



Local History

Forest Parke Library and Archives

Using City Directories for Local History Research

City Directories are an excellent source for property research, especially if you are looking to add a biographical element to the history of a structure. Six of our earliest directories, 1867, 1873, 1878, 1883, 1894, and 1904, are available as PDFs, linked from the CADL House History Research web page [<https://www.cadl.org/research-learn/local-history/person-research/researching-history-your-home>]. Additionally, you can access City Directories for Lansing up to 1960 in full text online via Ancestry.com within any CADL branch, or use our print editions in the Local History Room (1867-present; check current open hours).

City Directories are yearly publications which provide owner or tenant information by last name and (1906-present) street address, as well as business listings and advertisements, and often municipal information as well. In older volumes they additionally provide the profession and/or place of employment of the head of household. They are useful for finding women's first names and sometimes the names of older children who were still "boarding" at home.

The street listings in a city directory can be difficult to use because the numbering system used is different than today's. Lansing's first numbering system (seen in Mudge's 1878 directory) was in use from about 1867 to 1883. The numbers seem to run from south to north and west to east with no divisions by blocks. They did not use north, south, east, or west to qualify street names, only Washington Ave., Michigan Ave., etc.

The second system used (about 1885 to 1905) was similar to today's with north, south, east, and west streets, and divisions by block, 100, 200, 300, etc. Many of these numbers in the business district are the same as today, but many in residential areas are different.

The third system, known as the Philadelphia or block plan, was adopted in 1906 and is still in use today. The City required that the new numbers be posted on buildings beginning May 1, 1906, and the Post Office required them to be used on mail in place of the old numbers. This system is consistent because a number is assigned every 22 feet along the street with divisions at intersections and where intersections would be if all streets ran all the way through the city. Along with this postal address standardization, the City Directories began including address listing sections in 1906, making it much easier to trace a particular property through the years.

The old numbers are inconsistent and have to be deciphered individually; there does not seem to be a cross-reference key. The 1868 Sanborn fire insurance map shows the street numbers for Washington Avenue only. Later Sanborn maps (1885, 1892, 1898, 1906, 1913, and 1926) show the second and third numbering systems for some buildings. The 1913 maps in particular use dual numbering for many streets, effectively serving as a cross reference. Sanborn Maps are available from the Library of Congress. By using the Sanborn maps, other maps, atlases, plat books, property tax records, and other city directories, you have a chance of locating the address you are looking for.

Visit us at www.cadl.org/lh for more!

