Tracing urban residents can be challenging. They may be noncitizens, young, poor, own no property, move often, or generally have no reason or desire to interact with the US federal government. Despite these limitations, researchers may find some federal records helpful in locating urban (and non-urban) ancestors between decennial census years.

Military draft registration records

Military draft registration records are useful in locating current addresses and other information about men of draft age during the Civil War, World War I, and World War II.

For the Civil War, the Consolidated Lists of Civil War Draft Registration Records, 1863-65, in Record Group 110, Records of the Provost Marshal General’s Bureau (Civil War), are available on Ancestry. These records are arranged by state, then by 1860 congressional districts, then by class, then in rough alphabetical order by surname. Class I included all men between ages twenty and thirty-five, and all unmarried men between ages thirty-five and forty-five. Class II comprised “all other persons subject to military duty.”

For each man, the following information was to be recorded: name, residence, age, color, occupation, whether married (M) or unmarried (S), place of birth, former military service, and remarks. The former military service column is often annotated with the subdistrict number. (Each congressional district was divided into subdistricts for draft registration purposes.)

Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, was located in the 4th Massachusetts Congressional District. Captain W. Greene Howe, provost marshal for the district, recorded the specific house number for each man in May and June 1863. For example, John F. Kimball, age twenty-one, a married tailor born in the US, lived at 24 Richmond Street. James Knox, age twenty-eight, a married hostler born in Ireland, lived at 6 Medford Street. Edward Knox, age twenty-one, a single painter born in Halifax, lived at 102 Bremen Street.

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Provost marshals in other cities may not have noted a specific address. The records created under the supervision of Provost John S. Newbury of the 1st Congressional District of Michigan only recorded Detroit dwellers’ places of residence by ward number in June 1863. Men recorded as residing in “1st Ward, Det[r]iot[,]” included Phillemen H. Hastings, age thirty-four, a married hotel keeper born in New Hampshire; Richard Hassey, age thirty, a single railroad fireman born in Ireland; Oliver Hall, age twenty-five, a single railroad brakeman born in Ireland; and John Hall, age twenty-eight, a single omnibus driver born in Ireland.

World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-18, microfilmed as M1509, World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-18 (4,346 rolls), are available on Ancestry and FamilySearch. These twenty-four million cards typically give each man’s name, address, date and place of birth, age, citizenship and marital status, occupation, employer, types of dependents or name of next of kin, physical description, date of registration, and other information. Both aliens and citizens are included.

For example, Samuel Davis, who was born 6 May 1896 in Yassa, Rumania [sic], lived at 252 C Street, New York City, on 5 June 1917. He was an accountant employed by Arthur S. Millard at 21 W. 4th Street, and stated that his father, mother, and two sisters were dependent upon him for support. Davis also declared he was physically unfit and was a conscientious objector. Another New Yorker, Rudolph Deibel, was born 6 January 1889 in New York City, lived at 174 Lewis Street, New York City, and was a law clerk for Krakower and Peters at 309 Broadway on 5 June 1917. He had a wife and two children, and claimed exemption from the draft due to a glass eye.

Similarly, World War II Draft Registration Cards, also available on Ancestry and FamilySearch, give each man’s name, address, date and place of birth, next of kin and address, employer’s name and address, and physical description. For instance, Aaron Bernstein, who was born on 18 November 1912 in Saint Louis, Missouri, lived with his wife Ida Bernstein at 5745 Enright Avenue, Saint Louis, on 16 October 1940. He worked for the Michelson Realty Company, at 820 Chestnut Street in Saint Louis, and even had a telephone number: Pa 6079.

District of Columbia

Due to the District’s unique status as federal land not within the jurisdiction of any state, the National Archives holds some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century District of Columbia property, tax, criminal, license, and other records in Record Group 351, Records of the Government of the District of Columbia, as well as court records in Record Group 21, Records of US District Courts. While property and tax records are more likely to include stable people of financial means, criminal records are more likely

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3. Both Davis and Deibel are recorded in M1509, Roll NY-228, New York City Registration District 103.
to include resident and visiting transients. Some DC records are also held by the District of Columbia Archives (http://os.dc.gov/service/district-columbia-archives) or current District government offices.

Naturalization records

Naturalization records—which document the process by which an alien became a citizen—are complicated. Naturalization was usually a two-step process that could occur in any court of record (federal, state, or local). The two steps did not have to be done in the same court or even in the same state. There was little standardization in the details of records created or kept prior to 27 September 1906, when the process came under the federal supervision of the Bureau of Naturalization, subsequently part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

Setting research complexities aside, naturalization records may help document the place of residence of urban dwellers in two ways. First, obviously, the address of the alien being naturalized may be specified on the date of the declaration of intention or petition for naturalization. Second, the alien’s post-1906 petition for naturalization may supply exact addresses of witnesses supporting the alien’s petition.

For example, when Poland native Frank (Franciszek) Szynal of 4036 Montgomery Street, Chicago, petitioned the Superior Court of Cook County, Chicago, Illinois, for citizenship on or about 3 October 1924, the witnesses in support of his petition were Tony Fortuna, 2959 W. 43rd Street, Chicago, and William Winslow, 4049 South Kedzie Street, Chicago. The names of all three men are given on the index card in National Archives Microfilm Publication M1285, Soundex Index to Naturalization Petitions for the United States District and Circuit Courts, Northern District of Illinois, and Immigration and Naturalization Service District 9, 1840-1950 (179 rolls), available digitally on Ancestry and FamilySearch.⁶

Photographs of urban places and events

Photographs and other visual media can help enhance visual understanding of the places and events that ancestors experienced. The online National Archives Catalog includes many photographs. The still image of a patriotic parade in Cleveland, Ohio, circa 1917-1918, shows a significantly less urbanized downtown core than exists today.⁷ An aerial photograph of the Marine Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, includes homes in the surrounding neighborhood.⁸

Photographs can also give insight into an ancestor’s work and place of employment. A circa 1918 picture shows groups of men involved in manufacturing 10-ton, 50-horsepower artillery tractors at the Chandler Motor Car Company in Cleveland, with an American flag hanging in the background flanked by tall glass windows that let natural light into the workplace.⁹ Similarly, a photograph of screw and milling machines at the Accurate Machine Company in Cleveland includes individual men operating machines.¹⁰

In conclusion, finding information about some urban residents can be challenging, but imaginative use of federal records may shed new light on hard-to-trace individuals. Photographs, maps, and other graphic materials may help provide context. 🔼

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