

Mastering Census Records

What are census records?

- An official count or survey of a population. A census records information about members of a population.
- How the records were created: Theoretically, census enumerators went door to door and talked to the head of the household. Theoretically, everyone who was living in the United States at the time was counted.
- Census records are often the best starting point for genealogical research once family sources have been exhausted. They are the best records of families and individuals that exist in the U.S. People are grouped in families so relationships can be established. They provide a snapshot of a family at a particular point in time.
- Information found on census records can lead to many other sources. Clues on the census help you identify other relevant records. Many other records will be easier to find based on what you find in the census.

Federal Census

- The U.S. federal government has conducted a census every 10 years since 1790.
- 1790-1840 censuses—the head of the household is the only named individual. Tabulations of everyone else by age and sex. No relationships are listed. Early censuses were interested in counting individuals. How many men who could vote? How many men who could serve in the militia? The census was a means of determining each state's representation in the House of Representatives.
- 1850 on—every name censuses. From 1850 on, the census starts listing everyone in the household by name. Genealogists can gain the best information from these censuses.
- The 1940 census is the most recent census available to the public. There is a 72 year restriction on the release of census records. The 1950 census will be released in 2022.
- When conducting your research, start with the 1940 census and work backward.

1890 Census

- There was a fire in the basement of the department of commerce in 1921. Less than 1% of the records from 1890 survived.
- The 1890 special schedules that enumerate Union veterans of the Civil war and the widows of Union veterans can be a partial substitute for the missing 1890 census.
- City directories can also be a partial substitute for the missing 1890 census. A majority of the U.S. population resided in cities by this time.

Census Tips

- Check the next page on the census to make sure that there are not additional questions on the next page. Also check the next page in case the family is continued there. Also check surrounding pages to find relatives living nearby.

- Find all of the census records that you can. Don't skip census records if they're available. Each census asked slightly different questions. A lot may change in 10 years. Pay attention to older relatives living with a family--sometimes older relatives may move in with the younger generation.

State censuses

- In addition to the federal census, some states also conducted censuses of their own. State censuses can provide information on a family between federal census years. State censuses asked different questions than the federal census, often recording unique information. Which states conducted censuses?

https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/state_censuses.html

Census Records Limitations

- How good was the enumerator? Some were conscientious, others were not.
- Questionable information: Who answered the enumerator's questions? Was it the head of the household? Or a neighbor, a farm laborer, or perhaps even a child? The census does not tell us who answered an enumerator's questions. The person who answered might not know the birthplaces of a spouse's parents. (Or if it was a child answering the questions, they might not know the birthplace of their own parents.) Also, people may lie or be misunderstood. Enumerators often had trouble gathering information from recent immigrants who did not speak English well. Names were frequently misunderstood and misspelled. Names were often written as they sounded. Ages in census records are often suspect, especially for women. Mary Todd Lincoln (wife of Abraham Lincoln) aged only 7 years between the 1850 & 1860 censuses.
- Missing People: Many people do not trust the government's motives. Some refuse to answer enumerator's questions; others have lied. The boundaries of towns were ill-defined: some individuals & families may have been listed in the census twice while others were missed entirely. Some people lived in remote, out of the way places.
- Legibility: The original document may have worn or torn pages, faded and smeared ink, or poor handwriting. Indexers have to read the handwriting of the enumerator to create an index. You may also have trouble reading it.
- Even with their limitations, census records are some of the best records available when researching a family.