Thinking historically about Boston City Directories

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Thinking historically about Boston City Directories

Developed by Professor Pat Reeve, Suffolk University

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City directories contain lists of residents that are sorted by both names and addresses. Many directories also include lists of businesses, churches, city offices, etc. The directories can offer richly detailed information about residents’ occupations, home ownership, city government, immigration trends, populations, civic organizations, and commerce. Advertisements throughout the directories provide a history of commerce, advertising, and manufacturing.

Special Collections in the State Library of Massachusetts, housed in the State House on Beacon Street, contains a large collection of city directories that date from the first Boston directory of 1789 and cover most Massachusetts communities. The last Boston directory was published in 1981. Around this time directories for other Massachusetts cities and towns cease to be published, supplanted by the telephone book as a listing for a town's residents, businesses, organizations, and services. Directories contain a list of persons, organized by last name, residing in a town or city.

The main branch of the Boston Public Library in Copley Square has most (if not all) of the printed directories in the microtext room (off the courtyard in the McKim Building).

Tufts University has also put out a great resource online, called Boston Streets. Boston Streets combines three heavily used resources in historical research libraries: photographs, maps, and city directories. The website can be accessed at http://dca.lib.tufts.edu/features/bostonstreets/index.html

Nine Boston city directories (1845, 1855, 1865, 1870, 1872, 19875, 1885, 1905, and 1925) are included in the Boston Streets Collection. Entries include a person or organization’s name, occupation or organizational focus, commercial and residential address within Boston, and in surrounding towns and cities. The directories always work the best if you are searching by last name of an individual person, as that is how the directories are organized. However, with this information available online in a searchable format, there is more potential for success if you are researching the history of a building. You can search for an address and then use the “Find” feature on your computer to search for the specific mention of the address among those listed. If you wish to conduct a preliminary investigation at this website, please see Searching Boston City Directories, below.

Although not helpful for Boston neighborhoods, a good online resource about downtown Boston, is the website called Damrell’s Fire, which provides a great deal of information about the Boston Fire of 1872 and the years following during which the area was rebuilt. The website, which was created alongside the debut of a film that was made about the fire, has extensive information about the event, those involved, and the buildings that burned. This website includes fire insurance maps, plans of the burned district, and great photographs related to the fire. This
website also is another source for electronic versions of the Boston City Directories from 1845 to 1875.

**Searching Boston City Directories at** [http://dca.lib.tufts.edu/features/bostonstreets/index.html](http://dca.lib.tufts.edu/features/bostonstreets/index.html)

Once you enter the website (off the main page, click on Enter Boston Streets - you will see options on the top left corner. To find the directories, click on People. There you will find the option of searching a particular directory (for example, if you’d like to figure out who was living in a particular rowhouse in 1885, you can run a search for an individual address, i.e., 760 Tremont Street, and the entry SHOULD (in theory) show up.

For example, let’s say you wanted to learn who lived at the address 760 Tremont Street, which is a South End townhouse built around 1870 near the intersection of Tremont Street and Massachusetts Avenue. If you clicked on PEOPLE, that would lead you to a main page for the directories. Choose Search all Directories to go to a page with a search option. There, type in 760 Tremont and you will be sent to a page listing all potential matches. Knowing that the building wasn’t built before 1870, you can ignore earlier directories. If you click on the 1870 Directory, you will see that there are three matches listed by last name: Harding, Nevens and Young. There is no match for Harding (the search engine found the street number 760 and Tremont, the street name, listed separately on two different addresses, which happens pretty frequently), but there is a match for Nevens and for Young. From this, you can see the following:

Nevens E. P., 79 Franklin, boards 760 Tremont
Young Amos S., (Whitten, Burditt, & Young), 79 Franklin, house 760 Tremont

From this data you learn that Nevens (gender unknown) likely works at the 79 Franklin address (although what the business might be is not indicated) and that Nevens is a boarder at the 760 Tremont Street address. With the Amos Young information, we can understand a bit more of the living situation at 760 Tremont Street. It appears that Young owns the house and works at 79 Franklin Street, which the directory says is the address of Whitten, Burditt, & Young. Given that his name is included in the name of the company, we can assume that he (or his family) is a principal in that firm. It is likely more than a coincidence that both names associated with living at 760 Tremont Street have the same professional address - Nevens likely works for Young and boards at his household. A simple Google search of Whitten, Burditt & Young brings up a Google Books entry for *Wentworth’s Boston Commercial Directory* of 1869 (another great resource), where the company is described as a wholesale clothing company located downtown at both the 79 Franklin Street location and at 120 Devonshire Street.

With this small bit of information it is difficult to paint a full picture, but the combination of many different listings can teach you a great deal about a certain area: if people were renting (or boarding), if they owned the building, their occupation, etc. With more searching, you could find out if they lived with other family members, and what their occupations were.
A History of America’s City Directories


Although a group of Dutch magistrates in New Amsterdam (now New York City) compiled a list of residents by street in 1665, the first true, separately published city directory in America first appeared more than a century later in 1785. It was preceded by some scattered attempts to list city residents privately, such as a 1752 list for Baltimore, or as part of a larger publication, such as the 1782 list for Charleston in a statewide almanac. However, it was appropriately in Philadelphia, the young country’s largest city at that time, that two different individuals issued competing directories in November 1785.

Not to be outdone, New York City’s first directory appeared the following year. Before the turn of the century, directories had also appeared for Boston (1789), Baltimore (1796), and even Hartford (1799). Including the Charleston offerings, the nation now had directories for its five largest cities, and a new industry had been born.

Early directory publishers provided this service as an auxiliary to their regular occupations, be they postmasters, school principals, businessmen or involved in other trades. The most common publisher was the local newspaper editor, who had access to a printing press, and of course was very interested in the local residents, for they were his customer base. By the mid-1800s, full-time directory publishers had appeared in the major cities. Often, they would issue directories for several different cities within a region, with dates of issue staggered throughout the calendar, so their resources could be used virtually year-round.

By the latter 19th century, city directories had become big business. Large companies opened offices in various cities to provide directory services, and names like R. L. Polk became part of American consciousness. Directory publishers even formed a trade association to help promote the publishing of quality directories, to guard against fraudulent publishers and canvassers, and to provide year-round work for competent canvassers.

To appeal to more subscribers, publishers added more and more features over the years. Certain features became standard fare in most directories. Others never seem to have caught on, or to have proved their worth to the users. Some of the imaginative features included lists of Civil War soldiers who served from the city, death dates for persons who had passed away during the preceding year, and notations of removals from the city, often indicating where the resident settled. While genealogists would love to have had these features in all directories, we are grateful when they do appear, and they remind us that no two directories are alike. Each may offer features not seen elsewhere and hence should be scrutinized for helpful information.

Eventually, with the growth of mega-cities in the early 20th century, it became financially unviable for commercial companies to publish directories for a few of the largest cities. Increased availability and use of phone directories also diminished the perceived value of the traditional city directories. The last regularly issued directory for New York City (Manhattan and the Bronx) was published in 1925. For other boroughs, it was even earlier. Queens was stopped after 1912 and Brooklyn after the 1913 directory.]
There was, however, one last directory issued for New York City, with the assistance of the WPA. For Manhattan (with Richmond), directories were issued in 1931 and 1933, while Queens and Brooklyn directories appeared in 1933. In these cases, government “make work” projects of the depression provided a kind of “underwriting” for the commercial publisher of the directories.

Apparently, the last directory for Chicago was issued in 1928, and there were many missed years prior to that publication. Los Angeles directories seem to have stopped in the 1940s, although directories for some suburban areas are still in publication.

Although city directories are still published today, in many areas they are no longer annual, but have been reduced to every two years. In some metropolitan areas, multiple volumes are issued. For example, in the Salt Lake City area, one volume is issued for Salt Lake City proper, every two years. In the intervening years, a separate volume is issued for the suburban areas, which have a larger population than the primary city.

