Anatomy of a City Directory

Mary Kircher Roddy suggests that there is much more to searching these valuable resources than just the names

Search & Page List	Search Results & Help
Directories Home	**WELCOME to DonsList.Net**

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DIRECTORIES -- Almanacs, Businesses, Registers, Street Guides

Pittsburgh Area
AL AK AZ AR CA CO CT DE DC FL GA HI
ID IL IN IA KS KY LA ME MD MA MI MN
MS MO MT NE NV NH NJ NM NY NC ND OH
OK OR PA RI SC SD TN TX UT VT VA WA WV WI WY
International: Canada GreatBritain LatinAmerica FarEast

Arizona   Back to Top
1881 AZ Gazetter and Business
1888 Phoenix
1881 Tucson

Arkansas   Back to Top
1892

California   Back to Top
1859 1907 WomensClubs WW1 -HonorRoll 1918 -SelectiveServiceBoards
1876 Alameda County
1914 Richmond
Los Angeles 1893 1915 1916 1938 Phone 1951 Phone 1978 Phone
Oakland/Berkeley Area
1869-84 1887-89 1892-1904 1905-6 1907-9 1910-11 1912-15 1913 1920 1921 1923 1924 1928 1930 1933 1934 1935 1937 1938
1938 Address 1939 1940 1941 1967 1969
San Francisco Area
1861 1862 1863 1864 1865 1867 1868 1869 1872 1873 1876 1878 1879 1879 Biz 1880 1883 1885 1886 1887 1889 1897 1898 1899

Don's List (*www.donslist.net*) is an excellent resource for the Pittsburgh, PA area, but also many other cities.

When searching city directories online, it's so tempting to only look at the list of names. Search box on Ancestry.com, Fold3.com, and other sites with city directories make it so easy to type a name in the search boxes and go straight to the name in the directory. But there is so much more if you're willing to leaf through the pages!

Get familiar with the publisher's offerings. Generally the same publisher compiled the directories for a given city during a given span of time, so the book will be set up in roughly the same way from year to year. The supplementary material might appear toward the beginning of the book before the list of names or the names might be shown first, followed by the other data.

So what is the "other data?" Each directory is different, but some common items are:

Title Page – In the excitement of finding a name, it's sometimes easy to overlook the simple step of capturing the title page. On it you will find the exact title, publisher and date – all the information necessary to craft a source citation.

Maps – These may show the wards of the city, which might be helpful when trying to find someone on the census. You can take their address from the directory, plot it on the map in the book, and determine the ward number. Not every directory has maps, but some directories have descriptive text outlining the ward boundaries.

Schools – Many directories list the schools in the community

Where to find City Directories

Note: $ denotes a fee is required

- Ancestry.com – U.S. City Directories 1822-1995 – an OCR (Optical Character Recognition) collection of city and county directories from all states except Alaska. The Ancestry World subscription includes directories from the UK, Australia and Canada as well. (*www.ancestry.com*) $

- HeritageQuest Online – Many libraries have a subscription to HeritageQuest for library patrons to use at home, for free with a library card. One of the databases included is "U.S. City Directories 1821-1989" which uses the Ancestry.com search interface. This database has directories from all states except Alaska. – Free with library card. Also accessible through HeritageQuest Online: (*www.proquest.com/products-services/HeritageQuest-Online.html*) $

- Archive.org – this online library of free books has a collection of city directories. Search for "City Directory" plus your desired state name. Free

- Donslist.net – This site is a collection of miscellaneous databases in various categories. It's main focus seems to be on the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area, but includes many other localities. It has directories from 30+ states (some with only one, some with dozens), as well as international locations. (*www.donslist.net*) Free

- Online Historical Directories website – This site has links to directories in the US and internationally. Pick a country and then click down to the state and county. Note – these are links to directories, the directories are not held on the site. Several of the links are to DistantCousin.com and no longer work, but by using the Online Directories site, you'll learn whether a directory exists for a locality and then you can use the WayBack Machine (*http//archive.org*) to access DistantCousin.com. (*http://sites.google.com/site/online directorysite*) $ and Free, depending on link

- GoogleBooks – search for "city directory" and place name. Use advance search to limit to full view only if you only want to see books that you can look at online. A google book search may also show you where directories are available in libraries or online book-stores.

- Linkpendium – Site of genealogy links. Pick state, then county, then scroll down to "Directories" for links (*www.linkpendium.com*) Free or $ depending on link

- Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Directories Collection – pre-1901 directories. (*www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/directories-collection*) Free

Don't forget the library! Libraries, universities and archives may have what you are looking for in book form or on microfilm.

including elementary and secondary schools, both public and private, as well as colleges and academies. Compare the addresses of the various schools with your ancestor's address to determine which school they might have attended. Some directories even provide lists of teachers for each grade. You might find out the identity of Grandpa's second grade teacher, or establish the school where your great-aunt Mabel taught.

Churches – Most directories provide a list of churches and religious organizations. If you know your ancestor's religious preference, look through the listings to find the right church nearest his home. As with schools, this is another place where a map from the directory or other contemporaneous source will help. With this information, you've got the information required to seek out church records about your ancestor.

Secret and Benevolent Societies – Often an ancestor's obituary will list organizations he belonged to, and sometimes on the same page of the newspaper with the obituaries you might find "good-bye proclamations" to someone submitted by their "brothers" or "sisters" from a secret or benevolent society. The obituary may mention the parlor or lodge by name or number, but you should also search the listings in the directory, again armed with a map, to determine which group he attended. The directory information for societies details when and where they met. Does the organization still operate today? Do they have an archive or some central repository where chapter records are held? Follow up and you may learn a new thing or two about your ancestor.

Clubs, and Miscellaneous Societies – Just as your ancestor may have belonged to a fraternal organization, he may also have been in a club, or a work-related organization such as the

Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers or the Journeymen Bakers' and Confectioners' Union. Organizational records may exist in an archive somewhere. There also might be old organizational publications available, perhaps on GoogleBooks. Research in the newspaper of the day may yield some information about the group's activities. There are many places for follow-up research with clubs and other organizations.

Cemeteries – The county where you ancestor lived might have six or eight cemeteries today, but only two or three in the year she died. Check the cemetery listings in the directory for her year of death. They may help to narrow down a likely burial location.

Street Directory – Most directories have a listing of streets and cross streets, describing the directions of the roads and the address numbers for each block. Notations are made when streets changed names. By tracking this evidence from year to year, you may discover your ancestor with the "new" address didn't move after all – his street was renamed.

Directory of Householders – Some publishers, among them Caron's, included a Directory of Householders, listing by street the number of the building and the name of the occupant. You might find names of others living in the same building as your ancestor or recognize as neighbors the names you've found as witness on wills or other documents.

Removals, Changes, Alterations, Corrections, Omissions – No matter what you call it, each directory has a page or two of items which arrived too late to make it into the regular alphabetical position in the directory.

List of Abbreviations – Every single letter in a directory took ink and paper, so publishers used abbreviations to cut down on the listing length. One directory might have a simple quarter-page list of common abbreviations such as "bds" for "boards" and "h" for householder. Another directory might have a multi-page list of abbreviations for all the employers in the city. Regardless of how detailed the list, have it handy when you're trying to decipher the entry for your ancestor.

Read more than just your ancestors' names in the city directory. You can learn much about their world and discover clues for additional research. ☺

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