

Research Like a Pro with

U.S. Census Records

Genealogy Cheat Sheet

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Family Locket

What is a Census Record?

The United States government began taking a census of its citizens in 1790 to determine how many representatives a state was allowed in the House of Representatives and how much tax was owed by each state to the federal government. Every ten years census takers spread out over the country, visiting each household and recording important information on a census form. That census record is a look at the family at that moment in time. As the government wanted to know more information about its citizens, questions were added to the census form. Those questions changed from year to year depending on what was happening in the country.

Census Availability

Although the last census to be taken was 2010, only the 1940 and previous censuses are available to search because of privacy issues. A census is released 72 years after it is taken.

Most of the 1890 census was destroyed in an unfortunate fire and just a few fragments remain, including the veteran's schedule. This is known as the "Census of Union Veterans and Widows of the Civil War." Some confederate soldiers were accidentally listed.

The United States census records have been digitized and are available on [FamilySearch](#), [Ancestry](#), [My Heritage](#), and [Find My Past](#). If you can't find your ancestor on one website, try another as each search engine is different. Always look at the image to discover all of the information that is not indexed and to see if you agree with the indexers listing of your family's names. Often you can decipher a name more accurately because you know your family.

Fun Fact: The 1860 census was the first to note Native Americans, but only Native Americans who paid taxes.

When was each census taken?

An often overlooked aspect of the census is noting the date that the count was to take place. Beginning in the 1850 census, at the top of the NAME column, the date for the census can be found.

For example, in the 1900 census, at the top of the Name column, it says, "each person whose place of abode on June 1, 1900 was in this family... Include every person living on June 1, 1900. Omit children born since June 1, 1900."

Understanding the dating process can help you to better analyze your ancestor's household and the family members included. Each census had a specific date and each person living in the abode on that date was to be listed. The instructions for the enumerators included a time frame for them to complete their area assignment. From 1790 to 1870, they had anywhere from five to nine months to complete the field count. Starting in 1880, that was reduced to thirty days with exceptions given for larger communities.

Fun Fact: Census assignments were completed over a period of time. This resulted in occasional duplicate listings if a family had moved within that time period to a new Enumeration District.

Helpful Links

[Basic Family Information Found in the U.S. Census by Year](#)

[Census by Year](#): a detailed table from the [FamilySearch](#) wiki showing what was added and dropped from the census questions each census year.

[Atlas of Historical County Boundaries](#): hosted by The Newberry Library, this excellent website will help you understand the boundary changes in each United States county.

[Census Finder](#): This directory of free census records contains over 49,000 links to census records. Choose a state and see at a glance what state censuses, territorial censuses and any special censuses were taken to supplement the United States federal censuses.

[1790-1840 Census : Birth Year Calculations](#)

[Calculations](#): This very handy website does the math for you in figuring out the range for your ancestor's birth year, based on the tick marks of those early censuses.

What you might find in census records

- Name variations
- Birth year and birthplace
- Birthplace of parents
- Evidence of additional marriages
- Evidence of additional children
- Extended family members
- Occupations
- Military service
- Real estate (land) and personal estate (cash and other belongings)
- Education
- Immigration



Finding Ancestors in Census Records

On population schedules and beyond

Search for your ancestor
on each census that was
taken during their lifetime.

Census Search Tips

Some tricks and tips can help you be successful in your search in the census records. Few people were missed so often it is a finding problem if your ancestor is nowhere in the census. Maybe his or her name was misspelled or indexed incorrectly. Perhaps your family migrated west or moved back east and are not where you would expect them to be living. Here are some ideas to help you locate your elusive ancestor.

- Create a list of alternative spellings for your surnames
- Use wildcards to pick up name variants. An asterisk (*) matches zero or more characters. A question mark (?) matches one character. The only restrictions are that a) either the first or last character must be a non-wildcard character and b) names must contain at least three non-wildcard characters.
- Try no-name searches or use no surname and narrow by other fields like residence, birthplace, and age.
- Search for an unusual given name in the family.
- Use multiple census web sites – different indexers and different search engines.
- When all else fails browse the actual pages. Look through all the images for the area you think your ancestor must have been living.
- When trying to interpret handwriting look for the same letter somewhere else on the page.
- Try choosing one of your ancestors and locate every census that he would be listed in for his lifetime. Compile all of the information and see if you can discover something new about him.
- Watch for the follow-up post on the United States census where I'll give you ideas for how to analyze and use the census information that you've located, share some of my favorite links for census research, and demystify the non-population schedules.