Scope, Purpose, and Content of City Directories


Just who was included in a directory was a matter determined by each individual publisher, and it varied, not just from city to city, but over time in the same city, and by the same publisher. Some directories listed just the businessmen of a city. However, the chief purpose of a city directory was as a tool for businessmen. A tool that would help him identify his customers and potential customers. Hence, it was to the customer’s benefit, and therefore to the publisher’s benefit, to list as many persons as possible. Indeed, publishers often bragged (in their preface) about the number of names in their directories.

Remember, directories were not issued for our use. What use, therefore, did the actual customer make of them? A typical business in a city in the nineteenth century often extended some form of credit to its customers. Therefore, having a handy list of the addresses of the residents would make it easier for them to contact a customer, even if they moved within the city, about a balance due. For that matter, a listing in the directory was a useful tool in determining if credit should be extended to a new customer. Especially if the customer’s name appeared in the past couple of directories, the business could presume a certain level of stability, and therefore credit-worthiness.

For companies that arranged delivery of their goods, a directory would provide them with the address of their customer. Indeed, with middle initials, and occupations, a directory could help the user (then and today) distinguish between two men of the same name. The directory also quickly became an advertising medium. Publishers learned they could place advertising banners in the margins. (No, the Internet did not invent ad banners.) In the classified list of businesses, and even in the residential portion, they could charge extra for placing a listing in bold typeface. In fact, today’s “yellow pages” phone directories are a direct descendant of city directory business listings.
So, just who did the publishers list in the residential portion? Well, that varied over time. To be of value to their customers, they wanted to list as many useful names as possible. At a bare minimum, this would mean the homeowners in the city, or, more likely, the head of each household (including widows). In addition, since many families in the city rented, rather than owned their residences, publishers would list the principal tenants or the major lessees in each apartment. Some directories would list the head of every family, even if there were three or more families in one apartment. Of course, each publisher established rules regarding who they would list, but it was up to the canvassers to determine the name(s) to be listed for each address. Just like census takers, some directory canvassers were more diligent and careful about their job than others.

Over time, an increasing set of residents appear in the directories. By the middle of the 1800s, almost any adult male living in the city (or at least employed and living in the city) was a candidate for a listing. Widows were also usually listed. By this time, many directories also listed men who did not actually live in the city, but were employed in the city. In such circumstances, the listing would indicate the town where he lived, in addition to his work location. Obviously, that information came from the business, not a canvas of the suburb. Hence, a New York City directory might have a listing such as:

Smith John, manager Smith & Jones Tapestries, 120 Broadway, h Hoboken

Thus, such an entry requires the researcher have some geographic knowledge; at least enough to know that Hoboken is a New Jersey suburb, not a street in the city.

By the last third of the century, single adult females were being listed in many directories. To be sure they needed to be gainfully employed, often as a stenographer or teacher, but it appears that their employment status granted them a listing. By the end of the 19th century, most directories were also listing the names of wives, in the same listing with their husbands. A wife’s name often appeared in parenthesis immediately after their husband, the head of the household. By the early part of the 20th century, student’s names also appeared, with the “occupation” of student as a descriptor. These were typically post-secondary students, such as those at colleges or trade schools, although the schools are never identified. As telephones became more common in the 20th century, directories added phone numbers to the typical listing.

Despite this description, the listings varied more than we researchers would like. The earliest, simplest listing included just the name of the resident and his (seldom her) address. Soon his occupation appeared. The next element to appear was the work address. Different publishers also used different abbreviations. Therefore, check the list of abbreviations (near the front of the directory), to learn if “r.” means resides, rear or rents.

Sometimes a person may be listed twice, because different canvassers learned about him from his employer, as well as through a residential visit. You will recognize such duplicate entries because the information is similar, but not the same. Often the name is spelled differently, or sometimes, one of the addresses is expressed a bit differently.

