City Directories Help Resolve Conundrums

By Marilyn Thomsen

marilynthomsen@gmail.com

WHAT ARE CITY DIRECTORIES?

Published in the United States since the 1700s. Foreign directories also exist. They provided a way for people to connect, to find businesses and organizations. Printers promoted them as boosters. Use them to help resolve conundrums and construct family relationships.

They usually came out every year or two. Format and content varied by region, time period and publishers. Most list people by surnames; some arrange by address or have a "cross listing" by street in the back. Residents may be listed separately from businesses and organizations. Some have a historical summary of the area.

START by looking at the table of content and introductory text. Note the page for abbreviations.

NEXT Look for the first and last time your ancestor is listed.

FOLLOWUP with Cemeteries, Churches, Social Organizations and Businesses where individuals worked.

USE A FORM to collect information and recognize what information you have. A sample form can be found here.

Form for recording directory information

Directory	Date	Page	Street Number	Street Name	Occupant's Name	Occupant's Occupation

WHERE ARE THEY?

FamilySearch and Research Publications microfilmed 336 cities and regions from the late 1700s to 1935. These films have been shared by FamilySearch. FamilySearch may direct you to other

sites to see the information. Look in the Catalog by locality. Their BOOK database search is difficult to narrow for specifically located directories.

Databases directory locations

A helpful directory that has identified directories not only in the U. S. A. but also in foreign countries is **http://www.uscitydirectories.com/index.html**. At this writing, I found the search dropdown boxes not working, but scrolling down to use the map got me right in. Another approach is to use **https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Directories** FamilySearch Wiki pages for state links has helpful information and links to the City Directory Database. This site lists the year and the repositories for directories.

Formerly the Online Historical Directory <sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectorysite> had links to city directories on free and subscription websites. However, since a 2017 platform change, the site no longer works.

www.Ancestry.com has the largest collection **1822-1995**. Search for a name, and then use the ribbon to look in every year for additional information. The **1950-1993** collection is phone directories.

Fold3's collection is incomplete. Use other websites first.

MyHeritage's largest collection **U.S. City Directories** has been enhanced through AI extraction of the information in the microfilmed collection held by FamilySearch. Use this resource because they have combed through the data and links the searched individual and others that have been at the location before and after. MyHeritage is adding directories that are not in the US City collection.

Local Libraries have collections, and you can use interlibrary loan or look up services if necessary.

- Check the Library of Congress at www.loc.gov. Search for "{*the name of the city*} city directories."
- Try calling the library in the locality your searching and ask for a specific year and surname. They may send you a photo copy. Sometimes they require a written request through interlibrary loan.
- Locate a library in the region of interest using the *American Library Directory* published by R. R. Bowker Co., New York, available at all libraries. Also try the online searchable directory of libraries at libweb site at **>http://lists.webjunction.org/libweb<**
- In 1967 Research Publication Microfilmed sets of the 50 largest cities in the US that start in 1860 to 1935. The FHL has the complete set. Local research libraries may have part of the set. A list of what was filmed is in the reference *The Source*.

LIBRARY REPOSITORIES OF MICROFILMS:

- Family History Library
- http://www.uscitydirectories.com/
- Call Local Libraries
- Major Libraries are putting them online
- BYU offers interlibrary loans for family history research.
- www.cyndislist.com
- Google for a very specific title of a directory using advanced search.
- InternetArchive.com difficult to search by locality, use a specific name rather than locality.

1. When You Find An Ancestor In One Year-Don't Stop.

a. Some online collection will stop showing other years in the collection. Following a family through many years can give you a picture of location, family, and changes of occupation and financial circumstances, changes in street names. Use MyHeritage's connection of directories, but recognize that if the family moved, follow-up with other listings.

b. More than one publisher of city directory in the same city

   i. Some focused-on businesses, government entities, county properties. Others will include different segments, such as who died in the past year, where are the cemeteries, what are business names, cemeteries, hospitals, fraternal organizations, property owners.

   ii. One directory canvasser might have missed your family's resident, but the other did not. One directory may have noted widow of and death of spouse.

   iii. Maps showing location of cemeteries near your family.

2. **City directories help when records are missing,** such as deeds, 1890 census, death records.

   a. Some directories list land owners in the outlying regions.

   b. Directories list renters and in another are show property owners.

3. Women are listed in City directories.

a. If you only know a woman's married name, look for men with that surname in the city where she is living just before the marriage.

b. Directories may give you the first name instead of a nickname.

c. Look for her family in the locality.

d. Check for others with the same occupation of the husband. Men often marry the daughter of a boss or sister of an associate.

e. Follow a woman until she is shown to be a widow. The first couple of years directories will list her as widow of.

f. Some directories gave births and deaths.

       g. Look for family members living at the same residence. Check the cross directory.
4. **Some of the pre-Civil War era directories** contain a separate listing for the African American population.
5. **Use other records** in combination to get a broader picture.
6. **Timelines are extremely** valuable for organizing information.
       a. Track when family members appear in household because they are now employed, daughter-in-law appears when married, husband or wife die. They help track when the family moved into area, or leave area.
       b. When and how family members were employed or not employed.
       c. When the household changed due to occupation changes, marriages, deaths, purchase of home, move to new location, new street names. Widows who now live with their married daughters.
7. **Follow up on Occupation**
       a. Persons with the same surname and employer may be related.
       b. Schools- occasionally mentions teachers, and students.
       c. Learn what occupation positions are. Your ancestor may have moved up or down in his profession.

MODERN TOOLS ONLINE

       a. Steve Morse lookup for addresses in larger cities.
       b. Use reverse lookup
       c. Google maps can help see what the resident looks like. Go up and down the street to get a feel for the neighborhood.
       d. Photos of a house in Zillow might be different than Google Maps..

WHY IS A NAME NOT LISTED IN THE DIRECTORY?

- The individual was a child; minor children are not listed in the directories.
- The person compiling the directory missed him. Or he is in "names too late for inclusion." Then he would not be in the alphabetical order.
- He had no fixed address or employment.
- If you have an address for an ancestor and are wondering why they aren't listed, look for a section on "names refused." These are the people who for one reason or another didn't want to share their information with the directory canvasser. They are listed only by street address.
- Let the search tool help you cover more ground. (Note: For the new directory databases, which are grouped by state, you will need to search them through the main state page but can confine your search to one year by including that year in the appropriate field.)
- If they don't come up in a search, be sure to browse to that letter and look for yourself. OCR errors happen.
- Try cross-street indexes looking for relatives in the neighborhood and remarried widows at the same address.

- He was living outside of the City limits at that time. (The boundaries of the city change over the years.)
- He didn't pay to be included.
- Try another directory.

WHAT ABOUT THE BUSINESS INFORMATION?

Your ancestor's name may be listed with his or her business, as a society officer, a trustee of an institution or in any number of unexpected places.

- Business sections are arranged by type or business, then alphabetically by name of business
- Hospitals, institutions and schools
- Directories published 1916 and later, you will also find the wife's name listed in parentheses next to her husband; sometimes-adult children living at home.
- Death dates appear in the directories the year after the person's death.
- Train lines that serve the location

HOW DO YOU USE THE BUSINESS INFORMATION?

- Advertisements sometimes include photos of the business owner. Ads could have picture of the business
- Use the listings to locate churches, schools and mortuaries.
- Associations such as Masons keep records of member's deaths and biographical sketches
- Locate churches, schools and mortuaries.
- Use the listings of mortuaries and city map to determine which could have made arrangements for the remains of your relative.
  - o Go to a mortuary listing and they will tell how long in business and sometimes what name they did business under previously.

If a mortuary was in business near the period of interest, call and explain your request and the information you need.

Is it a home or apartment? Did the street number change, and they are in the same location. Steve Morse Census helps can assist with looking up large city address changes and looking for localities in large cities year to year.

Finally, take the time to write down your conclusions. Store them where others can see, and possibly contribute to resolving the riddle.

- These conclusions should be shared when adding a source to FamilySearch
- FamilySearch collaboration
- Ancestry.com Trees-notes