

City Directories – A look into your ancestor’s lives

City directories are a great resource for information about our ancestors. They can be used as a census substitute, tracking ancestors as they migrated around town or across the country, and can also provide historical context during your ancestor’s lifetime. Finding information about where they lived and what they did can provide clues for searching for more information about them.

There is no consistency in what was published in a city directory and what wasn’t. It was all about what the printer could afford for that area. Businesses bought advertising in city directories and salespeople purchased them which provided the printer with revenue. Larger cities often have more information than smaller cities. Larger cities are more likely to include smaller surrounding cities.

Using the city directory

- Confirm on the title page who published it and when. Directories were often published the year after they obtained the information.
- Check the index to see where information is located in the directory. These are typically located near the beginning of the directory.
- Check the abbreviations at the front of the names section to understand what abbreviations next to your ancestor’s entry means.
- Check variations of spelling of your ancestor’s name – correct spelling was optional and often depended on who collected the information.
- If possible, search for your ancestor’s address to see who all lived there. MyHeritage and Ancestry both support this.
- Read the town’s history for additional clues about your ancestor’s life.
- Use the city directories to create a timeline of your ancestor’s life.
- Small Towns may be included with a nearby larger town directory

What you may find:

- Historical Information about the town.
- Local, State, and National government information.
- Some city directories will have pictures of the city and/or pictures of buildings in the town.
- Maps of the city.
- A list of businesses and information about the businesses.
- Locations, meeting times, and general information about churches and societies.
- List of newspapers, churches, general social activities for your ancestor.
- Occupations & business addresses
- Advertisements with information about what your ancestor’s may have bought.
- Where your ancestor lived
- Street and Avenue list – list of street name changes.
- Women may be listed with their husbands, as widows, on their own, or not at all.

Where to find them:

Ancestry.com: <https://www.ancestry.com>

FamilySearch: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3754697>

Fold3.com: <http://www.fold3.com>

Cyndi's List: <https://www.cyndislist.com/directories>

Historical Directories Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectoriesite/>

Google Books: <http://books.google.com> – search for city directories & a location

Linkpendium: <http://www.linkpendium.com/usa-genealogy/>

MyHeritage: <https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10705/us-city-directories?s=175437652>

Archive.org – <http://archive.org>

Heritage Quest – can usually be accessed through your local library

Info on City Directories:

Direct Me NYC 1786: A History of City Directories in the United States and New York City

<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/06/08/direct-me-1786-history-city-directories-US-NYC>

United States Directories: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Directories

City Directories: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/City_Directories

Facebook Group – Historical City Directories