Start Hunting!
Six Things to Find in City Directories

1. Your Ancestor. And other family members.
Sure, you’re going to look for your ancestor, but look or other family members, too. Some of them may have lived nearby, others across town. Then follow the family year-by-year to note changes in occupation, living arrangements, even deaths of a head of household. Add it all to a timeline so you can keep track of the family’s comings and goings.

2. Streets and maps
Street names can change over time – so can house numbers. To get a real look at your ancestor’s neighborhood, look for street directories inside city directories. In some cases you may even find maps of the city or town. Street directories will typically give you cross streets, which you can use to orient you on modern day maps. This sample lists the right and left side of the street and the house number that corresponds with each intersection.

3. Churches and Clerics
Religious records are incredibly valuable for discovering dates, places, and family relationships. And for the years before states were required to keep records of births, marriages and deaths, churches may be the only place to find that information. Use city directories to find the churches nearest to your ancestor. And if you find the name of a cleric on records associated with your family, research the cleric in city directories, too. Use his address and compare it to the address of local churches to determine church affiliation. Also look to see if the directory you’re viewing has a list of churches and synagogues that includes the names of clerics.
4. Cemeteries

Check city directories for cemeteries near the homes of your relatives home at the time they lived there. They may point you to burial locations, possibly even a family plot, where you’ll find details about more than one family member. This directory from Mobile, Alabama in 1890, gives the locations and even the name of the sexton.
5. Advertisements
Look at the ads carefully – you may discover more information about a family member’s business or place of business, names of photographers, banks, organizations and other details that could appear elsewhere in your family’s history. Advertisements were a big source of revenue for directories and this Buffalo directory calls its index of advertisers the “Honor Roll.” Page numbers in the final column will take you directly to the ad.

Buffalo, New York, 1939

6. Historical Information
City directories often included histories of the area, some with images of the city, too. That same Buffalo directory from 1939 includes an Introduction that spans 21 pages with photographs of the city and its landmarks, and sections on early history and settlers, historic sites, street names, statistics, and more. There are even sections outlining the history of several ethnic groups in Buffalo (Polish, German, Italian, Irish, and Jewish). All of this can give you a little more background on your family and their home life.

Get more tips on using U.S. City Directories Collection on Ancestry.com in our video. Click here to start watching.