FINDING MY WAY:
RESEARCHING YOUR ANCESTOR IN CITIES

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GOAL:

This presentation will cover historic resources that are often available in most major U.S. cities to help you research your ancestor. The challenge of urban research is correlation of many sources into a cohesive view of an ancestor, and the city, neighborhood, and community they inhabited. As with all genealogy research, **correlation and organization of information is the best practice**. The wonderful thing about urban research is that there are so many sources, and if you can keep your work organized you will find a treasury of information.

COMBINING STATE AND FEDERAL CENSUSES AND CITY DIRECTORIES

Use the censuses and city directory information as an anchor point to start your search.

- **Start your directory search at a federal census year that includes a street address (1900-1950)** and note the address from your census search. Find the corresponding entry in the city directory.
- Research each year of the city directory **plus one or minus one year from your anchor census**; record all information found in each entry, with citation. Note changes over time, like widow status, address, and occupation changes; note all family members at a location.
- **Consult the front of directories for the abbreviations key and symbols**. Abbreviations may differ from one directory to another.
- **Keep track of the occupation of all family members**. Occupation can often recur in families because skills/knowledge and connections in a particular trade helped family members to secure work.
- **Be careful, there are many same-named people in a city**. If you get lost in who is who among same-named people, go to another anchor point and work toward where things felt off. You may need to gather all the data on all the same-named people and compare over time to clarify which one is your John Smith.
- **Cross-reference all addresses** found on other records like the vital records and newspapers.
- **Do not assume that if someone is missing they are not living there.** Sometimes people go missing because they are unemployed; looking for all known family members can to help confirm family addresses. Noting occupations or industries of employment can help clarify conflicting information or gaps in employment.
- **Manually search each year of a directory; do not rely on the search engine**. The city directories on Ancestry are poorly indexed with missing entries (an ancestor appears on the physical page of the directory, but they are just not indexed). The indexes can have odd spellings due to the poor character recognition by the computer optical reader used to index the directory.
- **Watch out for the change of street names over time**. You may need to map locations by landmarks if street names are changed (count blocks, some maps I have seen have incorrect street numbers, look for clues like the descriptions of business type over time).
- **Directories can contain errors, duplicates and most have an errata section**. *Some errors were deliberately placed by the publisher to catch their competitors stealing data.*

- **City Directories may list the death date of an individual the year after they died**. It pays to check each year; this may give you a clue when a person died (check death records to confirm) or the directory may simply list the death information.

How do I find people with a different surname who also live at the same address? How do I search for a specific address?

In *Ancestry*, go to city directory search engine page ->

1. enter [your location data] in the **location field**
2. add a year you want to narrow in on to the **event field**
3. add a known address to the **keyword field**

This only works where the indexing was done correctly.

MORE RESOURCES TO EXAMINE WHEN RESEARCHING A LOCATION

City Building Permits and Permit Cards – These resources can be useful for finding out about changes to a building over time, or when it was first built, by whom and for whom it was built. Permit cards often list subsequent permits issued for additions, roofing changes, or electrical updates; these cards also might reference additional documents held by the city like blueprints, or insurance records. Building permits are often originally held at these types of repositories: Borough Offices, Building Departments, City Planning Offices, and Zoning and Code Enforcement Offices.

- St Paul permits held by Ramsey County Historical Society: https://rchs.com/collections/
- Minneapolis permits held by the Hennepin County Public Library: https://www.hclib.org/en/programs/genealogy-local-history/researching-homes

Lot surveys and land plats – Lot surveys and land plats can be useful for finding out about the size of a lot, or if changes were made over time to sub-divide a lot, and they capture the state of a property in a specific time. Additionally, we can often see neighboring properties and who owned them (remember to check the FAN club).

- Minnesota Digital Library https://collection.mndigital.org // Enter "Lot Survey" into the collection search field, then select Type = Cartographic – there are 492 cartographic items including plat maps, atlases and transportation specific maps available for Minnesota Locations.
- City of St Paul Surveyor's Office has a variety of maps, plans, plat books, aerial photos, and surveys at their office. https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/public-works/surveyors-office/maps-and-records
- Hennepin County Library – Minneapolis Lot Survey Collection https://digitalcollections.hclib.org/digital/collection/p17208coll12

In a City, birth and death vital records may be available earlier than typical the 1900-1910 timeframe for State level mandated records. Don't forget to check for State, County, and City level records.

