CITY DIRECTORIES

City directories are books that were published for populated areas that list building occupants, among other information. Some of these books date back to the 1800s. City directories have a section that lists street names in alphabetical or numerical order, and under each street name the addresses are listed numerically. Listing addresses in this way makes it easy to find out what company or person occupied a certain address in a particular year. When you look at a page in a city directory, you can see the addresses and occupants adjacent to each side of and across the street from the property you are investigating. In this way, you can make assumptions about what the properties were used for at the time the directory was published.

City directories were often published on an annual basis in urban areas. For this reason, city directories are often one of the best data sources available to establish a history of property occupants over time. This information can be used to assess whether any of the prior occupants could potentially have caused environmental problems due to releases of chemicals or petroleum products.

CITY DIRECTORIES ARE GREAT FOR:

• Determining past occupants and property uses at regular intervals over a wide range of years.
• Assessing past property uses for possible environmental concerns.
• Estimating the location of a former building tenant, such as a dry cleaner located in a strip mall.
BE AWARE THAT ADDRESSES CAN CHANGE OVER TIME

Property address changes can make city directory research challenging. Your property may be located on a street that has had a name change, or the number address for the property has changed. To be confident that your data provider understands these research challenges, ask questions about the limits of the research they conduct and how they identify address changes over time. This is important because you need to find past occupant information for both the current and former addresses for the property.

In some areas, complete renumbering of street addresses occurred in the past. The original address of 50 South 1st Street in 1925 may have been converted to 200 South 1st Street in 1955. Experienced researchers adept at conducting city directory research have procedures in place to make sure this is taken into account during the research process. See Figure 1 for an example of how addresses changed on a street in Atlanta between the years 1922 and 1931.

On the left is a portion of the 1922 Atlanta city directory for Peters Street, between the cross streets of Hayes and Fair. Note the addresses within this same block of Peters Street have been re-numbered in the 1931 city directory shown on the right.
Ask if your data provider attempts to identify street name changes. Some directories will tell you that a street name has changed. For example, a 1975 city directory listing for Martin Luther King Jr. Street may indicate, at the beginning of the street listing, “formerly Main Street.” The researcher should then research the property address on Main Street back in time. See Figure 2 for an example of a street name change that occurred over 50 years ago and how that change needs to be considered when conducting city directory research in the present day.

On the left is a small portion of the 1953 Chicago city directory for the street named Market South. On the right is a small portion of the 1963 Chicago city directory for the same street, which has been re-named Wacker. In this case, the same listings are noted for 15 Market and 15 Wacker in both directories. To avoid missing important data about past site uses, make sure you work with experienced researchers who have procedures for identifying street name changes over time.
Request your data provider make the effort to research historical addresses associated with your property to make sure you get complete information. A property may currently be addressed on Elm Street but in the past may have been addressed on an adjacent cross street or even a parallel street across a now vacated alley. Historical addresses and former street names may be available from the property owner, from local building permit files or from reviewing historical plat maps, real estate atlases or fire insurance maps.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCHING SURROUNDING PROPERTIES

When requesting city directory research, make sure that your provider isn’t just checking the address of your property. At a minimum, you’ll probably want them to look at all adjoining properties. If you’re in an urban area, it is helpful to know what was on the cross streets and the street running parallel behind your property because these adjoining properties are physically close to your property. If any of those adjoining properties have been contaminated, then the contaminated soil, groundwater or harmful vapors could impact your property. Please see Figure 3 on the next page for an example of how surrounding properties of potential environmental concern can be identified by researching surrounding streets.

To better understand potential environmental risks, extend the city directory research beyond immediately adjacent properties. Use this information to identify if there was a gas station, dry cleaner or other potentially contaminated site near yours. Why? Past use by such occupants in the area could have caused subsurface contamination that may migrate to your property via groundwater or vapors.
On the left are two portions of the 1949 Indianapolis city directory for Maryland Avenue and Virginia Avenue, which intersect as seen in the 1954 fire insurance map located above. It is important to note that city directory information identifies prior occupants of properties that are near your site but are addressed on a different street. Therefore, it is important to research the streets around your entire block for the most complete information.
CITY DIRECTORY PAGES

Some data firms and researchers provide hard copies or digital images of city directory pages. Full-size city directory page images provide the information as it appears in its original format (the city directory book), which eliminates the possibility of human error that could occur when typing or hand writing the information to create a summary or "abstract". Full-size city directory pages also do not limit the data provided, the way abstracts or a cropped version of pages do. Some people find reviewing city directory pages to be time consuming due to the large amount of addresses, especially for an urban setting. Data providers who highlight your property location on the page will help you save time without limiting the data provided.

CITY DIRECTORY ABSTRACTS

The quality of city directory abstracts will vary depending on the experience and the procedures used by the researcher. City directory abstracts may be presented in a searchable format making it easy to find key words or phrases such as “filling station” or “dry cleaner.”

Some city directories can be digitized using optical character recognition (OCR) software and then searched for keywords or organized into an abstract. However, the current OCR software available does not always work well, especially on older city directories, due to incompatibility with obsolete or rarely used type fonts.

If you prefer to order city directory abstracts, request that all historical addresses for your property be researched. You shouldn’t have to provide addresses for surrounding properties of possible environmental interest you want researched. That just doesn’t make sense! How would you know which addresses will be of environmental interest before the city directory research has been performed? To eliminate this issue, request that address ranges on each street be researched, for example “100 – 200 Blossom Boulevard.” This eliminates the problem of minor address changes with the same street name and also provides complete information for surrounding properties.
A PRIMARY HISTORICAL RESEARCH TOOL

City directory research is a great way to establish a history of occupants and uses of a property and adjoining properties over time. When you have easy-to-use city directory information that is also thorough, it helps you obtain a clearer understanding of potential environmental issues.