Of course, just because a person should have been listed in a directory does not mean that he (or
she) was. If they were a common laborer, living with a friend or relative (i.e.: they were not the principal tenant), or an immigrant who did not communicate well, or they had recently moved, and the person answering the canvasser did not know them, or for any of several more reasons, they may not be listed in any given year. Take heart! Most directories were eventually published each year. A person who was overlooked one year, may well be included the next.

Most directories claim to have been created entirely new each year, from a fresh canvass of the entire city. They did not simply take the current copy of the directory with them on their rounds and update the listings. Hence, a family who never moved or changed occupations may appear differently each year. The name may be spelled differently, the occupation may vary, or the name may not even appear for a couple of years, all because one canvasser did his job differently than another.

Although directories will not include everybody you would find in a census (notably women and younger children), you will find some persons in a directory who were not listed in the census. Prior to 1850 of course, the census only lists the head of each family. A directory from this time may well list other gainfully employed adults. Therefore, if you find a relative in a city directory, but cannot locate him in the associated census records, look for other persons with his surname in the same ward in the census records. Pay particular attention to persons in the census whom you cannot identify in the directory. Perhaps the name you found in the directory is the representative for that address in the directory, but is not the head of the household in the census. Take the neighbors from the census listing and seek them in the directories. Determine if any of the census neighbors live on the same street, or even the same address, as the relative in the directory. If so, then the person you found in the census with the same surname as the relative in the directory may well be living with the person in the directory, and you may have just found another relative.

This process can even work if you cannot find others of the same surname in the same area where the relative appears in the directory. Try seeking his neighbors in the census, to learn if he might be an additional adult male in the census.

Now, finding the neighbors may take some work, since directories of that time do not arrange listings by street. Using the directory information, determine in which ward the relative lived. Then, searching the census, find a few unique names in that ward. Now seek those same names in the directory to learn where they lived within that ward.

Repeat this process until you find the area of the census that includes the street where the relative appears in the directory. Then, copy a couple of pages from the census, and find as many of those names as possible in the directory. Eventually you will find the page where your relative's neighbors lived, and perhaps even persons at the same address as your relative. These families could be close relatives, and would therefore suggest additional search protocols.

There are other reasons why a person listed in a directory may not be in the census. Perhaps he died before the census was taken, or he lived outside of the city (even outside of the state as some cities are near state boundaries), and you did not consider census entries from other localities.

Even persons in directories after 1850 may be omitted from the census. Perhaps they were not home when the census taker came, and he did not learn about them from the neighbors. Perhaps the census taker spelled the name very wrong (because the landlord provided poor information), and you can’t recognize it in the census. Of course, a person may have moved into the city shortly
after the census was taken, or moved out before. This is why it is important to learn when the city was canvassed for the directory.

Watch for late listings. Often published at the front of the list of residents, it may carry the title “Names received too late for insertion.” This page (sometimes two) includes two types of listings (not distinguished from each other). Some are names of persons at addresses where the canvasser had not obtained an answer earlier. Others are persons who had recently moved into the new address. They may be new to the city, or a long-time resident who moved. In any event, if the family you are seeking is not in the regular listing, check out this page.

Content of City Directories

Most people think of city directories as simply a list of the names and addresses of the residents of a city. That is in large part true only because most pages are dedicated to listing the householders and principal tenants in the apartments. However, the typical directory included much more information about the city. Such information can be critical to a family historian’s research success. In addition to the list of residents, consider the following typical contents of a nineteenth century directory:

- Publishers’ introduction
- History of the city
- Street directory
- Ward boundaries
- Map of the city
- Abbreviations
- Directory of churches
- Directory of cemeteries
- List of city officials
- Classified list of businesses
- List of fraternal and social organizations
- City laws or ordinances
- Calendar of events
- Reverse, or Criss-cross listings

Much like the web sites of today, this information may have been considered ancillary to the chief purpose of the directory, but the publisher included it, “free of charge” to promote the additional uses and value of the directory. How many web sites do you know which include general-interest material to encourage additional visitors, hoping they will spend more time and/or money at that web site?

