

Census of All Kinds

Building and Researching Your Family Tree, a Twelve Part Series

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Why the Census Exists

- The earliest U.S. Federal Census was completed in 1790.
- Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution requires a decennial census.

“Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States... according to their respective Numbers... 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.”

- The census was important to the framers of the constitution because representation in U.S. Government is designed to be based on population not wealth or land ownership.
- The 1790 Census asked only 6 questions. Overtime the Census became a way to also collect important social statistics.

Where to Access the Census

The U.S. Federal Census is kept confidential for 72 years. Currently, the 1790-1940 censuses are available. The 1950 Census is scheduled to be released on April 1st, 2022. The available censuses can be accessed from the following databases:

- Familysearch.org (FREE)
- Ancestry Library Edition (FREE at any Waco McLennan County Library location)
- Fold3 (FREE with WMCL card)
- Heritage Quest (FREE with WMCL card)

To access the library databases for free, follow these steps:

1. Visit www.wacolibrary.org
2. Click “Learning & Research” from the menu
3. Click “History & Genealogy”
4. Select database
5. Login using your Waco-McLennan County Library Card

How the Data was Collected

Enumerators

These are the people responsible for collecting the information for the census. Originally, this job was done by U.S. Marshalls, but beginning in 1880, citizens were hired to perform this job. In 1960, mail in forms were used more frequently than door-to-door enumerators. The 2020 Census was performed primarily online.

Look up the instructions used by enumerators from a given year to better understand how they were expected to record information.

Enumeration District

This is the amount of land that could be covered by a single enumerator in the time allotted in a single census period. Find maps of the enumeration districts between 1900-1940 for free on FamilySearch.

The enumeration district number can be found at the top of the census form. Knowing the location of an enumeration district can help you better understand the specific location where your ancestors lived.

What You Can Find

The questions on the census change from year to year. In general, the amount of information obtained increased from 1790 until 1940.

1790-1840

Only the head of household's name is listed on the census in these years. All other individuals will be tallied in categories based on age, sex, and race. Some questions about citizenship, military service, education, industry, and disability are asked in various years.

1850-1880

Beginning in 1850, all free individuals in a household are listed by name (enslaved people are still tallied based on age, sex, and race in 1850 & 1860). In 1880, the relationship to the head of household is added. Other new questions during these years include occupation, place of birth, estate value, education, marital status, and specific age.

Supplemental schedules are also available during these years. These include slave schedules, mortality, agricultural. Manufacturing/industrial, social statistics, and the Dependent, Defective, and Delinquent Classes. The availability of the supplemental schedules varies by year and location.

1890

Most records from the 1890 U.S. Federal Census were lost to a fire in 1921. Records that remain include the veteran's schedule, Indian Territory, and fragments from Alabama, Washington DC, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, and Texas. Many organizations have compiled reconstructed 1890 Censuses for their area. Look for these as print indexes.

1900-1940

During the early 20th Century, the most in-depth questions are asked. Some of the new questions asked during this time include, highest level of education completed, citizenship status, cost of housing, wage, years married, number of children, address, and who answered the questions (1940).

Search Tips

- Try a variety of name and spelling combinations.
- Information on the census can be incorrect. Find confirmation from other records.
- Look for every census available in a person's lifetime.
- If you are having trouble locating a family, look for their neighbors to see if they were still living near each other in a different census year.
- Find the census records for all children of you ancestors. