Using City Directories: Top 10 Tips and Tricks

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Prior to the invention of the telephone and the telephone book, most cities and even small towns had a directory listing information on its inhabitants. Even after the telephone became popular, and up through the 1920s and 1930s, many towns continued to publish these directories. City and business directories are filled with clues to help you break down brick walls and better understand your ancestors.

The City Directory: More Than Meets The Eye

When we say "directory" we mean much more than an alphabetical list of residents and their addresses. Here's the basic type of information you can often find in directories related to an ancestor:

- Name
- Spouse / Marital Status
- Occupation
- Address
- Employer

Keep in mind that a directory for a large city such as Buffalo, New York or Chicago, Illinois will offer more information than a small town directory. However, I have seen some small town directories that even list when residents died in the previous year, and the ailment or cause of death!

The Basic Elements of a City Directory

It may take some time for you to understand how information is presented in a city directory. Each directory and directory publisher uses a different format. Here is an example from the ***Brooklyn City and Business Directory, 1872-1873***, published by Lain & Company:

For the first entry, it reads "Duff Aachbild, employed in the milk business, home address on 5th Avenue, corner of 18th Street."

So how did I figure that out? First, above the listing is the table of abbreviations for this particular directory and I see that "h" means "house" and "c" means "corner."

ABBREVIATIONS, ETC.

acct. *accountant*; agl. *agricultural*; agt. *agent*; al. *alley*; art. *artificial*; av. *avenue*; asst. *assistant*; bldg. *building*; bldr. *builder*; B'way *Broadway*; c. *corner*; c. h. *custom-house*; clk. *clerk*; col'd *colored*; com. *commission*; comr. *commissioner*; ct. *court*; dept. *department*; depy. *deputy*; E. *east*; furng. *furnishing*; ft. *foot*; gds. *goods*; h. *house*; imps. *implements*; ins. *insurance*; insp. *inspector*; insts. *instruments*; kpr. *keeper*; la. *lane*; lab. *laborer*; manf. *manufacturer*; mer. *merchant*; mkr. *maker*; mkt. *market*; n. *near*; N. *north*; N. Y. *New York*; oper. *operator*; opp. *opposite*; pat. *patent*; pl. *place*; pres. *president*; r. *rear*; rd. *road*; S. *south*; sec. *secretary*; sq. *square*; supt. *superintendent*; surgl. *surgical*; tel. *telegraph*; treas. *treasurer*; W. *west*; wid. *widow*.

And how did I know that it was 5th Avenue and 18th Street, and not 5th Street and 18th Avenue? I consulted the **Street and Avenue Directory** at the end of the general directory.

Abbreviations in City Directories

The clue to solving many family history mysteries can be found in the abbreviations within a city directory listing. For most directories, there will be a table of abbreviations listed in the first few pages. The most common abbreviations are:

- **Ab.** – above (meaning the person could live above a store or business)
- **Bd.** or **Bds.** – boards (meaning the person is a lodger or boarder at the address)
- **Emp.** – employee
- **Opp.** – location "across" or "opposite" from an address
- **Prop.** – proprietor
- **W. or wd.** – widow or widower

Watch for Abbreviations of Street Names, Neighborhoods, Neighboring Towns, and Given Names!

You may encounter more than the common abbreviations listed above. Especially for large city directories where an attempt was made to save space and reduce printing costs, you may see a table of abbreviations for a variety of text. Some may not make sense unless you consult the table. Example: Hy for "Henry" and not "highway."

GenealogyInTime Magazine has an EXTENSIVE list of abbreviations at http://www.genealogyintime.com/dictionaries/city-directory-abbreviations.html .

Advertisements and Why They Matter

Many town or city directories were free or could be purchased at a nominal price. So how did the publisher make money? With advertisements of course! Often you will need to page through ads just to get to the listings. And then you may find ads at the top and bottom of each page.

In most directories, a list of advertisers will appear at the front or the end of the directory. If your ancestor ran a business check to see if it is listed. Advertisements can

also help us understand how our ancestors lived. What were the prices for basic goods? What were the fashions of the time period? What items were in demand?

Creating Timelines and Using the F.A.N. Club concept

Very often information found in a city directory will be "direct" in that it will state a name, occupation, address, etc. But you need to be a sleuth and start using the "indirect" information to harvest those genealogy clues.

Example: city directories are perfect for pinpointing a location for an ancestor in between census years. So for the missing 1890 US Federal Census, a city directory from 1890 or 1891 can solve many issues. If you have access to several successive years of a city directory, verify the address for the same ancestor. Did they move within the city? Did they move out of the city? Then consider plotting the information along a timeline including residence, occupation and place of employment.

In addition, if your ancestor owned a home and then moved to a new address, who owned the home previously OR who purchased the home from your ancestor? Remember that using the F.A.N. Club concept ("**F**riends, **A**ssociates and **N**eighbors"), property was often purchased by relatives not strangers.

Tips and Tricks for Clue Gathering with City Directories

1. **Search last name only**. The formatting for city directories is different than most records and using the "first name last name" search will prove frustrating.

2. **Browse images by surname.** Make sure you review the entire list of people with the same surname of your ancestor. Check the names against your family tree and you may be able to fill in some gaps.

3. **What is the date of the directory?** Keep in mind that information listed in a directory was often collected up to one year PRIOR to the date on the cover. A 1908 directory could show where your ancestor lived in 1907. Check the front/back pages of the directory to see how information was collected.

4. **Don't ignore the Table of Contents!** You'd be surprised at what is actually contained in a directory by consulting the "TOC." Often there will be street names, lists of churches, fraternal and charitable organizations, and more.

5. **Search by address.** Once you've located an ancestor at a specific address, use that address to search other directories in the same town or city.

6. **Beware address changes!** Many cities "reconfigured" their address schema or street grid at some point. This usually occurred as cities grew. The address listed in a directory in 1908 may not correspond to the current address.

7. **Understand the abbreviations.** While most abbreviations were standardized across directories ("w" or "wd" for widow, "bd" for "boarder"), check the front or back of the directory for a list of abbreviations.

8. **Can't find a directory for your small town?** Locate the nearest larger town or city and check that directory. Often you will find that smaller villages and hamlets are included in the directories of larger cities.

9. **Use Google Maps Street View.** Once you've determined an address, check out the current view on Google Maps Street View and see if the building still exists.

10. **Create Timelines!** Track your ancestor over time once you've collected information over the course of several years in a city directory.

Access US City Directories Collection at MyHeritage

The **U.S. City Directories** collection at MyHeritage contains 545,346,859 records in 25,468 directories. "City directories contain an alphabetical list of adult residents and heads of household, often with their spouse, with addresses and occupations and additional information. This collection is a huge genealogical compilation from 25,468 city directories published in 1860-1960 across the United States, created exclusively by MyHeritage using advanced machine learning technologies developed specifically for this purpose. It comprises 1,3 billion individual records that have been consolidated (to reduce duplication) to hundreds of millions of aggregated records, each featuring the same individual who lived in the same set of addresses during a span of years."
https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10705/us-city-directories

Resources

- **City Directory Abbreviations – GenealogyInTime Magazine**
  http://www.genealogyintime.com/dictionaries/city-directory-abbreviations.html

- **Google Maps Street View**
  https://mapstreetview.com/

- **MyHeritage City Directory Collection**
  https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10705/us-city-directories