FAQs about Boston’s Geography and Peoples


Boston’s Geography

Has Boston always appeared as it does today?
No. Boston was originally a hilly peninsula, connected to the mainland only by a thin strip of land, known as Boston Neck. Today, Washington Street runs along the route of the Neck.

**How much of Boston is filled in?**
The original size of the peninsula was almost 800 acres. Since the 17th century, almost a thousand acres have been filled in, including:
- Mill cove, 70 acres
- West Cove, 80 acres
- South Cove, 86 acres
- East Cove, 112 acres
- Back Bay, 570 acres

Furthermore, a much larger amount of land has been added to Boston through annexation. Today, Boston covers approximately 24,000 acres.

**When were Boston's neighborhoods annexed?**
- South Boston: March 6, 1804
- Roxbury: January 6, 1868
- Dorchester: January 3, 1870
- West Roxbury: January 5, 1872
- Charlestown: January 3, 1874
- Brighton: January 5, 1874
- Hyde Park: January 1, 1912

**How long did it take to fill in the Back Bay?**
Filling in of the Back Bay began in 1857, and proceeded westward until 1890. By 1860 the Bay had been filled in to Clarendon Street; by 1870 Exeter Street had been reached; by 1880 the Back Bay district was entirely filled.

**African-Americans in Boston**

**Where did Boston's African-American community live, historically?**
Since the 18th century, Boston's African-American community lived principally in the North End of Boston. As the black population increased in the early to mid-19th century, blacks began to move to the north slope of Beacon Hill. Here they lived in the area bounded by Pinckney Street on the north, from Joy Street to the Charles River. Beginning around the turn of the 20th century, African-Americans began moving from Beacon Hill to the South End, and by the 1930s, into the lower Roxbury area.

What sites are associated with the Underground Railroad in Boston?

The Lewis Hayden House on Beacon Hill, owned by noted abolitionist Lewis Hayden, provided refuge to escaped slaves in the 1850s. The Farwell Mansion in Boston was also used to harbor fugitive slaves during that time.

Immigration and Ethnicity

When did Irish immigration to Boston begin?
Irish had been emigrating to Boston ever since the mid-17th century. Beginning in the late 1820s and 1830s, the number of Irish immigrating to Boston increased significantly. The 1840s and 1850s, however, brought the largest waves of immigration, due to the Irish Potato Famine (famine conditions caused by a blight on potato crops, which were a basic staple of the Irish diet).

Where did the Irish live?
Irish immigrants crowded into neighborhoods along the waterfront, especially in the North End and the Fort Hill area. Beginning in the 1860s and 1870s, Irish began to move out of North End and Fort Hill, into the West End and the South End, later into South Boston, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Charlestown.

When did Chinatown develop?
Initially, Chinese immigration to Massachusetts came from California. The Chinese had come to America in the 1850s and 1860s to work in the Gold Rush and to help build the railroads. They then began moving east after construction of the railroads was completed. In 1875, a group of Chinese workers were brought in to break a strike in a shoe factory in North Adams. When the strike ended, many of these workers came to Boston. They arrived by train at South Station, and settled in the nearby South Cove area.

When did Italians and other immigrant groups arrive in Boston?
Beginning in the 1880s, the nature of immigration began to change. Previously, newcomers had almost exclusively been from England, Scotland, Ireland and northern parts of France and Germany. Beginning in the 1880s, however, people began immigrating in rapidly increasing numbers from southern and eastern Europe - Italy, Poland, Greece and Russia.

The first group of Jewish immigrants had been from Germany in the 1850s and 1860s. Jewish immigration increased in 1880s and 1890s, in response to pogroms in Poland and Russia. The height of Jewish immigration was in the 1890s.

Where did these immigrants live?
Italians settled in parts of the North End. Jewish immigrants initially settled in a small part of the North End, bounded by Hanover, Endicott and Prince streets. Jewish residents gradually moved into the West End, East Boston and parts of Roxbury and the South End. Italian Bostonians gradually moved into the West End.
Examples of the Use of Directories in Research


Note from Prof. Reeve below are scholarly publications that are based on research in city directories. This listing will clarify the value of this source for recreating a given city, its neighborhoods, business, and population characteristics.