Fun Fact: Because of the aftermath of the Civil War, an estimated 1.2 million Southerners were not enumerated on the 1870 census.

Non Population Schedules

Mortality Schedules 1850-1885

Mortality schedules list people who died during the previous 12 months. They include the family and dwelling number that the person's family was enumerated on in the population schedule. Mortality schedules were in 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880. In 1885, Colorado, Florida, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, and South Dakota took a mortality schedule. Ancestry.com has an indexed collection with images at "[U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885](#)." You'll find information such as the month he died, cause of death, and number of days ill.

Veterans Schedules 1840 and 1890

1840 Veterans Schedules: When the 1840 census was taken, the enumerators listed living pensioners of the Revolutionary War or other military service on the back of the population schedules. They listed pensioners' ages and persons with whom they were living. The names are published online in the Ancestry.com database "[Revolutionary War Pensioner Census, 1841](#)."

1890 Veterans Schedules: This one-time schedule was conducted to help Union veterans find compatriots to assist in the procurement of pensions and for the government to identify the extent of their future monetary obligations. Unfortunately nearly all of the schedules for the states of Alabama through Kansas and about half of Kentucky are missing. Check for your family members on the Ancestry database, "[1890 Veterans' Schedules](#)" and the FamilySearch collection "[United States Census of Union Veterans and Widows of the Civil War, 1890](#)." If your ancestor fought in the Confederacy, he may still be listed, just with his name crossed out.

Slave Schedules 1850 and 1860

Prior to 1850, enslaved individuals in a household were listed after the free individuals. In 1850 and 1860, a different schedule was used and listed the residence and name of the slave owner, the number of slaves owned, age, gender, and color of each slave. If you're doing African-American research, these schedules can give clues to a family, but no names are mentioned for the most part. FamilySearch has the [1850 Slave Schedules](#). Ancestry has the [1850 Slave Schedules](#) and the [1860 Slave Schedules](#).

Defective, Dependent, & Delinquent Schedules 1880

1880 was the only year the federal government required a separate schedule for the following classes: insane, idiots, deaf-mutes, blind, paupers and indigent persons, homeless children, and prisoners. As offensive as those terms are today, that was the terminology used by our ancestors. Ancestry has the digitized and indexed collection, [U.S. Federal census – 1880 Schedules of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes](#).

Other Non-Population Schedules 1850-1880

The U.S. federal government wanted to know about the agriculture, manufacturing, industry, and social statistics in any given location, hence the non-population schedules. Ancestry hosts this [collection](#) and gives a very helpful explanation of what you will find in each type of census.



Citing Census Records

Reference Notes for Various Census Records

1790 Census, Rowan County, North Carolina, p. 300 (penned), line 6, John Johnston; digital image, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.FamilySearch.org> : accessed 13 Nov 2018); citing NARA microfilm publication M637 roll 7.

1800 U.S. Federal Census, Rowan County, North Carolina, p. 327 (penned), line 1, John Johnston; digital image, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org> : accessed 9 Nov 2018); citing NARA microfilm publication M32 roll 33.

1810 U.S. Census, Halifax County, North Carolina, p. 28 (penned), line 2, Randol Johnson; digital image, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 13 Nov 2018); citing NARA microfilm publication M252, roll 38.

1820 U.S. Census, Morgan County, Georgia, Captain Campbell's District, p.92 (penned), line 6, Robert Cessney; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 13 December 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication M33, roll10.

1830 U.S. Census, Morgan County, Georgia, District 277, p.239 (penned), line 22, Robert Cessna; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 13 December 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication M19, roll19.

1840 U.S. Census, DeKalb County, Alabama, population schedule, Northern District, S.C. Newnan, p. 7 (penned), line 31, F.B. Royston household; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 27 September 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication M704, roll 4.

1850 U.S. Census, Chambers County, Alabama, population schedule, 19th District, p. 318 (stamped), dwelling 749, family 749, Thomas B Royston household; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 17 August 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication M432, roll 2.

1850 U.S. Census, Hawkins County, Tennessee, agricultural schedule, District 15, p. 615 (penned), line 14, Robert Dyer; digital image, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 10 Dec 2018); citing NARA microfilm publication T1135, roll 2.

1860 U.S. Census, Dallas County, Texas, population schedule, Precinct 6, p. 120 (penned), dwelling 834, family 835, H. Weatherford household; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 19 September 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication M653, roll 1292.

