Brick Wall Special Interest Group
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"SHOPPING FOR ANCESTORS" IN CITY DIRECTORIES

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City and County Directories can provide much more information about your ancestors than just a name, date and address. Here are some tips to get the most from these underused local community publications.

HISTORY OF CITY DIRECTORIES:

- Commercial publications funded by advertising
- Predate telephone directories
- Either given away or sold to patrons
- Listed residents and businesses
- Created by written questionnaires or door-to-door canvasing of the city
- Initially published in urban areas
- First in Philadelphia in 1785
- Many were published yearly
- Information contained reflected residence in the year before publication
- Common in smaller cities and towns in the early 1900s
- Small towns and rural areas may be "bundled" into a bigger county or city directory

USING CITY DIRECTORIES FOR GENEALOGY:

- Fill in places of residence between censuses (Hint – Create a timeline)
- Track yearly place of residence of adults in a family
- Indicate whether resident rents or owns his residence
- Track changes of occupation or place of employment
- May provide information about employers or businesses
- May state that women are the widow of a late husband and even provide a date and cause of death
- Use addresses as a resource to find ancestors in other records
- May help locate a local church, school, or cemetery to search for more records
- May list people with the same name help sort out which "John Doe" is your guy (Hint – Create a table or chart with name, address, spouse, occupation, etc. using census and directory information to separated facts about two or more persons with the same name.)

SOURCES FOR CITY DIRECTORIES:

Online

- www.ancestry.com U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995
- www.myheritage.com U.S. City Directories (1860-1960
- www.familysearch.org Search either Catalog or Location and Key Word
- Free digital libraries such as https://babelhathitrust.org, https://archive.org, www.googlebooks.com, www.familysearch.org Books
- Lists like www.donslist.net, www.cyndislist.com , etc.

Local and state libraries and/or historical societies and major research libraries (may also have digital copies online

The Topeka Genealogical Society Library and the Topeka Public Library have numerous city directories. Check the catalogs for specifics.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

- Adult resident's given and surname
- Sometimes, race (ex. "c" for "colored")
- Relationships (wife or widow of)
- Current home address and home ownership
- Occupation, employer & employer's address
- Business addresses and advertisements
- Sometimes, a list of taxpayers
- Government information
- Churches
- Schools
- Local history, commerce, and culture

Also…

- look for an "Additions" page for omissions, errors, residents who were late arrivals, or "removals," etc.
- There may be more than one directory for the same place in the same year by different publishers.
- Remember to check alternate spellings of names!

EXAMINE:

- Title Page – Year of publication, Contents, Use as Source Citation for Information
- Index – Overview of Contents
- Introduction – General information about the publication and contents, as well as specific information about some entries
- Statistics about the particular city and area
- Government, church, school, newspaper, cemetery, military, society and veterans' information
- KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS – These are not uniform among publishers! Refer to the key in each directory to see the abbreviations used for occupations, given names, street names, types of residences (owner, renter, apartment, boarder, etc.), types of businesses, etc.
- Alphabetical listing of residents
- Classified Business Directory
- Street Guide and Directory of Householders – Lists all adult persons living at the same residence, may denote property owners, lists nearby cross streets, may list earlier names of the same street, lists nearby neighbors and businesses
- Buyers' Guide – Business Advertisement Section
- Index to Advertisers – Alphabetical list and page number of all business ads
- Directory of Rural Residents - Arranged alphabetically by rural postal route numbers
- County Taxpayers – Arranged alphabetically by name and listed with address
- Any other pertinent sections listed in a specific publication

FREE WEBINARS ON USING CITY DIRECTORIES:

https://familytreewebinars.com Type "City Directories" in the search bar and see two free webinars and five more for paid subscribers

https://www.familysearch.org/rootstech/session/how-city-directories-can-reveal-your-family-history **"**How City Directories Can Reveal Your Family History" webinar and handout by Sunny Morton

https://www.familysearch.org/rootstech/session/city-directories-as-a-genealogical-source "City Directories as a Genealogical Source" Short video from Family Search

www.youtube.com Type "City Directories for Genealogy" in the search bar = LOTS of FREE videos and webinars; from Ancestry.com, Lisa Lisson, genealogy librarian at Allen County, etc.