1) Identify the location in *Family Search* Catalog, and examine all Vital Records by State, County, and City.
2) You may have to go to the local historical society website to see if they have archived these older records.
3) You may need to contact County/City Clerks or Registrar's Offices for access.

DEEDS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

1) Use the Catalog function on *Family Search.*
   Search -> Catalog -> Place field: enter location [County, State].
   On the Location Page select -> Land and Property -> deed indexes

2) Use the *Family Search* **Full-text Search** feature, to look for mentions of ancestors in deeds as witnesses or as owners of adjacent properties. https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/full-text

3) Consult the county register or recorder of deeds office website for your location of interest if the necessary information is not available on *Family Search*. The office may be known as the Register of Deeds, Recorder of Deeds, Auditor's Office, or County Clerk's Office depending on the location.

MAPS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

Most cities were extensively mapped, and there is typically a collection of maps over a range of dates. We can look for a known location from a deed or city directory on a map to help us to understand where our ancestors lived. Some excellent resources for online copies of maps and mapping information are:

- Digital Public Library of America https://dp.la/
- The B1G Academic Alliance Geoportal https://geo.btaa.org/
  https://geo.btaa.org/catalog/999-0011-minnesota
- USGS TopoView https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview/
- Borchart Map Library at the University of Minnesota
  https://www.lib.umn.edu/collections/borchert
- The Library of Congress
  - Geography and Map Reading Room (sign up for their e-newsletter)
    https://www.loc.gov/research-centers/geography-and-map/about-this-research-center/
  - Maps Digital Collection (though I often have good luck just Googling a map location and often get hits for this collection) https://www.loc.gov/research-centers/geography-and-map/collections/digital-collections/
  - Fire Insurance Maps https://guides.loc.gov/fire-insurance-maps/introduction
  - Sanborn Maps Search https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps
  - https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/about-this-collection/
  - Sanborn Atlas Volume Finder on LOC
    https://www.arcgis.com/apps/instant/media/index.html?appid=0cb2c04324a0413081e1b793ea18f854&loclr=twmap
- The National Archives
  - Cartographic Research Room https://www.archives.gov/research/cartographic/visit
  - Maps at NARA of interest to Genealogists
    https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/maps
- New York Public Library – Atlases of the United States
  https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/atlases-of-the-united-states#/?tab=navigation

You can often find still existent city addresses by using Google Maps. But if an address has changed names or no longer exists, it is helpful to find reference points on old maps and align those points with current locations on maps to merge an old map with a newer map.

Library of Congress blog "**Georeferencing: Moving Analog Maps into Modern-Day GIS**" to learn more about how to use this technique. https://blogs.loc.gov/maps/2021/01/georeferencing-moving-analog-maps-into-modern-day-gis/

The Library of Congress **Guide on Geospatial Mapping**. https://guides.loc.gov/geospatial/georeferenced-maps

The Morris Institute Library's **Guide on Digital Map Collections for Genealogy**. This guide is a thorough collection of links to more information on the topic of Georeferencing and on using maps in genealogy. https://morseinstitute.libguides.com/digitalmapsforgenealogy

NEWSPAPERS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Look for ancestral names, surnames only; be flexible on spelling.
- Seek out all known family members.
- Search for known street addresses.
- Correlate known data with other information already gathered and resolve conflicting information.

Online newspaper resources:

- Newspapers.com, which can be added to an *Ancestry* account https://www.newspapers.com/search/
- NewspaperArchive, which is available as a part of membership to the National Genealogical Society or independently, https://access.newspaperarchive.com and https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/newspaperarchive/
- Chronicling America, historic newspapers at the Library of Congress https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/
- Minnesota Digital Newspapers Hub at Minnesota Historical Society https://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/hub
- Wisconsin Historic Newspapers Collection – at UW Madison https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/c.php?g=596638&p=4197853 https://badgerlink.dpi.wi.gov/resource/archive-wisconsin-newspapers

ADDITIONAL CITY SPECIFIC SOURCES AND TIPS:

- Immigration and naturalization records
- Church records
- Unique records for a location
- Neighborhood Associations
- Historic Real Estate listings
- Ethnic and Social organization records and histories
- Occupation specific records
- Correlate addresses on vital records
- Check for early vital records in cities