

Using City Directories

By Lisa Gorrell

City Directories are wonderful resources for pinpointing where your ancestors were in the years between the decennial censuses. City Directories vary from year to year and might list any of the following (depending on the time frame):

- Resident's name, address, occupation, work address, wife's name
- Businesses
- Government agencies and officers
- Schools, administrators, teachers
- Military personnel
- Post offices, churches, courts, banks, and hospitals
- Lists of benevolent, literary, and scientific societies, associations, and social clubs & officers
- Lists of periodicals and newspapers
- Historical descriptions of the place they cover, and a of local industries and resources
- 19th-century county directories usually give a brief description of local communities

In the past, directories helped researchers using the non-indexed census to better find their ancestors. Now with wonderful indexes of the census, use the city directories to learn more about your ancestor.

City Directories can also help you jump start into other records. If the ancestor lived at the same address for many years, he might own the house. Check the land records. If the ancestor disappears and the next year a woman is listed as "widow of" then check death records for the ancestor. If a female is listed and then disappears, perhaps she has married. Look for a marriage record. Directories were also published for smaller towns and counties including farms. Don't think that just because your ancestors never lived in a city that you might not find a directory.

Where to find City Directories:

Libraries:

- Local & county libraries in the area of research
- State Libraries and Archives. California State Library in Sacramento has extensive collection of California cities.
- Sutro Library in SF has hard cover of California cities, microfilm of US cities: melvyl.edlib.org
- CGS Library has hardcover SF, Oak, & other city directories: 2201 Broadway, Oakland.
- Steve Harris has extensive collection of hardcover books of US directories. 2201 Broadway, Oak. see <http://www.californiaancestors.org/> calendar for info or contact him: wizard848@earthlink.net

American repositories with large collections of city directories include:

- Library of Congress, Washington D.C., <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>
- American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA, <http://www.americanantiquarian.org>
- DAR Library, Washington, D.C. <http://www.dar.org/library/default.cfm>
- Family History Library, Salt Lake City, UT <http://www.familysearch.org>
- New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, MA <http://www.newenglandancestors.org>
- Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana <http://www.acpl.lib.in.us/>
- Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois <http://www.newberry.org>
- New York Public Library, New York City, NY <http://www.nypl.org/>

Websites (free):

- Cyndi's List: a good place to start. Articles and databases.
<http://www.cyndislist.com/citydir.htm>
- City Directories of the United States of America. Lists of repositories that have city directories. (Not a complete list) <http://www.uscitydirectories.com/>
- Search your city with the word "directory" in your favorite browser. Many public libraries have digitized city directories.
- Primary Source Microfilm, an imprint of the Gale Group. They sell microfilm and their list helps you know which cities have microfilmed city directory.
<http://microformguides.gale.com/>
- Distant Cousin. Images & extractions. <http://www.distantcousin.com/Directories/>
- National Archives circa 1930 census. <http://www.archives.gov/genealogy/census/1930/city-directories.html>
- San Francisco City, Social & Phone Directories.
<http://www.sfgenealogy.com/sf/sfdata.htm#sfdirs>
- The Genealogy Register. <http://genealogyregister.com/citydirectories/index.html>
- Old Directory Search. <http://www.olddirectorysearch.com>
- Randy Seaver's blog about city directories at Internet Archive. These are books scanned by Google Books. <http://rainydayreadings.blogspot.com/2009/04/city-directories-on-internet-archive.html>
- Genealogy Today. http://dir.genealogytoday.com/city_directories.html
- Minneapolis, MN. Hennepin County Library,
<http://www.hclib.org/pub/search/specialcollections/minneapolisishousehistory.cfm>
- Internet Archive. <http://archive.org/search.php?query=city%20directory>

Websites (fee):

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

Ancestry. <http://www.ancestry.com> Their collection has grown! Check out the U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989 collection and browse by state and city.

CompuGen Systems. Paid search in Ohio and Indiana city directories. <http://www.compugensystems.com>

Ebay. City Directories for sale. <http://ebay.com>