City Directories as Sources of Migration Data (available online)

Sidney Goldstein

Abstract: The city directories for Norristown, PA, were analyzed to determine their usefulness for the study of migration and occupational mobility. Tests showed that they provided a complete enumeration of the city's population and its occupational composition. Death certificates identify persons who disappeared from directory listings through death, and birth certificates and school records identify those who first appeared in the listings upon arriving at the minimum age for inclusion. Then, by the method of residues, the remainder were classified as either out-migrants or in-migrants. Thus, through corroborative use of diverse sources, American demographers have a valid substitute for the system of continuous population registers found in several European countries.

City Directories as Aids to Ante-Bellum Urban Studies: A Research Note

Peter R. Knights

Extracts: The great advantage of the annual directory to the urban researcher is, of course, that it provides him with ten "snapshots" per decade of a large part of a city's population, rather than two glimpses, admittedly much more comprehensive, he obtains from the federal census (p. 4). The kinds of information directories provided about individuals usually included four basic items: name, occupation, home address, and work address (p. 5). Directories, properly used with an awareness of their racial, economic, areal, and other biases can provide valuable data on internal urban conditions (p. 6). Among the uses of city directories in addition to those already mentioned, are those as aids to indexing manuscript censuses, as adjuncts to traffic analysis, and of assistance in tracing the changing occupational trends of masses of individuals (p. 9).

“The Journey to Work”
Abstract: Presents the importance of city directories as a source of commuting data. Procedures that indicate the information that can be derived from the directory: assessment of the city directory of Toronto, Ontario; characteristics of Toronto that suit the study; traditional sources of information on commuting; conclusions.

Extract: City directories often provide far superior evidence. The structure and coverage of local directories can vary between cities and from year to year. ...In North America...they purport to list every employed adult. They often report occupations and, in some cases, also report the names of employers. Knowing where people live and work makes it possible to infer their daily commute...Because directories usually list last names by street address as well as alphabetically, it is also possible to document where residents of a specific neighborhood work.

Other researchers who have used city directories to trace social and residential mobility:


University of Texas, Bureau of Research in the Social Sciences. 1942. The use of city directories in the study of urban populations. Austin: University of Texas Press.

The Impact of Industrial Decentralization on the Gendered Journey to Work, 1900-1940 (available online)

Richard Harris and A. Victoria Bloomfield

Abstract: Scholars have assumed that in North American cities before World War II only the decentralization of industry drew workers into the suburbs, and even then, sometimes with a lag of years. In fact, available evidence is meager and contradictory. The impact of industrial
decentralization on settlement patterns can be traced by using published annual data in city directories regarding the evolution of labor sheds and employment fields. A case study of Toronto, Ontario, using directories and oral histories, shows that the decentralization of employment was only one influence upon suburban settlement, even among blue-collar workers. Cross-sectional data and case studies of one city and one suburban employer show that it did contribute to a temporary shortening of the journey to work for suburban workers. In part, this was because companies tapped a preexisting suburban labor pool. Men were affected more than women in the downtown. This is consistent with, but does not prove, arguments that decentralization enabled companies to exploit suburban male workers and that suburbanization disadvantaged women.

Repeated Migration as a Factor in High Mobility Rates (available online)

Sidney Goldstein

Extract: ...The analysis of migration in Norristown from 1910 to 1950 was based on the coordinated use of city directory data, vital statistics information, and school records. The city directories, ...published biennially for Norristown since 1860, contain an alphabetical listing of all adult males...and information on their occupations. Test made of these directories by comparing their enumerations with comparable United States data indicated that they afford the demographer an accurate source of data on both the total size of the adult population and its occupational composition. The method by which these directories were utilized in conjunction with vital statistics and school records to obtain data on the patterns of migration was a comparatively simple one and was a necessary preliminary to the utilization of these same data for the investigation being reported on here...Two samples were drawn from the directories... The first of these samples, that drawn from the 1940 directory (for example), served as the basis for analyzing migration out of the community during the ensuing decade The second sample, that drawn from the 1950 directory, served as the basis for determining migration into the community during the previous decade.

