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# City Directories as Genealogy Tool

— Walt and Hope —

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# History

**1588** – first city directory was created in London. Just list of Freeholders

Earliest directories in the American colonies were in New York and Baltimore.

By the mid-19th centuries many cities had directories, and they grew until the early 20th century when they were superseded by the telephone book.

# History

Since often published annually, city directories are a tool for genealogists to fill in the gaps between census years and substitute for the missing 1890 census

The 19th and early 20th century directories were primarily limited to listing the male heads of household, but as time passed, spouses' names were included. As children came of age and entered the workforce, their names would appear.

# What can you find in a city directory -1-

- **An alphabetical listing of inhabitants** (arranged by name, address, and occupation)
- **A street address listing** (arranged by address, name, and occupation)
- **Widows, working women, and adult children at home**
- **Ward maps**

# What can you find in a city directory -2-

- **Street locator, including cross streets**
- **Street name changes**
- **Removals (sometimes destinations)**
- **Business and index to advertisers**
- **Addresses and maps of churches, schools, funeral homes, cemeteries, post offices, courts, hospitals, benevolent associations, newspapers**

# What can you find in a city directory -3-

- Many early directories listed only businesspeople.
- Some directories list wife in parenthesis.
- Whether a woman is a widow (including name of husband)
- List of marriages and deaths of previous year
- Death date

# Ways to make the most of city directories - 1

- **Title Page** –capture image of the title page so you can create a source citation. Pay attention to the page number of the information you find (page number not the digital capture frame number).
- **List of Abbreviations** – Most directories have this page. Will define “r” for “residence” and “bds” for “boards.” May include abbreviations for major employers in area.
- **Additions Corrections Removals** – Most directories have a page of “too late to have made it into the alphabetical listing” names. Be sure to check this

# Ways to make the most of city directories -2

- **Search by Address** – you may find in-laws and other related people at same address. May also help to find a badly butchered surname spelling.
- **Street Directory** – Streets may have changed names. Section in directory may show old and new names with date of change. May help prove that two people with “different” addresses are the same person.
- **Year by Year** – don't just look for one year. Find as many as you can and track movements and progress over time.

# Ways to make the most of city directories -3

- **Removed To** – you may find this after someone's name indicating that they have moved and where to.
- **Death Dates** – some directories will indicate date of death of someone and perhaps age. If such information is not provided, it's possible to infer approximate date of death when a woman appears listed as "Ahern, Rebecca (widow)" or "(wid of Henry)"
- **Alternate Spellings** – consider all alternate spellings. Even members of the same household may be listed under an alternate spelling of the surname.

# Ways to make the most of city directories -4

- **Find Widows** – When a widow “disappears” search by her address. AHERN, Rebecca, baker, 1790 Folsom” in 1904 isn’t found in 1905, but by searching for address you might find “MACY, Rebecca, baker,1790
- **Narrow timeframe to search for marriage records:** Folsom” and a listing for “MACY, Orlando” at the same address.

# Ways to make the most of city directories -5

- **Advertisements** - types of business where ancestor may have worked
- **Churches by denomination with addresses.** Hint: Map nearest church of correct denomination to your ancestor's residence
- **Secret and Benevolent Societies** (Freemasons, Odd Fellows, Elks, Knights of Columbus, etc.)

# Ways to make the most of city directories -6

- **Cemeteries**
- **Schools**, sometimes with addresses and names of teachers.
- **Funeral homes**
- **Boarding houses**
- **Historical Images** – Check advertisements for photos of people or buildings that may no longer exist.
- **Dating Photographs**

# Ways to make the most of city directories -8

- **Save entire list of people with surname** – They may be related. You might not know now, but won't you be happy in the future when you are able to connect those names
- **Colored** – Depending on time and location there may be a separate section of the directory for “colored” persons, or they may be integrated into the general listings

# Where to find

- [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)
- HeritageQuest Online (at home via BCPL w/library card)
- [Archive.org](https://www.archive.org)
- [Fold3](https://www.fold3.com)
- [Google Books](https://books.google.com) [books.google.com]
- [Linkpendium](https://www.linkpendium.com)
- Donslist.net
- Online Historical Directories

# Additional Resources

- [Directories](#) - Digital Public Library of America
- [U.S. Directories](#) - Family Search Wiki
- [Directories](#) - Cyndi's List
- Sutton, Philip, Direct Me NYC 1786: A History of City Directories in the United States and New York City, [New York Public Library Blog, June 8, 2012](#)