davis)
 - Spelling Variations
- When using online forms:
 - Use name plus sounds like searches
 - Use wildcards
 - Skip the forms and browse
- Skip the search forms:
 - Not all online city directories are searchable through a form.
 - Some searchable indexes skip entire sections of a page from poor OCR scans and thus are not in the index.
- Pay attention to the abbreviation guides
 - **r** could mean 'road,' 'rear', 'rents'
 - **b** could mean 'boarding; or 'beside'
- Review **Additions, Corrections, and Removals** section - This section contains information gathered right before publication but after the canvassing of the area for the book.
- Search the **Street Index**
 - Every street is listed in alphabetical order
 - Below the street name, every house is listed in numerical order
 - Beside the house number, you'll find a list of who the head of the household is (and no one else)
- Search the **Business Directories and Listings**

Hidden Stories in City Directories



How to Find the Hidden Stories

If you only look for your ancestor, you're missing more details about their life and their community. If you don't compare one city record entry to another, you're overlooking even more stories and details

- Pay attention to all the ancestors you find in a directory (male and female).
 - Are they all living in the same place?
 - Are they living near the previous address?
 - Are they on opposite ends of a city?
- Pay Attention to changes to your ancestor:
 - What economic information can you gather from their job changes?
 - If their residence changes, did they actually move? If so, where?
- Search the **Street Index**
 - Discover who else is living at the residence of your ancestor?
 - Pay attention to the names listed at an address across many city directories.
 - When did the resident's name changes, what happened?
 - Marriage
 - Death
 - Migration
 - Pay attention to the neighbors listed on the street:
 - Do they witness your ancestor's civil actions (court cases, marriage, land purchases, pallbearers)
 - Do they marry?
 - Are they relatives?
 - Look at individuals on cross streets and streets behind your ancestor's street. Backyard and corner street individuals can be related or relevant to your ancestor's story.