

GSP RESEARCH TIP

USING PHILADELPHIA CITY DIRECTORIES IN GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH

By

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Philadelphia City Directories are a veritable gold mine of information that helps you to identify an individual over a period of time. They can also provide clues and leads to other records that need to be searched.

City directories are compiled sources of information much like telephone books. Basically, they provide an alphabetical list of residents of a given locale with their occupations and addresses. At different times, they also give widow's names, titles such as senior and junior, and wives' names after 1930.

In addition to data about Philadelphia residents, the directories often contain special features such as change of address, street guides, ward boundaries, businesses formed and dissolved, and registers of churches, cemeteries, schools, fraternal organizations, and government officials on the city, state and federal levels. Some directories provide special listings for early health professionals, including Physicians, Midwives, Nurses, Dentists and Bleeders, Bleeders with Leeches, and Layers Out of the Dead. The special lists are of value as they can provide clues and leads to other sources of information about your ancestors. For instance, the register of churches can help you locate church records.

Philadelphia directories date from 1785 to 1936. They were published annually; however, there are some gaps in both the early and later years. No directories were published during the following years: 1786-1790, 1812, 1815, 1826-1827, 1832, 1834, and 1838. Also, there were no directories published during the few years after the Great Depression of 1929; the directories for 1931 through 1934 were not published.

Philadelphia was the first city to produce a "separately printed" directory. (Dorothea N. Spear, *Bibliography of American Directories Through 1860* [Worcester, MA., American Antiquarian Society, 1961], 6, 273). Baltimore and Charleston had earlier directories, but they were parts of other publications. In 1785, competing Philadelphia publishers John MacPherson and Francis White both issued directories, but MacPherson beat White to publication by about nine days. There were also duplicate directories published in the years 1799, 1811, 1817, 1820, and 1837.

Philadelphia had a number of compilers. Some of the most prominent were James Robinson, Robert DeSilver, A.M. McElroy, James Gopsill and William Boyd.

The early directories represented a "side issue" rather than the main line of work of the compiler. (Arlene Eakle and Jonni Cerny, eds., *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* [Salt Lake City, UT. Ancestry Publishing Co.], 387; hereafter *The Source*). Since they often performed all three roles of compiler, editor and publisher, these terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

City directories were created as tools to serve the business community. They listed the products and services that were offered to Philadelphia consumers. (*The Source*, p. 429). Consequently, some classes of

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people tended to be omitted from coverage. For instance, members of the working class, especially the blacks and transients, tended to be excluded from the directories. (Theodore Hershberg, ed., *Philadelphia Work, Space and Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, Oxford Univ. Pr. 1981] 508, Appendix II).

There was better coverage of all classes of people in the second half of the nineteenth century. One publisher of directories has stated that the aim in “compiling the Directory was to list the names, addresses, and occupations or places of business of all residents of the city who were gainfully employed and/or the heads of the households.” (Carol Ann Golab, “The Polish Communities of Philadelphia 1870-1920: Immigrant Distribution and Adaptation in Urban America” [Diss., University of Chicago, 1972], p. 430, Appendix).

Very little has been written on how the directories were compiled, although a few of the publishers themselves have given some hints and clues. In 1859, compiler S.E. Cohen employed 400 persons to canvass the city for the 1860 directory. The canvassers went from door to door to obtain the information. According to A.M. McElroy, compiler of the 1861 directory, it was not an easy task. McElroy states, “In almost every instance, at private dwellings, the only source through which this information is obtained being the domestics in attendance at this time.” Amazingly enough, it took only 120 persons to compile and publish the 1861 directory.

The now defunct Philadelphia Social History Project at the University of Pennsylvania has estimated that McElroy’s 1850 directory contained only 12.6% of the total population of Philadelphia. By 1860, the coverage had increased in Cohen’s directory to 21%. However, the coverage was much better than it appears if one considers only the percentage of adult males was included. In 1850, the coverage of the adult male population was 48%; in 1860, 81%; in 1870, 100%; and in 1880, 87%.

The early directories were compiled in the latter half of the year. For instance, the 1819 directory was completed in the five months from September to January. By 1915, it took one year to complete the survey of the City. (Golab, “Polish Communities”). Thus, the 1915 directory represents a canvassing done in 1914.

The city directory was never totally complete or accurate.

In the 1819 directory, publisher John Paxton noted that even if all the names were “taken perfectly correct,” there would be at least 50 errors by the time of publication. He attributed this shortcoming to people who failed to notify him of their changes of address after the survey was taken. In addition, there were people who were missed because they were not at home when the canvasser came to call. Nevertheless, the directories may be more reliable than the censuses. Being published every year, they were under a “strong compulsion” for accuracy. (Theo. L. Brownyard, “The Use of City Directories in Genealogical Research,” 24 Sept. 1983, *Talk*, National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

The spelling of the name can be a problem to the family historian. Before you start your research, you need to think of all possible variant spellings of your surname. You may find members of your family

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listed under many different spellings. An example of a surname with at least a dozen variant spellings is *Swaney*. Other names that may have variants are *Reagan*, *Fraser* and *Bailey*. In earlier times there was no standardized spelling of names.