Labor-Shed, Employment Field, and Dynamic Analysis in Urban Geography

James E. Vance, Jr.
Economic Geography, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul., 1960): 189-220

Vance used city directories to trace the development of the employment field for Natick, Massachusetts, a self-contained mill town, between the years 1882-1951, using the information available in the directories on the place of employment for residents of the town according to type of work, thereby showing how Natick was drawn into Boston’s metropolitan field.

In addition to those mentioned above, other researchers who have used city directories to examine labor sheds or employment fields:


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**The Flexible House: The Housing Backlog and the Persistence of Lodging, 1891-1951** (available online)

Richard Harris


**Extract:** Although the *directory* was obviously biased against lodgers, there is no reason to believe that the degree of bias changed within the period of study. As a result, this source may be used to obtain a picture of annual fluctuations and broad trends in lodging between 1890 and 1929. To this end, additional samples of 1,000 persons were drawn from each *directory* over the period in question, using the procedure outlined above.

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**The Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940** (available online)

Gerald Gamm and Robert D. Putnam


**Extract:** To measure national patterns of association building, we located sequences of *city directories* from twenty-six cities and towns. They range in size from large places like St. Louis and Boston...to small places like, Rome, Georgia...For each city or town, we identified at intervals of about ten years, every association listed in the annual city directory. In total, we gathered data from 224 directories, identifying 65,761 voluntary association...as a systematic source of data, the *city directories* are unparalleled. . . . Associational data from the city directories confirm the broad patterns of growth suggested by the scholarly literature.
A Case-Control Study of Bladder Cancer using City Directories as a Source of Occupational Data
(available online)

Kyle Steenland, Carol Burnett and Ana Maria Osorio

Abstract: Commercial city directories, currently produced in 1,250 United States cities, potentially provide yearly information on occupation and employer for all city residents over age 18 years. To investigate the usefulness of these occupational data, the authors have conducted a case-control study of male bladder cancer mortality in Hamilton County, Ohio (which includes Cincinnati). A total of 731 bladder cancer cases who died during 1960–1982 were matched on age, sex, race, date-of-death, and residence at death to two controls per case. Risks of bladder cancer death were calculated by occupation, industry, and specific employer, using both city directories (multiple statements) and death certificates (single statement). Four companies showed a significant excess bladder cancer risk when using city directories. Only one would have been identified using death certificates, which ask for usual lifetime type of Industry rather than a specific company name. Using city directories, significant positive associations were found between bladder cancer and occupation as an engineer, tailor, carpenter, furnace operator, blending machine operator, chemist, pressing machine operator, house cleaner, or salesman. For Industry, the authors found significant positive associations for the textile, chemical, grain mill, foundry, petroleum, building service, entertainment, and advertising industries. A significant increase in risk for those with 20 or more years of employment was seen for those employed as truck drivers and furnace operators or those employed in the railroad industry. A check of the validity of city directory data indicated that 77% of the listings agreed with Social Security earnings reports for employer in any given year. One limitation of Hamilton County city directory data was the fairly large number of yearly listings without any occupational data (15 per cent for occupation, 36 per cent for employer). While city directory data do provide work history over time, unlike death certificates, such data are available only for years of residence in the city in question.

One Historian’s Use of This Source:

“The Last Mantuamaker Craft Tradition and Commercial Change in Boston, 1760-1845” Miller, Marla R.

Abstract: In 1845, the 17th-century term mantuamaker disappeared from the Boston city directory advertising women’s clothing makers, supplanted by the term dressmaker. This event marked a change in terminology and the practices of skilled women artisans, who constituted a community of craftswomen making women’s fashionable clothing. Through an examination of the Boston city directory from 1789 to 1845, the article discusses how individual shops, and their proprietors were transformed by increased population, shifting clothing styles, and the advent of new manufacturing technologies and ready-made clothing.