

Using City Directories for Genealogy Research

By Kimberly Powell
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For anyone researching ancestors in a city or larger community, standard **genealogical resources** often fall short. **Newspapers** generally mention only the influential, interesting or most newsworthy residents. **Land records** offer little help when researching renters. **Census records** don't tell the stories of individuals who moved multiple times between census years.

Cities, however, offer an invaluable historical and genealogical resource not available to those of us researching rural ancestors—namely, city directories. City directories offer anyone conducting family history research in a city or large town a nearly annual census of city residents, as well as a window into the community in which they lived. **Genealogists** all know the value of placing an ancestor in a particular time and place, but city directories can also be used to follow an individual's occupation, place of employment, and place of residence, as well as potentially identify life events such as marriages and deaths. Looking beyond the names of your ancestors, city directories also provide invaluable insight into your ancestor's community, often including sections on neighborhood churches, cemeteries, and hospitals, plus organizations, clubs, associations, and societies.

Information Often Found in City Directories

- Name and occupation of head of household (often men and female widows; later single employed females)
- Name of spouse (often in parentheses following name of husband; mid to late 19th century)
- Sometimes the names of children, often only those employed outside the home
- Street name and house number of residence
- Occupation
- Work address (if employed outside the home)

Tips for Research in City Directories

Abbreviations were often used in city directories to save printing space and costs. Locate (and make a copy) of the **list of abbreviations**, usually located near the front of the directory, to learn that "n" Fox St. indicates "near" Fox St., or that "r" means "resides" or, alternatively, "rents." Properly translating the abbreviations used in a city directory is essential for correctly interpreting the information it contains.

Don't miss the **late listing** of names received too late for inclusion in the alphabetical portion. This can usually be found located just before or after the alphabetical list of residents and may include people who had recently moved to the area (including those moving within the city limits), as well as individuals the canvasser missed on his initial visit. If you're lucky, you may find a separate list of individuals who migrated from the city (with their new location), or who died within the year.

What If I Can't Find My Ancestor?

Just who was included in a city directory was up to the discretion of that directory's publisher, and often varied from city to city, or over time. Generally, the earlier the directory, the less information it contains. The earliest directories may list only people of higher status, but directory publishers soon made the attempt to include everyone. Even then, however, not everyone was listed. Sometimes certain parts of town weren't covered. Inclusion in a city directory was also voluntary (unlike a census), so some people may have chosen not to participate, or were missed because they weren't home when the agents came calling.

Make sure you have checked every available city directory for the time period when your ancestors were living in the area. People overlooked in one directory may be included in the next. Names were also often misspelled or standardized, so be sure to check name variations. If you can locate a street address for your family from a **census**, **vital**, or another record, then many directories also offer a street index.

Where to Find City Directories

Original and microfilmed city directories can be found in a variety of repositories, and an increasing number are being digitized and made available online. Many may be available either in original format or on microfilm in the library or historical society that covers that particular locality. Many state libraries and historical societies have large city directory collections as well. Major research libraries and archives such as the Library of Congress, Family History Library, and American Antiquarian Society also maintain large collections of microfilmed city directories, for locations across the United States.

Over 12,000 city directories for cities across the United States, most from the collection of the Library of Congress, have been microfilmed by Primary Source Media as **City Directories of the United States**. Their online collection guide lists the cities and directory years included in the collection. The **Family History Library Catalog** also lists a large collection of city directories, most of which can be borrowed on microfilm for viewing at your local **Family History Center**.

Where to Find Old City Directories Online

A large number of city directories can be searched and viewed online, some for free and others as part of various subscription genealogy collections.

Large Online City Directory Collections

Ancestry.com has one of the largest online collections of city directories, with a focus on coverage between the 1880 and 1900 U.S. federal census, as well as 20th century data. Their U.S. City Directories collection (subscription) offers good search results, but for best results browse directly to the city of interest and then page through the available directories rather than relying on search.

The **City Directories** collection online at subscription-based website Fold3, includes directories for thirty large metropolitan centers in twenty U.S. states. As with the collection at Ancestry.com, better results are achieved by browsing the directories manually rather than relying on search.

The **Historical Directories Searchable Library** is a free website from the University of Leicester in England, with a nice collection of digitized reproductions of local and trade directories for England and Wales for the period 1750–1919.

Additional Online Sources for City Directories

A number of local and university libraries, state archives and other repositories have digitized city directories and made them available online. Use search terms such as "city directory" and [your locality name] to find them via your favorite search engine.

A number of historical city directories can also be found through online sources for digitized books, such as **Internet Archive**, **Haithi Digital Trust**, and **Google Books**.

