

U.S. Federal Census Records

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Understanding the Census

The United States Federal Census population count is mandated by the US Constitution. The census determines representation based on population, not wealth or heredity. The census began in 1790, is done every 10 years, and the most recent census was last year.

Not only is the U.S. Federal Census a record of people in their homes, but it is also a record of the population characteristics deemed important to record at the time the census was taken.

The census is officially released 72 years after it is completed. The 1950 census will be released on 1 April 2022. When it is initially released, it is not searchable by name, it must be indexed. This indexing is done by volunteers and may take many months.

Reviewing the different census forms and questions, as well as the instructions to enumerators, helps with understanding the information collected. If you have a question about a marking on a census form, the instructions to enumerators for that column form for the census year may answer your question.

Two useful sources for understanding the census are the National Archives "Resources for Genealogists" website and the "Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790-2000."

In addition to the population schedules, in various years additional schedules recorded other information. There are agricultural schedules, mortality schedules, and more. The National Archives has a listing of all schedules by state and an explanation of the schedule in a link included.

Getting Ready to Search - Start with What You Know.

The most used US Census research sites are Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. Ancestry is a paid subscription account. If you are a GFO member, you can currently access Ancestry through the GFO Member Portal. FamilySearch is a free site but does require that you register for an account. Other sites such as MyHeritage.com, GenealogyBank.com and findmypast.com also have searchable censuses.

Take your time and gather potentially useful information. Slower can be faster in the long run. Hints from where to look can come from lots of sources.

Try to narrow your searching to a location (at least state) and census year.

Use the card catalog at whichever site you are searching and learn to use wildcards at both Ancestry and FamilySearch to improve your searches.

If your search is not successful, expand your search to additional people using the FAN (Family, Acquaintances, Neighbors) network. A link to an article by Lisa Louise Cooke explaining the FAN network is included in the references.

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Make a record of unsuccessful searches to avoid redoing the same work.

To search by address, use the Steve Morse website. A link an article on this by the New York Public Library is included in references.

Examine What You Find in Detail

Examine the actual census page image and review all data included on the form, including all information in all columns for each of your family members. Download the image to your genealogy files.

Review the other persons enumerated on the page (and the page before and after) to get clues about the demographics of the area and to find other family members or potential family members, such as a future wife.

Record your impressions and any surprises. Also write down any questions that the results bring up. Additionally, you may want to make notes for yourself that you would not want on a public tree.

Work backwards from a known census listing to the previous census.

The “Tic” Censuses

The census from 1790-1840 only include the name of the head of household. All other persons are noted by marks or “tics” in age columns divided by sex. Searching these censuses requires a different approach. A link to an article in Family Tree Magazine that gives a method for searching these censuses is included.

How Reliable Is the Information in the Census

The information in the census was given by a non-identified person (except in the 1940 census). This information was recorded by another person, the enumerator. The enumerator may not have spoken the same language as the person giving the information. The census information was then often copied onto another form. The censuses were eventually microfilmed and indexed by volunteers . All information about your family in the census should be verified with additional sources.

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Resource List

Understanding the Census

National Archives Resources for Genealogists (Census forms, all schedules)

<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms>

Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses From 1790 to 2000 (history of the censuses, instructions to enumerators and comparison charts)

https://usa.ipums.org/usa/resources/voliii/measuring_america.pdf

National Archives: Research Our Records- Nonpopulation Census Records

<https://www.archives.gov/research/census/nonpopulation>

Getting Ready to Search

To see all available schedules, follow these paths:

Ancestry US Federal Census card catalog path: From homepage (<https://www.ancestry.com>) choose "Search", then from drop-down box choose "Census & Voter Lists". From new page under "Narrow by Category" choose "US Federal Census Collection". On new page choose "View all collections in this search". The new page shows all the censuses and schedules available.

FamilySearch United States Census card catalog path: From homepage (<https://www.familysearch.org>) choose "Search" and from drop-down box choose "Records". On new page under "Find a Collection" type "United States Census". All available data sets will pop up in a scrollable window.

Ancestry searching with Wild Cards

<https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Searching-with-Wild-Cards>

FAN Network Searching

<https://lialouisecooke.com/2016/10/29/genealogy-fan-club/>

Finding Census EDs from Street Address: The Unified Census ED Finder

<https://stevemorse.org/census/unified.html>

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Genealogy Tips: Searching the Census by Address by the New York Public Library

<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/08/genealogy-tips-searching-census-address>

The "Tic" Censuses

How to Search Pre-1850 Censuses

<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/records/census/head-hunting/>

Reference Books on the Census:

The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy, 4th Edition by Val D. Greenwood

The Census Book: Facts, Schedules & Worksheets for The U.S. Federal Censuses
by William Dollarhide