Peepholes to the Past: American City Directories

Sidney F. Huttner
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Names, dates, addresses, and marginalia appearing in or on books are, by today’s collecting cannons, either defect or glory. Written on flyleaves and titlepages or stamped on bindings, they may create “association copies,” eagerly sought and fetching premium prices. Scratched across the flyleaf or inserted as a bookplate, an ordinary citizen’s names is, however, a defect eliminating the book from the “serious” collector’s consideration. Still, few of us can, in fact, be mentally so rigorous as not to wonder from time to time who these unknown former owners were and what the books meant to them. There are, in short, several reasons why collectors, bookdealers, and librarians need to know something about the sources to which to turn to develop a name into a person.

The subject is a large one. Most of us turn readily to the dictionaries of national biography (many of them still frustratingly in progress), to the many volumes of Who’s Who, to the ever useful Webster’s Biographical Dictionary, and to indexes such as Hymanson’s Dictionary of Universal Biography of All Ages, and Biographical Dictionaries Master Index, as well as to the large number of resources available for many periods and professions. New sources appear daily; the K. D. Sauer Verlag recently announced the availability on microfiche of The German Biographical Archive, 200,000 biographies in a single alphabetical sequence from 250 German biographical reference works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those not familiar with the breadth of resources should read section AJ of Eugene F. Sheehy’s Guide to Reference Books, published by the American Library Association.

One particularly important and often overlooked source for collectors and students of nineteenth century American books merits special attention: the city directory. Discounting a few earlier lists of residents published in newspapers, city directories first appeared in the United States in 1785 with the publication of two directories in Philadelphia, the earlier being MacPherson’s Directory for the City and Suburbs of Philadelphia and the second, issued a few days later, White’s The Philadelphia Directory. After that, annual directories proliferated, first appearing in New York in 1786, Boston in 1789, and New Orleans in 1805. Most cities, in fact, attracted a directory about the time their population reached 10,000 and by 1860 only a handful of cities that size or larger failed to have an established directory.

The directories first came to my attention when I attempted to learn more about a small, attractively bound volume purchased from Douglas Wilson, the Chicago bookseller, who had found the book among several lots purchased by a colleague at the 1975 Dicke sale (see Van Allen Bradley, “Lawrence E. Dicke, Collector,” in American Book Collector, May-June 1975, pp. 26-27). On the top board of the full goatskin binding is stamped “Rev. T. Breintnall to Rev. H. P. Powers,” and on the lower “New Ark May 25, 1825.” The text is the first half of an Episcopal
Clergyman’s Companion (New York, 1806), and turning to a list of Episcopal clergy I was quickly able to determine that Thomas Breintnall had been ordained in 1817 and Henry P. Powers in 1819. Breintnall had started his career at Zion Church, New York City, and Powers at Trinity Church, Newark, New Jersey.

By using city directories in combination with other sources it has proven possible to expand the few clues offered by the binding into a satisfyingly full (if as yet incomplete) story. Breintnall is listed in the New York city directories between 1820 and 1836, placed at addresses near his church at Mott and Cross Streets. Leaving New York in 1837, he served the next decade as a “missionary” in the Hamiltonville and Spring Garden suburbs of Philadelphia, retiring in 1846 to Newark, where he died at age 54 on May 24, 1847, survived by a widow and two sons. His wife, Sofia Augusta Nelson Breintnall, who lived on in Newark until the 1880s, was the only daughter of George Nelson, one of the first directors of the Newark Banking and Insurance Company, Newark’s first bank, and Treasurer of the Trinity Church (now Trinity Cathedral) building committee in 1809. The couple was married on May 25, 1825, with the ceremony performed by Rev. Henry Powers. My binding, it seems certain, was Breintnall’s gift to Powers on the occasion of the former’s marriage.

Powers published three sermons while he was rector of Trinity, Newark, but otherwise proved initially elusive. The first city directory for Newark was published in 1835, and while published annually thereafter, Powers is never listed by the compilers. The Episcopal Church maintains extensive archives, however, and inquiries to them produced information on his resignation from Trinity in 1829, his transfer to the Michigan diocese, and his activities in Ypsilanti, Michigan, Sandusky, Ohio, and Madison, Wisconsin, as late as 1860. These towns were then too small to merit city directories (Detroit had its first—not including Ypsilanti—in 1837, but its second did not appear until 1845; Sandusky’s first directory appeared in 1855, and Madison’s in 1851), but Ypsilanti records have revealed that Powers married and produced two children, his wife dying in 1864.

