City Directories: More than Basic Facts

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When one thinks of a city directory, it is typically viewed as a criss-cross directory, meaning that someone can look in the book under three categories: an individual's name, address, or phone number to locate cross-referencing data among these three categories. But city directories have not always been published in this format. They have undergone many incarnations over the centuries, providing varying details depending on the publisher and the deemed scope for a particular publishing year.

Background

The first city directory in the United States was published in 1785 for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Two publishers printed competing directories for that year: John Macpherson produced *Macpherson's Directory for the City and Suburbs of Philadelphia* and Francis White printed *The Philadelphia Directory.* Within a few years, directories were being printed for other cities by a variety of publishers with trade and businesses being the initial focus.

To acquire the data for these publications, questionnaires were left on the door and those who returned the notices in a timely manner would appear in the directory for the year. Those who were late in submitting information may be listed in the "Additions" section of a directory, or excluded entirely. In later years, questionnaires requesting information were mailed, and in more recent decades, data was compiled from phone books and other public information sources such as property assessor records. The preliminary pages of the specific directory may explain how the data was collected.

Publishers varied in how they handled business listings. Some had "Yellow Pages" sections similar to a phone book with businesses listed by industry, while others had a separate "Business Directory" section which could be alphabetical or, once again, organized by industry. Others had "Advertising" sections with ads of varying sizes. Businesses may not appear in a directory if they were delinquent in submitting their information or failed to pay a fee to be added to the volume.

Directories could cover the surrounding suburbs and counties as well as cities. The publisher defined the area covered within each volume, and the area could change each year. The title and preliminary pages can identify which, if any, surrounding towns were included. Another consideration was the definition of the city limits at the time of the publication as this might limit the scope of the directory. Over time, it became too expensive for publishers to produce volumes for large cities such as New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc., leading to sporadic publications beginning in the twentieth century for these metropolitan areas. Be mindful that the year of the directory is not when the information was compiled but rather the publication date, so the year is only a point of reference.

To determine what years a town or city appeared in a city directory, check the following sources:
- *City directories of the United States, 1902-1935.* Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1986-.
- *City directories of the United States, pre-1860 through 1900: Guide to the microfilm collection.* [Woodbridge, CT]: [Research Publications], [1983, 1984].
- Spear, Dorothea. *Bibliography of American Directories through 1860.* Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1961.

The Basics

Reading the preliminary pages of each directory is crucial to the use of the volumes as the content varied annually. These introductory pages can describe the scope of the directory, provide a table of contents, explain the organization of the volume, and define the symbols and abbreviations used within the entries.

The organization of the directory varied as well. Some volumes are organized alphabetically by surname, while others are alphabetical by the first letter of the surname. Certain cities are divided based on wards or boroughs then alphabetically by surname. Others have individuals separated from business listings while others have them intermixed. The more current editions are divided into name, address, and phone number sections.

Basic information found in a directory can include name, address, telephone, and occupation. Other facts have been collected over the years including place and address of employment, property ownership, and marital status.

More Than Basic Facts

When evaluating a directory, the facts listed may seem basic, but there are details that should be evaluated further, such as:

- Marital status

Marital status has been disclosed through the years by the wife's name appearing in parenthesis, a female being listed as Miss or Mrs., or the notation of "wid" for widow or widower.

- "Wid" notation

Search each year to determine the first year that the notation appears which will provide a timeframe for the spouse's death. The "wid" notation sometimes provides the name of the deceased spouse. If the "wid" note does not give the name of the spouse, then continue searching through the previous years to locate other individuals who resided at the same address, or to see if there are notations of the spouse's name in other volumes.

- An individual disappears

Check the "Additions, Corrections, and Removals" section to see if the person had been delinquent in supplying information or if they had possibly moved. Search subsequent years because some people are skipped for a number of reasons then reappear. Another option is to determine if other known family members are still listed in the directory.

Do not assume that the individual died, but if other family members remain, looking for death-related records is an option. If looking for a female of marriageable age, the next step may be to search for marriage records.