It was not until 1790 that houses were numbered. However, even into the 19th century, some addresses continued to be listed without house numbers.

While most Philadelphia directories had an alphabetical arrangement, there were three that did not: the ones for 1795, 1796 and 1801 were arranged by address. However, these issues did include indexes with references to the house addresses. These directories can be useful when you are looking for an individual's neighbors.

The 1828 city directory lists house numbers for corner properties running north and south for the City only. The corner numbers are helpful in pinpointing an address.

The 1898 and the 1910 Philadelphia directories contain changes in Names of Streets, along with Old and New Names of Streets. This is important to note because during these time periods, and especially in certain areas of Philadelphia such as Germantown and West Philadelphia, as the population shifted there was a surge in new housing developments that required new streets to be surveyed, the renaming of existing streets, and the renumbering of existing housing stock. It may appear that your ancestor moved when, in fact, he did not. Similar changes are also reflected in the city directories of 1855 and 1856 after the outlying boroughs and townships of then Philadelphia proper, were incorporated into what we are now familiar with as the boundaries for the City of Philadelphia.

How To Start Your Research Using City Directories

The city directory should be a first source in searching for an individual in Philadelphia records. In your search, you should try to find every listing for your ancestor. This is essential for making a full identification of him. An important detail may be listed in one year, never to be repeated again, such as a middle initial, for example.

City directories can tell you how your ancestor fared economically and socially by carefully studying his changes of occupations and addresses. He may progress from a bookbinder to a merchant and, finally, to a gentleman. He may also move from a working class neighborhood to one more prestigious. Unfortunately, sometimes you may find a downward movement.

A long period of residence at one address may indicate home ownership and warrant a search in the deed indexes. On the other hand, frequent relocations might suggest that an individual was a renter.

City directories are useful in linkage with other record sources. For instance, to find a death record for an individual, you need to conduct a year by year search for him in the directories until he no longer appears. And an additional clue after his disappearance may be the appearance of his wife at the same address in the following year. A search for your ancestor's death record would then be in order.

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Since you want to find every entry for your ancestor, it is a good idea to extend the search for him 10 years before he first appears and 10 years after he last appears in the directory. An individual sometimes drops out of the directories for several years and then mysteriously reappears. A disappearance of several years might suggest a number of possibilities, among them military service, or your ancestor locating work elsewhere temporarily.

Be careful in using the early directories, as the names do not always follow a strict alphabetical arrangement.

It is also a good practice to check the other people listed who have the same surname for identical addresses. You may find sons who were employed and still living at home. To determine the relationship between two men with identical names, look for the terms *senior* and *junior* after their names. If there are two addresses for an individual, the first one indicates his place of business and the second, his residence.

In the nineteenth century a man usually made his first appearance in the directories close to the time of his marriage. The procedure here would be to search the marriage records a year or two before his first listing.

Another important linkage of directories to other records is with the Federal population census. The family researcher is fortunate today in having such wide availability of these census records on the internet, through the LDS Family History Centers and through online services subscribed to by many genealogical libraries and historical societies.

How To Identify Pre-1850 Census Individuals

The census returns prior to 1850 do not give a person's occupation or street address, making it difficult to positively identify him. Assuming that the city directories and censuses were compiled the same way (block by block), the directories can help you to identify your ancestor in the census.

The procedure is to record your ancestor's neighbors in the census and then check their addresses and your ancestor's in the directories. If the addresses are similar, you have good evidence that your ancestor in the census and city directory is one and the same. Thus, the information in the directory helps to verify that found in the census.

Like the census, city directories are helpful in reconstructing a family, and they enable the researcher to trace a person's life over a span of years.

City Directories and Telephone Directories

City directories ceased publication after 1936. Although they contain less information than the city directories, telephone directories can be used to trace an ancestor after this date. Telephone directories for Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs are available on microfilm at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

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Availability of City Directories

Philadelphia city directories are available on microfilm at the following repositories: The Free Library of Philadelphia, The Philadelphia City Archives and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The directories are also available for rental through your local LDS Family History Center. Footnote.com, which is a fee-based online site, has Philadelphia city directories available from 1785 through 1922, with some gaps particularly in the first half of the 19th century. Also, several Philadelphia city directories are currently available on the Internet free of charge at the following websites: 1856, 1857, 1858, 1861 & 1866 - <http://www.philageohistory.org/citydir/>
1890- http://www.olddirectorysearch.com/Philadelphia__Pennsylvania_1890/

In spite of their shortcomings, city directories remain one of the most vital tools for urban research.

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