The history of American bookbinding having long been another of my interests, and having determined why the binding was created, I wanted to establish who had created it. It seemed likely that Breintnall would have placed his commission with one of the many New York city binders active in the mid-1820s. Although the binding is not signed (regrettably few bindings of this period are), the principal tool used to create the built-up border design is distinctive and, I hope, might have been used on a signed binding. Returning once again to the New York City directories, I compiled a list of sixty-six names identified as bookbinders in the 1825 volume. I viewed this list as no more than a starting point, a way of searching library catalogues and organizing information about bindings by known bookbinders as it could be collected. Since the task could proceed with no great speed, I continued to abstract from the directory entries for those in the graphic arts as well and, months later, found myself creating a continuation through 1842 of George L. McKay’s A Register of Artists, Engravers, Booksellers, Bookbinders, Printers & Publishers in New York City, 1633-1820 (New York Public Library, 1942). Including the many
stationers and booksellers (since many of them were also bookbinders), the list has now grown to nearly 5000 names and some 50,000 addresses.

The directories themselves, as a genre distinct in publishing history, became objects of fascination as I worked with them. The earliest city directory is thought to be one which appeared in London in 1595. Similar volumes were issued once or twice in the seventeenth century, and with some regularity in the eighteenth century, but London directories were not published consistently until after 1817, and those published before this date were principally lists of tradesmen by trade. Perhaps reflecting the American character, our early directories seem from their beginnings far more democratic than their English models. While the needs of commerce certainly underlay their rapid commercial success, the American directories seem universally to have attempted to include all heads of household in a single alphabetical sequence; the directory organized by trade re-emerged much later. A typical directory entry recorded name, trade or profession characterized in a word or two, a business address if any, and a residential address. Business firms—nearly always partnerships in the virtual absence of more complex commercial organization apart from banking and insurance—and widows were also included, as were unmarried women conducting a trade.

While the labor required is great, and the work tedious, the directories are thus a widely available primary source of the names of not only nineteenth century craftsmen and tradespeople but an entire range of “ordinary citizens.” They have been mined, to a degree, for registers of particular trades during particular years (McKay’s Register is one of the earliest and broadest of these lists and similar work has been done at least for the book trades of Boston and Baltimore, 1800-1825; for Philadelphia to 1820, for St. Louis through 1850, for Nashville through 1862, for Rhode Island through 1865, for Cincinnati through 1880, and for Vermont). They have been consulted by compilers such as George Croce and David Wallace in the production of their Artists in America, 1564-1860 (New Haven, 1957), but they have much greater potential.

In New York City, for example, a prolific publisher and reprinter, David Longworth, began a series of directories in 1796 that lasted through 1842. Descriptively titled Longworth’s American Almanack, New York Register, and City Directory for the [---] year of American Independence: containing a list of all the banks and insurance companies and chartered companies in the city, with the names of their respective officers, and all the necessary information relative thereto; the post-office establishment, rates of postage on letters and newspapers, with the time of arrival and closing of all the mails that are received and made up in this city, in detail; a list of city officers, a table of streets, with corner numbers in extensor; the time and places of holding the courts in the state of New York; also the names, occupations, and places of residence of all heads of families, firms, and doing business in the city, amounting to above [---] thousand, in correct alphabetical arrangement, the directories appeared each June or July—encouraged by a convention whereby landlords notified tenants on February 1 of rent changes which became effective on May 1 and made the latter date a general moving day. Thomas Longworth, David’s
son, took over the annual compilation in 1806 (collecting 13,500 names that year), assumed full editorship in 1818 (17,300 names), and carried on through 1842 (over 42,000 names).

There is as yet no published study of the way in which directories were compiled, printed, distributed, and used, but an outline can be read between the lines of the two- or three-page publisher’s advertisements which were a routine part of the directory. The publisher hired canvassers to comb the city collecting names, occupations, and addresses which were put in alphabetical order, set in type, printed, and bound for distribution. In New York all this work was done typically in six to eight weeks and rarely required more than ten.

