

City Directory Research Challenges and Solutions

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City directories are a valuable tool in determining current and former occupants, owners, business names and prior use of specific addresses. Publishing of city directories for major U.S. cities began in the 1800s. Many of the earliest directories did not include street or address sections but became more robust over time. In the 1950s and 1960s, many metropolitan areas were covered in cross directories, which included a name section, street section, and a numeric telephone section. For these reasons, city directories are extremely useful when conducting environmental due diligence. In addition, ASTM E1527-13 lists “local street directories” as one of the standard historical sources used to conduct a Phase 1 Site Assessment. However, conducting this type of research comes with its challenges. There are a number of obstacles a researcher may encounter and ways in which they can accurately uncover useful historical information.

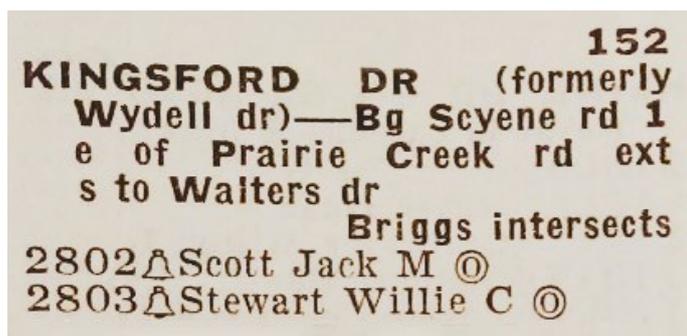
Street Name Changes and Alias Names for the Same Street

Street name changes have been common since cities and towns were first established in North America and have only increased in frequency. In Portland, Oregon alone, there have been over 3,000 name changes to streets or portions of streets since 1890. This can present a problem in trying to locate historical address information for a property. However, if the researcher incorporates proper research procedures, overcoming this roadblock can be attainable.

One research procedure to overcome a street name change is to find the earliest directory where the street name appeared and research the specific listings in the alphabetical section of the book. For instance, if Smith’s Grocery is listed at 101 Oak Street, Jones Cleaners at 103 Oak Street and Williams Filling Station at 110



Oak Street in a 1952 city directory but Oak Street is not listed in the 1951 city directory, consulting the alphabetical section of the book (often the white pages) may show Smith’s Grocery at 101 Plum Street; Jones Cleaners at 103 Plum Street and Ralph’s Filling Station at 110 Plum Street. This is evidence that Plum Street, or a portion of Plum Street, was renamed Oak Street at some point during or between the publication years. Often, city directories may note a previous name at the head of the listings for the specific street.



Example of City Directory street name change

Streets named for individuals were often known by other names in the past. The civil rights activist Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has 730 streets bearing his name or initials in the United States. All of these streets were known by other names prior to the 1970s. In Atlanta, most of MLK, Jr. Boulevard was previously known as Hunter Street. When a street disappears in the listings for earlier publications of a city directory, the researcher should be aware that the street may have been known by a previous name.



Intersection of Hunter Street, now known as Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard – ca. 1960

Additionally, if earlier directories exist for a city, but the street is not listed, it could indicate that either that portion of the city was not covered in the directory listings or the street was recently developed and is new.

Re-numbering of a Street

Street renumbering is another obstacle that a researcher may encounter. Consulting a historical map may show the previous numeric address of a property, but another solution could be noting between what numeric address does a cross street appear in the listings.



For instance, in 1940, all listings on Main Street range from 1100-3000 and across street Maple Avenue appears between 1200 and 1300. But in 1939, the range is 100-2000 and the cross street Maple Avenue appears between 100 and 200. It could indicate that the area of interest was renumbered between the publication years 1939 and 1940.

Adjoining Properties in Another Town or Municipal

It is not uncommon to discover adjoining properties in a different town. One business located on FM 407 in Lewisville, Texas is surrounded by properties located in Highland Village, Argyle, Flower Mound and Lewisville, Texas. Additionally, FM 407 is also known as Justin Road, so some addresses may be listed under FM 407 while others may be listed under Justin Road. Changes in the incorporated boundary lines may also require looking for the listings under different city or town names. Also, it is not uncommon to have publication coverage end at a geographic boundary that may exclude either the subject address or some adjoining addresses.

Addresses Falling in Different Municipalities During the Property's History

When addresses fall in different municipalities or towns during the property's history, it can become a roadblock to city directory research. Sandy Springs, Georgia is the 6th largest city in the state by population, but was not incorporated until 2006. Does this mean there is no coverage for addresses in Sandy Springs prior to that time? No. Sandy Springs was incorporated from portions of unincorporated Fulton County with addresses predominantly in Atlanta and Roswell.

Coverage for much of the area is found in Atlanta Suburban directories back to the 1950s. John's Creek, Georgia, the 10th largest city in the state by population, was also not incorporated until the 2000s, with much of the area covered in directories for Alpharetta and Duluth. A search for dates of incorporation or basic history of a city or town should give the researcher the clues they need to determine if addresses may have fallen in different municipalities during the property's history.

Researcher Tip:

It is always important to know the specific addresses adjoining a subject property before diving into the historical research in city directories. Some research processes only look for properties close to the subject property on the same street or one cross street. In reality, most properties in urban centers are surrounded by addresses on more than one or two streets. A building located at 576 Saint John Street, Portland, ME is surrounded by addresses on five different streets:

Dartmouth Avenue, Brighton Avenue, Saint John Street, Saint James Street and Douglass Street. If the addresses on Brighton Avenue are not researched, a dry cleaner located at 185 Brighton would be overlooked in the research process.

For this reason the EnviroSite City Directory Report includes subject property and likely surrounding addresses – including additional street/addresses at no additional charge per street – for a standard report on a single parcel property.



False Positives in City Directories Where Errors Occur in the Listings

City directories are not infallible and false positives show up in occupant listings. For instance, Williams Service Station is located at 121 South Washington Street, but another business by the same name is showing at 1505 Jefferson Road in a residential area. In this instance, Jeffrey Williams, the owner of Williams Service Station, has a residence at 1505 Jefferson Road and Williams Service Station is incorrectly recorded at the 1505 address in addition to 121 South Washington Street.

Consulting other historical sources and title records may help expose the city directory error, and often the error is not repeated in earlier or later publications.

Rural Areas and Smaller Towns in Which No Directories Were Published (or there is no coverage for the specific address in a published directory)

No coverage for a city or town is another common road block in city directory research. City directories were compiled from thousands of sources and were sold for cities and towns for which there was demand. Therefore, directories were generally not published for small towns. Additionally, areas outside of the incorporated boundaries of the municipality may not have been included in the directory.

Using a data provider such as EnviroSite, with a comprehensive nationwide archives of historical address listings is an alternative around lack of coverage for both a city and areas of a city that were not included in published books.