1860 U.S. Census, Chambers County, Alabama, slave schedule, Northern Division, page 48 (penned), Thomas B. Royston owner; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://ancestry.com>: accessed 13 November 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication M653 roll 4.

1870 U.S. Census, population schedule, negative search for Robert C Royston; database with images, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 26 April 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication M593.

1880 U.S. Census, Johnson County, Texas, population schedule, precinct 1, enumeration district (ED) 81, sheet 271A (stamped), p.41 (penned), dwelling 356, family 362, Robert C Royston household; digital image, *Ancestry*, (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 26 April 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication T9, roll 1313.

1880 U.S. Census, Hawkins County, Tennessee, mortality schedule, 4th District, p. 999 (penned), line 10, family 171, John R. Dyer; image, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 12 Nov 2018); citing NARA microfilm publication T655, roll 29.

1890 U.S. Census, Hawkins County, Tennessee, veteran's schedule, civil district 4, enumeration district (ED) 121, p. 1 (penned), house 25, family 25, Richard F. Dyer, digital image, *Ancestry*, (<https://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 29 Dec 2018); citing NARA microfilm publication M123, roll 95.

1900 U.S. Census, Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory, population schedule, township 2S range 5W, enumeration district (ED) 166, sheet 24B (penned), dwelling 378, family 396, W.H. Shults; digital image, *Ancestry*, (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 17 February 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication T623, roll 1849.

1910 U.S. Federal Census, Jefferson County, Oklahoma, population schedule, Earl Township, enumeration district (ED) 152, sheet: 9A (penned), dwelling 106, family 107, Houston Shults household; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2 March 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 1254.

1920 U.S. Census, Okfuskee County, Oklahoma, population schedule, Okemah Township, enumeration district (ED) 150, sheet 11A, (penned), family 185, W.H. Shults household; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 7 March 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication T625, roll 1478.

1930 U.S. Census, Hockley County, Texas, population schedule, Justice Precinct 5, enumeration district (ED) 110-7, sheet 3A (penned), p. 248 (stamped), dwelling 35, family 36, William H Shults household; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 10 March 2016,); citing NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 2357.

1940 U.S. Census, Fresno County, California, population schedule, Fairview, enumeration district (ED) 10-115, sheet 61 B (penned), family 13, William H. Shults household; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 10 March 2016); citing NARA microfilm publication T627, roll 205.



Analyzing Census Records

Fun Fact: In the 1940 census, an X marks the individual giving the household information. Don't we wish we knew the informant on all of the other censuses...

Steps for Analyzing a Census Record

1. Abstract all the information.

Don't be tempted just to copy the names, ages, and birthplaces. Take note of occupations, land and property values, and all other data. I like to use a table in a Google Doc to list the information. As in any transcription or abstraction project, just the act of copying down the information helps you to process it.

2. Ask questions.

What do you notice about this census? What questions do you have about the family that arise from the information on the census? i.e. George is listed as 26 years older than Martha. Was this a 2nd marriage?

3. Form hypotheses.

Make an informed guess about what might have happened in the family. i.e. Martha was born about 1808, if her age is correct on the census. Her first marriage would be most likely after 1824.

4. List other records to search.

What records might answer the questions that are raised from the census information? i.e. "Search marriage records of Georgia for the marriage of a Martha and George W. Dillard about 1824."

Where to Look Next

Clues from census records often lead to additional record sets that flesh out the stories of our ancestors. Here are some records that you can search after finding a clue in a census:

Revolutionary War Records

1840 Census: **Revolutionary War service**; check military rosters and bounty land grants.

Land and Tax Records

1850 -1940 Censuses: **Land ownership** questions; if "owned land" is indicated, look for land and tax records.

Probate Records

1860 & 1870 Censuses: **Value of personal estate**, if over \$100; check for probate records.

Naturalization Records

1900: **Citizenship**: year of immigration to the US; number of years in the US, whether still an alien, having applied for citizenship, or naturalized (AL=Alien, PA=First Papers Filed, NA=Naturalized); check ship passenger lists, letters of intent, naturalization records

Civil War Records

1910: **Whether a survivor of Union or Confederate Army or Navy** (column 30 – UA=Survivor of the Union Army; UN=Survivor of the Union Navy; CA=Survivor of the Confederate Army; CN=Survivor of the Confederate Navy); check Civil War muster rolls, pension records, if Confederate, check state pension records.

Source List

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