The schedule was subject to interruption, however, and in 1823 Longworth wrote that “never at any former time have we experienced so much difficulty in collecting the names as at the present season; the number of hands temporarily employed, and the nature of the task, subject us to peculiar difficulties, and the work being such as to exclude us from a personal superintendence of the labor, we are thereby exposed to much abuse; this year alone some of the hands were greatly at fault, which involved us in much extra expense and labor.” And, indeed, not everyone chose to co-operate graciously: “the very nature of the work renders perfection unhoped for: many people are shifting about at the time we take the names—to obtain their address is almost an impossibility, and they think not of furnishing their address until the work is published, at which time they manifest their importance by finding fault. Some unenlightened merchants in this city, have refused to furnish their names and address, when politely called upon; this is mentioned to account for some of the omissions” (1822). Still, that same year Longworth can report that “the number of names obtained in a house is from 1 to 4; frequently in the upper part of town, from 4 to 8, and in many instances more than 8,” and in 1830 he claimed “the names of all persons doing business, heads of families, whether journeyman or master mechanics, editors of newspapers, clerks, coloured people, gentlemen and commons, are all indiscriminately inserted, without other distinction than that resulting from alphabetical arrangement.”

Once obtained, names were not easily let go. In 1838 Longworth wrote that “the anger of not a few, and the displeasure of many, will be provoked upon finding their names and addresses in the Directory; in the compilation of the work, the object of the editor is only to render the work accurate and valuable; he therefore does not stop in inquire whether he has any right to publish the name and address of any individual; he is governed solely by the consideration that the public rely on the faithful performance of his duties;—that confidence must not be betrayed; he therefore avows that he has disregarded all directions to omit names.”

The spelling of names was not fixed—many did not know how to spell their name or spelled it in more than one way—and people in the same trade might describe their work differently. In a time when the city was growing rapidly, however, these problems seem to have bothered Longworth less than the frequent naming and numbering of new streets and the constant renaming and re-numbering of old ones. In 1827 he complained with particular force that “a few years since Fulton Street was numbered throughout, which the Editor presumes to consider
should have rendered unnecessary a renumbering of this street for a century to come; nevertheless it has again taken place, much to the dissatisfaction of the residents, and greatly to the displeasure of the Editor, who had just made his collections.”

These problems—regular complaints not only of Longworth but of other directory publishers well into the century—suggest the need for caution in judging the completeness and accuracy of the directories. They remain, however, a vast reservoir of little-used information. Between 1806 and 1842, the number of entries published by the Longworths alone totaled over one million.

The directories were, until recently, difficult to make use of. In 1960, however, the American Antiquarian Society published Dorothea Spear’s *Bibliography of American Directories* through 1860 which described for the first time the 1647 city directories known to have been issued to that date. This was a considerable advance, but a collector with Spear in hand wishing to consult those directories other than those in his own city (for which he could generally turn to the local library or historical society) had to travel or engage in lengthy correspondence. Even research libraries had rarely developed large collections of the directories, and the only collection nearing comprehensiveness was that the American Antiquarian Society itself.

A decade ago, however, most of them (all but 45 of Spear’s entries, which could not be located) were published on microfiche by Research Publications, Inc., of Woodbridge, Connecticut, and many libraries have acquired the entire set. Even those who dislike using microforms will revel in the collection, and it is of distinct interest to collectors that Research Publications sells the fiche by city and by state or region as well as by the complete set. They have also continued to microfilm and publish city directories from 1861 to 1902 for more than fifty selected cities and are currently extending the series down to 1935 for fifty major population centers. There is, unfortunately, no publication like Spear for the period after 1861.

It is by now perhaps all too obvious how city directories lead from question to yet other questions. In using them one never gets a full story, just a detail here, a fact there, one bit more of a mosaic from which a pattern may emerge—and always yet another question. There are changing relationships to note, re-organized partnerships, shared addresses, familiar names (James Fenimore Cooper, occupation not given, resided at 6 St. Mark’s Place in 1834-1835), and thousands of unrecognized names which ask for re-embodiment. The stories the directories contain yield only with sustained effort and in combination with other sources—but their every line puts a story in our view.

Ah, yes; my bookbinder. Identified by another route as one Henry I. Megarey, stationer, publisher, and bookbinder, he is listed in the New York directories from 1809 through 1853, a fascinating man with a long and remarkable but little-remembered career—but thereupon hangs another tale.

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SIDNEY F. HUTTNR has been a special collections librarian at The University of Chicago and Syracuse University. A student of city directories, he is assembling materials for a history of the genre.