

Making Sense of the U.S. Federal Census



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The United States Federal Census was not created for the purpose of genealogical research, but it is one of the most helpful public records that genealogists can use to locate their family. The first known census was taken by the Babylonians in 3800 B.C. Records suggest it was taken every six or seven years and counted the number of people and livestock, as well as butter, honey, milk, wool and vegetables.

The most famous census in Europe is the Domesday Book, undertaken in 1086 by William I of England so that he could properly tax the property he had recently conquered.

What is the U.S. Census?

The U.S. Census was first taken in 1790 by Federal Marshals, not long after the thirteen colonies became the United States. The Constitution mandates that a count be taken every ten years, and that the number of members of the House of Representatives be apportioned accordingly. Funding for many programs are also included.

- ❖ In 1790, only three out of every five slaves were counted for apportionment.
- ❖ American Indians were not counted and were not taxed.
- ❖ One of the main goals was to provide information on men eligible for the military.
 - We had recently gained our independence from England. It was important to know that a military force could be assembled, if the need arose.
- ❖ The federal census is taken every ten years. Some states took their own census in the years between the federal enumeration. These were taken mainly for the purpose of taxation.

Census Takers

Who were they? Everyday people. Some were young, some were old. In the earlier census, they usually rose horseback, carrying their clipboards with blank census sheets ready to be filled.

They may have been school teachers, or farmers trying to supplement their income. They knew how to read and write and usually lived in the area they enumerated.

- ❖ The government paid them to go door to door with the goal of getting a head count.
- ❖ He could walk many different paths to cover his territory. There was no instruction on the direction he should take. People living on adjoining property might be listed several pages apart.



Why is it helpful to genealogists?

The census helps to establish relationships between family members, and provides documentation of those relationships. It also places them in a particular location.

- ❖ All U.S. Censuses since 1850 list the name of each family member, his/her age, gender, “color” and place of birth. All of these details can provide important clues to finding other records – birth certificates, etc.
- ❖ The records are taken based on geography. The census taker went door-to-door down your ancestor’s street, interviewing one family at a time. Perhaps you can find other relatives nearby – it was common for extended family to live close together.
- ❖ Aside from the Social Security Death Index, it is the most broad-based collection of public records available.

Where can I find census records?

Traditionally, using the census has involved using microfilms of the original handwritten pages, which were originally produced by the U.S. Government to preserve the records from decay. Many copies have been made, and researchers usually go to a Family History Center or a regional office of the National Archives.

Today, many microfilm images are available online. This can speed up research considerably, but not all censuses are available on microfilm.

The actual records aren’t released until 72 years after a census is taken, for privacy reasons. This also encourages truthful answers.

Microfilm copies:

- ❖ Local Family History Centers (FHC). Go to www.familysearch.org to locate one near you.
- ❖ Branches of the National Archives

- ❖ Many larger libraries have a large collection.
 - Ohio Genealogical Society (OGS) has all of Ohio, plus several surrounding states.
 - Western Reserve Historical Society
 - Cincinnati Public Library
 - Fort Wayne – Allen County Public Library
- ❖ County libraries – usually of the local county. Check in the “Local History” or “Genealogy” section.

Online:

- ❖ <https://www.ancestry.com/> Subscription based, with two-week free trial period. May be accessed through some libraries.
- ❖ HeritageQuest Online may be accessed through some libraries
<https://about.proquest.com/>



My own county library



Getting started

1. **Write down what you already know.** This is your starting point.
2. **The more recent the record, the more information.** It is always best to start with the more recent records and work your way back.
3. **It's wise to look at a minimum of ten families before and ten families after your ancestor's listing.** Often related families lived nearby.
4. **Work with blank census forms.** Go to the library or online with blank forms in hand.
 - a. <http://familytreemagazine.com/censusforms>
 - b. <http://www.ancestry.com/charts/census.aspx>
 - c. <http://www.genealogy.com/00000061.html>
 - d. <http://www.genealogy.com/00000061.html>
 - e. <http://genealogygenius.com/UScensusform1930.aspx> (can be filled out on your computer)
 - f. http://genealogy.about.com/od/free_charts/a/us_census.htm

Why did the enumerator miss your ancestor?

If you cannot find your person in an index and you feel reasonably sure that he should be there, do not hesitate to check the whole county if it is a rural area. A county usually takes about one reel of microfilm. Note everyone with the surname you are looking for. Note the head of household and wife, ages and page number – that will make it easy to go back to. If you are looking in a large city, try using city directories and street indexes.