<https://www.thoughtco.com/city-directories-for-genealogy-1422322>

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Burns Arvilla (wid Duane) r2480 C
—Delmar (Kath) h1440 3d av apt 1
—Jesse (Edna) millwkr r2611½ Myers
—John clk Currier Bros Mkt r RD6 box 2160
Bucone Al (Mary A) carp h4937 Virginia av
—Mary A Mrs emp Smith's New Method Lndry & Laundrette h4937 Virginia av
Burriss Alveta Mrs cash Pac Tel r RD4 box 1888c
—Buddy L swtchmn WPRR r Polk
—Faye Mrs prsr Oroville Laundry & Dry Clns r1820 Fort Wayne
—Irvin W (Faye) millwkr High Sierra Pine Mills r RD2 box 729
—Orville R swtchmn WPRR r Thernalito
—Willard I (Faye) sawyer h4667 Virginia av
Burror Elden slsmn Frank's Used Cars r2493b Quincy rd
Burrow Caroline M Mrs h2415 Fort Wayne
Burt Jos eng WPRR r1460 Lincoln
—Lydia J nurse Oroville Curran Hosp r RD4 box 1941
Burton Robt T (Jerry) emp Sacramento Box & Lbr h3165 Columbia
Burton's Shoe Store (Herald T Sedzwick) 1359 Myers
Burwell Geo R (Clara A) mgr job printing Oroville Mercury-Register r RD5 box 2150
Bush Erwin H (Juanita T) millwkr High Sierra Pine Mills h4970 Palermo rd
Bushey Wm J h815 Montgomery
Bushman Emory (Pauline) opr County Dept Pub Wks h3647 Ashley av
Butler Deena waitr Radio Tower Restr r El Medio
—Gerald E (Hattie) condr WPRR h4751 Palermo rd
—Irving A (Lenore; Blackie's L & B Exchange) r Arbol and Hilldale
—John D h2250 Myers
—Lena A (wid Elbee J) h2127 Hewitt av
—Lenore B Mrs chf clk County Health Dept r1958 Montgomery
—Peggy slswn Ben Franklin Stores r RD5 box 2085
—Viera Mrs mail clk First Natl Bk r2220 A
Butte Copying & Blueprint Co (Harry Harper Richd O Richards) 1331 Huntoon
—County Central Labor Council Mrs Virginia Davis sec 1365 Huntoon
—County Memorial Museum 2360 Montgomery
BUTTE COUNTY TAXPAYERS ASSOCIATIONS, Thomas H Sweeney Exec Sec, 1378 Myers, Tel 999
BUTTE COUNTY TITLE CO, Donald W Baldwin Pres, Mrs Irene Clemes Sec-Treas, 1427 Huntoon, Tels 1713 and 1714 (See page 49 Buyers' Guide)

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OROVILLE CITY DIRECTORY (1955)
BUTTE RADIATOR & BATTERY SERVICE (Bud G West)
Sales and Complete Service, Radiators and Batteries,
Saturday's Till Noon, PO Box 1111, 1925 Ora Vista (Oroville By-Pass) Tel 687
Butterfield Georgia D studt r2363 B
—Gertrude A (wid Geo A) h2363 B
—Ida Mae studt r2363 B
Butts Alex (Carolina M) lab High Sierra Pine Mill r RD4 box 1740f
Byerly Fred S clk County Aud r Chico
Byhre Chris P r1875 Grace
Byrd Harry lab r1345 Oliver
Byrne Homer M Sealer of Weights r Chico
—Selma F E (wid Jas E; Regina Rest Home) h878 Montgomery
Cabitto Nick (Jeannie) mach WPRR h2478 D
CABORN DICK TIRE SERVICE (Richard H "Dick" Caborn)
Bear Wheel Aligning, Kraft System Recapping, 2322 Olive Highway at Ora Vista, Tel 757
—Donna A Mrs bkpr Oroville Auto Parts r1624 High
—Lloyd h1622 High
—Lloyd mech Dick Caborn Tire Service r Woodley Star rte
—Richd H (Merle; Caborn Dick Tire Service) r RD4 box 1777
—Robt E lab r3522 Strauss av
—Robt E (Jeanette) mech Dick Caborn Tire Serv h1624 High
—Robt H bartndr Hob Nob Tavern r Skyline blvd
Cabral John r1611 Washington av
Caffaratti Darius F MD (Rose Marie) Physician and Surgeon, 1625 High, Tel 115, h261 Canyon Highlands Dr, Tel 1402
—Lucille (Club Sierra) r1486 Montgomery
Cahill Harold G (Evelyn) frame cutter High Sierra Pine Mills r RD5 box 2430
Cain E Jas Rev (Mae M) chaplain USA h3050 Clemo av
—Ellen J studt r3050 Clemo av
—Mildred E studt r3050 Clemo av
Cal-Central Liquid Gas Co Coy S Ford mgr butane gas 2470 Myers
Caldwell Carrie M Mrs enrywkr Wyandotte Olive Growers r RD4 box 2175a
—Eliz Mrs h3337 Columbia
—Jas parts clk Don Hobble r Palermo
—John W (Viola; Curly's) h2112 Myers
—Julius K (Georgia) carrier PO r 12th and Plumas
—W Frank driver Union Oil r Palermo
—Willard hubemn Don Hobble r Palermo
—Wm E mech Stokely Van Camp r RD4 box 2175a
Cal-Farm Insurance Lucius E Weaver agt 1454 Pine

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