

## Making Sense of the census

The requirement for a regular counting of the people of the United States was laid down in Article 1, Section 2 of the U. S. Constitution:

"The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct."

When that very first U. S. Congress passed the law creating what became the decennial census of the states, their goal was to create a system to be used in apportioning Congressmen and taxes to the various States. That they also created a valuable and highly treasured source of records for the modern family historian was just a happy coincidence. But the simple fact is that the collection of U.S Federal Censuses provides more information about the lives of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans than any other single group of records.

### *What Can We Learn From the Census?*

The information provided by the Census varies depending upon the census year, but taken as a whole resource, the census can tell you a lot about your ancestors:

- The make-up of the family – you get a snapshot of the family at a specific point in time.
- A timeline for places of residence, including the state, county, and often the town or township.
- Approximate dates of birth.
- The state or country of birth.
- Approximate dates of marriage.
- The number of children born to a mother.
- The occupations of family members.
- The year of immigration to this country.
- The names of those who were military veterans.
- Lots of other great stuff.

There have been 23 U.S. Federal Censuses to date, but because federal privacy law prohibits release of population schedules for 72 years, only the first 15, the 1790-1930 census schedules, are currently available for research. The original 1890 schedules were severely damaged due to a fire in 1921 and only fragments remain. The 1940 U.S. Census will be released to the public on 2 April of 2014.

For purposes of today's discussion, we will divide the 15 U.S. Censuses available for research into the following groupings: 1790 - 1840, 1850 - 1870, 1880, and 1900 - 1930.

**1790 - 1840.** Population schedules for 1790 - 1840 are useful for locating the residence of a family. Only the names of the heads of free families are reported; information about other members of the household are limited to separate counts by sex and age group for free white

persons, other free persons, and slaves. Judicious use of the age grouping from one census to the next can help in approximating a birth year.

In 1820, columns reporting the number of aliens and the numbers of persons engaged in agriculture, commerce, and manufactures were added. The census of 1830 included the numbers of deaf and dumb and blind persons. And in 1840, additional categories were added the insane and idiotic, persons over twenty who could not read and write, and the name and age of Revolutionary and military pensioners. Occupational categories were expanded to seven: mining; agriculture; commerce; manufactures and trades; navigation of the ocean; navigation of canals, lakes, and rivers; and learned professions and engineers.

Since names were not given for all members of the household, and since statistics include any person living in the household, it is difficult to draw provable conclusions about a family from the data in these early censuses. The data could be for family members, but could also include relatives, boarders, hired hands, and servants.

Nevertheless, the 1790 - 1840 censuses are invaluable for locating a family and tracing its migrations. When you know the place of residence of an ancestral family, you know where to look for other records such as wills, deeds, and records of marriages, births, and deaths.

## **1850 – 1930 U.S. Censuses**

In 1850, the census expanded to give us the name, sex color, age, occupation and birthplace of each free member of the household, the value of real estate owned, whether a child had attended school that year, whether a person over 20 could read and write, and whether any household member was deaf, dumb, blind, or insane. Each subsequent census added more data. For the first time, we could see 2<sup>nd</sup> great granddaddy living in 3<sup>rd</sup> great granddaddy's household and follow individual family members from census to census. Detailed family analysis had arrived.

We will look at these censuses through the kind of information offered on each one:

- **Names entire household:** Every one of these censuses identifies every member of each household. Beginning with the 1880 census, they all identify the relationship between the household member and the head of house.
- **Date of birth:** The 1850-1880 and 1910-1930 censuses provide a person's age; only the 1900 census delivers the person's month and year of birth. Exceptions to this occur when a listed person was born "within the year" – within the 12 months leading up to the official census day. Both the 1870 and 1880 census reports include the month and year of birth for these folks.
- **Place of birth:** The 1850-1930 censuses also provide every person's state or country of birth.
- **Date of marriage:** The 1850 - 1880 censuses report whether a person had married within the year – again, the year before the official census day. The 1900 and 1910 censuses ask the number of years of marriage for each married person.
- **Number of children:** The 1900 and **1910** censuses report the number of children that were born to each woman and how many were still living at the time of the census.