- ❖ Are you looking in the right place?
- ❖ Are you sure they are still living?
- ❖ Do you know all the name variants?
 - Elizabeth may have enumerated as Betty, Lizzie, Liz, Eliza, etc.
 - Could they be listed by their middle name?
 - Consider all variations based upon phonetics and handwriting.
- ❖ Do you have the right last name?
- ❖ Have you searched for other family members?
- ❖ Are the names reversed?
- ❖ If using the internet, are you entering too many search parameters?
- ❖ Is the last name mangled in the census?
- ❖ Is the “wrong” occupation really correct?
- ❖ Are soundex options catching all of the variants you need?

Non-Population Schedules and Special Censuses

- ❖ Mortality schedules, 1850-1885
- ❖ Veteran’s Schedules, 1840-1809
- ❖ Slave Schedules, 1850-1860
- ❖ Agriculture Schedules, 1840-1910
- ❖ Manufacturers Schedules
- ❖ Social Statistics, 1850-1880
- ❖ State and Local Censuses
- ❖ Reconstructed 1790 Census Schedules
- ❖ Censuses of Native Americans

Search Tips for Census Success

1. **Don’t count solely on soundex.** When available, the soundex search option is a great way to pick up alternate spellings. It may not get them all.
2. **Try a wildcard search.** If you aren’t sure how to spell a name, some search engines allow you to use special symbols called *wildcards* to represent some unknown letter or letters in a word. Most will allow you to use an * to represent an unknown number of characters at the end of a word. A search for john* might return john, johns, Johnson, Johnsen, etc. Usually you need to have at least three characters preceding the *.
3. **Familiarize yourself with nicknames.** It is not uncommon to find families providing census takers with their formal birth names in one census, and then using the names their friends and family called them by in another.

4. **Check the middle names, too.** In many areas of the world, it is common for an individual to be known to families and friends by his middle name. Be sure to search for middle names, baptismal names, etc.
5. **Search by surname and location.** When you're pretty sure you know where an ancestor was living, but traditional searches just aren't turning him up, try searching by surname only – restricting by state, county, district or town.
6. **Search for initials.** Sometimes those enumerators were lazy!
7. **Search for siblings, children, or other family members.** Your ancestor's first name may have been hard to read, but her brother's may have been a bit easier.
8. **Search for neighbors.** If your ancestors have been living in the same place for awhile, search for people who were listed nearby in other census years.
9. **Leave out the name entirely.** When all else fails, forego the name and search by other known facts. Sometimes this is the only way you'll find those people whose names were seriously mangled during the indexing process.

Census: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Census>

Dollarhide, William, Ancestry's Red Book, American State, County and Town Sources, Ancestry.com, 2nd Rev. Ed., 1992.

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Census maps: <https://raogk.org/census-records/>

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Ticked Off!! Those Pesky Pre-1850 Tic Marks

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Most genealogists researching American ancestors love the detailed censuses taken between 1850 and 1930. Yet our eyes glaze over and our head starts hurting when we take on the columns and head counts of the pre-1850 census enumerations. Many researchers go so far as to avoid them altogether, or use them only as a source for the head of household. When used together, however, these early U.S. census records can often provide important clues to early American families. Kimberly T. Powell

The census records from 1790-1840 only list the free heads of households, not the names of other family members. The family members were tallied, but not named.

These earlier censuses can help to point us in a different direction that we may not have considered before, and therefore use new record sources. They may help us discover the county of residence using a census index. All pre-1850 census records have been completely indexed.

1840 Census Headers – Census Day; 1 Jun

Written page number	Printed page number	Name of Head of Family	Free White Persons (including heads of families)																									
			Males													Females												
			under age 5	5- 10	10- 15	15- 20	20- 30	30- 40	40- 50	50- 60	60- 70	70- 80	80- 90	90- 100	100 & up	under age 5	5- 10	10- 15	15- 20	20- 30	30- 40	40- 50	50- 60	60- 70	70- 80	80- 90	90- 100	100 & up

1830 Census Headers – Census Day; 1 Jun

Written page number	Printed page number	Name of Head of Family	Free White Persons (including heads of families)																									
			Males													Females												
			under age 5	5- 10	10- 15	15- 20	20- 30	30- 40	40- 50	50- 60	60- 70	70- 80	80- 90	90- 100	100 & up	under age 5	5- 10	10- 15	15- 20	20- 30	30- 40	40- 50	50- 60	60- 70	70- 80	80- 90	90- 100	100 & up

1820 Census Headers – Census Day; 7 Aug

Written page number	Printed page number	Name of Head of Family	Number of Free White Males						Number of Free White Females						Number of foreigners not naturalized	Number of persons engaged in agriculture	Number of persons engaged in commerce	Number of persons engaged in manufacture	Number of Free Colored Persons								All other persons	Slaves
						Including heads of families						Including heads of families							Males				Females					
			to age 10	10 to 16	16 to 18	16 to 26	26 to 45	45 & up	to age 10	10 to 16	16 to 18	16 to 26	26 to 45	45 & up					to age 14	14 to 26	26 to 45	45 & up	to age 14	14 to 26	26 to 45	45 & up		