- Same surname and same address

Do not assume that individuals with the same surname residing at the same address are direct relations. Verify the relationship by seeking out other records such as census and vital records.

- Other individuals residing at the same address

Compile a list of those individuals who resided at the same address. Some of them could be boarders, family relations, future in-laws, friends, or coworkers. These people shared a dwelling at one time, therefore may also appear in documents together through life and should not be ignored.

- Property ownership

The "Abbreviations" section features a key to the abbreviations, codes, and symbols used within the entries. One of these notations can indicate whether the listed individual owns the property. Once ownership is determined, reviewing prior and subsequent directories can provide a timeframe for when the property was acquired and when the property was sold, leading a researcher to grantor/grantee indexes.

Through the years, many cities renamed streets or altered street numbers as the city developed. These changes mean that an individual could maintain residence on the same property but appear in the directory with a new street address. Indications that there are new street names or numbers include a statement in the preliminary pages, a "Street Directory" section providing the former and new street names, or notations within the individual entries.

Further Discovery Process

Though the content appears to be the same, the publisher would determine the scope of the directory. Some city directories had specialized "City Guide" or "Miscellaneous Directory" sections that provided an annual synopsis of local events. These included an accounting of the local government, social institutions, and businesses and industries. It was informative in chronicling the priorities of the community.

These sections were a snapshot in time of the community. Areas with mining interests would prominently feature information about oil companies or zinc companies. Port cities would have details about shipping companies and railroads. Cities with lots of commerce would chronicle the directors of the numerous industries. Military organizations and pension offices were featured following military conflicts.

The "City Guide" or "Miscellaneous Directory" sections provide helpful data that may be missing from other genealogical documents, such as:

- Religion

If a document provides a home address and states the family's religion, then review the "Church Directory" section of the directory, which is divided by religion, and compile a list of church addresses. Using a map, one can determine the closest church the family may have attended.

If a document names a religious officiate, then examine the "Church Directory" or "Ministers (Having Charges)" section of the directory to see with which religion or church the named officiate was affiliated. This could lead to church records for the family.

- Cemeteries

If unsure where an ancestor might have been buried, the directory for that time period may have a compiled list of possibilities in the "Cemeteries" section.

- Courts

Court systems have changed their designations in some localities. The "Courts" section can help a researcher determine if a Probate Court was in existence in a certain time period or if the Court of Common Pleas rather than the Circuit Court is the record owner. Knowing the name of the court for a specific time period can help in court record searches.

- Location

The "Street Directory" section lists and describes the location of city streets, while the "Wards" section details the boundaries for the wards within a city. Some directories feature maps of the city as well.

- Newspapers

Several cities had more than one newspaper publishing at the same time. Some were based on ethnicity, religion, or political stance (Republican or Democrat). The "Newspapers" section can help one determine which paper might have mention of an ancestor.

- Organizations

Based on the individual's interests, military experience, or trade, he or she may have been a member of an organization. There are a variety of "Societies and Associations" and "Trade Unions" sections based on subcategories such as secret societies, military associations, benevolent societies, ethnic societies, etc. These organizations maintained their own set of records. Based on the addresses of schools and colleges in the "Educational" and "College" sections, one can map out where an ancestor may have attended school, which could be followed-up with a search of alumni associations.

Access

Directories can be found in varying formats, such as microfiche, microfilm, printed books, and digitized online. Many libraries and archives maintain local print and filmed directories, while larger genealogical libraries, such as the Library of Congress and The Genealogy Center at the Allen County Public Library, have a more diverse directory collection. Online access offers indexes and images from differing cities, years, and publishers.

- Free Websites
  - Internet Archive <https://archive.org/>
  - Hathi Trust <https://www.hathitrust.org/>
  - Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) <https://dp.la/>
  - Search for local digital collections
- Subscription Sites
  - Ancestry <https://www.ancestry.com/>
  - Fold3 <https://www.fold3.com/>
- Centralized Directory Sites
  - Ancestor Hunt list of free directories <https://theancestorhunt.com/directories.html>
  - FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Directories>