- **Immigration:** The 1900 – 1930 censuses show the individual's year of immigration to the United States. Follow this up by using these dates to locate ships' passenger lists.
- **Naturalization:** The **1870** census has a column titled "Male Citizens of the U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards." If man from another country had this column checked, it meant that he had been naturalized by 1870.

The 1900 - 1930 censuses have columns that indicate an individual's naturalization status. The answers are "Al" for alien, "Pa" for "first papers," and "Na" for naturalized. The **1920** census also provides the year of naturalization.

- **Foreign-born parents:** The 1870 census has a column that was checked for people with foreign born parents. The 1880 - 1930 census reports have columns identifying the birthplaces of each person's parents.
- **Military Service:** The 1910 census identifies survivors of Union and Confederate army or navy service, and the 1930 census marks Civil War veterans with the abbreviation "CW." The **1930** census also identifies service in other wars: "Sp" indicates service in the Spanish-American War, "Phil" for the Philippine Insurrection, "Box" for the Boxer Rebellion, "Mex" for the Mexican Expedition, and "WW" for World War I.
- **Real property:** The 1850 - 1870 censuses report on the value of real estate owned by each individual. The 1900 - 1930 censuses report whether the person owned ("O") or rented ("R") the home or farm where they were living. For people who owned their property, the 1900 - 1920 censuses also reported whether or not the owner had a mortgage on the property. And the 1930 census indicates the value of the property, if owned, or the monthly rental, if rented. These clues should lead researchers to the county recorder's office or equivalent agency for deeds, mortgages, and property tax records.
- **Other data:** All of these censuses report the person's occupation, though with varying detail. The answers to these questions could lead you to the Agriculture Schedule or Manufacturing Schedule for those censuses that have them. Agricultural census schedules exist for 1850-1880; manufacturing census schedules exist for 1820 and 1850-1880.

Becoming familiar with what the various census reports contain, and studying all of the fields on the census will provide a surprising amount of information about your ancestors and may open new paths of research.

### ***The U. S. Census Search – Putting it All to Use***

The first step in every census search is to gather as much information as possible before you start – names, already known, known or suspected locations where your people lived, the names of brothers and sisters, etc.

The next step is to select your search resource. Not too many years ago, this discussion would have covered published census indexes and census abstracts. These days there are a several online resources you can use to search the census and each requires specific types of searching. Below is a description of each of these sources with some tips on how to search each one individually.

### **Ancestry.com**

This is a subscription site, but it is free in most public libraries and at all Family History Centers.

- Contains all US Censuses from 1790-1930
- Has some State censuses
- Soundex search, exact name search, or wildcard (\*) search
- Allows a State and County search
- In 1850-1930 Census you can search a year range of +/- 0, 1,2, 5, 10, 20
- Retrieved results organized by state A-Z
- Allows viewing of original images and advanced features for saving or printing images

### **HeritageQuestOnline.com**

- Contains all US Censuses from 1790-1930 but does not have comprehensive indexes
- 1790-1820, 1860-1870, 1890-1920 all fully indexed
- 1880 is partially indexed (23 states) and 1900 is partially indexed (5 states)
- No Soundex searches
- Results sorted by state or county
- Allows viewing of original images and features for printing

### **Genealogy.com**

- 1790-1820, 1870, and 1900 indexed by head of household
- 1860-1870, 1890, 1910 are every name indexed
- 1830-1850, 1880, 1920-1930 partially or not all indexed

### **FamilySearch.org**

- Contains the 1850-1930 Censuses
- No images for the 1880 Census
- Contains every name index with significant search engine
- Soundex or exact name search and wildcard searches possible
- Search with age range +/- 2, 5, 10, 20
- Can search by just head of household, race, birthplace
- Links on site to allow for viewing and printing of original images

### **Census-Online.com**

- Provides information about Censuses for specific geographic location from 1790-1930 that are available online
- Site doesn't have Census database—merely provides links to various online databases

### **CensusFinder.com**

- Similar to Census-Online in that it provides links to other databases