1800 or 1810 Census Headers – Census Day; 4 Aug and 6 Aug

1810 U.S. Census Schedule of the whole number of Persons within the division allotted to _____ Family: _____, Town: _____, City: _____													
County: _____, State: _____ Page #: _____, Ancestry pg #: _____		Free White Males					Free White Females					All other free persons, except free Indians not taxed	Slaves
Line #	Names of Heads of Families	Under 10	10 thru 15	16 thru 25	26 thru 44	45 & over	Under 10	10 thru 15	16 thru 25	26 thru 44	45 & over		

1790 Census Headers – Census Day; 2 Aug

Page	Name of Head of Family	Free White Males 16 years & upwards including heads of families	Free White Males under 16 years	Free White Males including heads of families	All other free persons	Slaves	Dwellings/ other information
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Census Checklist – download from www.familytreemagazine.com


Census Checklist

Note which US census records you've researched for each ancestor.

Name	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930

1810 Floyd Co., KY Census, Adam Carehart – **Find the differences using 1810 headings above.**

ancestry.com | 1810 United States Federal Census for Adam Carehart

Kentucky > Floyd > Floyd

Feedback

Name	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930
Floyd County															
William															
Jonathan															
Thomas															
Adam															
Adam															
James															

Compare this to the handwritten image above.

			Free White persons											
			Male					Female						
LN	Firstname	Lastname	0	10	16	26	45	0	10	16	26	45	Not	
			10	16	25	45	+	10	16	25	45	+	Tax	Slv
1	William	Christ						1		1		1		
2	Thomas	Castin		1	2		1		4	1	1	1		
3	?	Carehart		1			1		2		1			
4	Adam	Carehart		1		1					1			
5	Adam	Carehart			1	1		1	1	1	1		1	
6	James	Camron		1	1			1	3				1	
7	Samuel C.	Coburn		2			2	1	1	1		2		

Look for these census headings in the bibliography under the FamilySearch Wiki.

U.S. CENSUS HEADINGS 1790-1860 

1790

1790 Census - United States

State		Call number									
Page	Head of family	Free white males					Free white females	All other persons	Slaves	County	City
		16 and up including head	Under 16	Including head							

1800-1810

1800/1810 Census - United States

State		County				City				Call number				
Page	Head of family	Free white males					Free white females					All others	Slaves	Other information
		Under 10	10-16	16-26	26-45	45 and over	Under 10	10-16	16-26	26-45	45 and over			

1820

1820 Census - United States

State		County				City				Call number								
Page	Head of family	Free white males					Free white females					Foreigners not naturalized	Agriculture	Commerce	Manufactures	Free colored	Slaves	Other information
		Under 10	10-16	16-18	16-26	26-45	45 and over	Under 10	10-16	16-26	26-45							

1830-1840

1830/1840 Census - United States

State		County				City				Call number															
Page	Head of family	Free white males										Free white females										Foreigners not naturalized	Free colored	Foreigners not naturalized	
		Under 10	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	70-80	80-90	90-100	Over 100	Under 10	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-30	30-40	40-50				50-60

1850

1850 Census - United States

State		County				Town/Township				Call number					
Page	Dwelling number	Family number	Names	Age	Sex	Color	Occupation, etc.	Value - real estate	Value - personal property	Birthplace	Married within year	School within year	Cannot read or write	Enumeration date	Other information

1860

1860 Census - United States

State		County				Town/Township				Post office				Call number			
Page	Dwelling number	Family number	Names	Age	Sex	Color	Occupation, etc.	Value - real estate	Value - personal property	Birthplace	Married within year	School within year	Cannot read or write	Enumeration date	Other information		

The above headings also go to 1930. Download these to your desktop for reference.

Selected Bibliography

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Helpful Websites

Free Census Worksheets: <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/free-census-worksheets/>

Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790-2000:
<https://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/pol02marv-pt2.pdf>

National Archives, Clues in Census Records 1790-1840:
<https://www.archives.gov/research/census/1790-1840.html>

Persi/Heritage Quest Library:
<https://www.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/help/censusbook/Section%205.pdf>

US Census Headings:
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/img_auth.php/0/0e/US_Census_Headings_1790-1860.pdf

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/img_auth.php/b/b8/US_Census_Headings_1870-1930.pdf

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/1940_Census_United_States_%E2%80%93_Census_Form_Headings

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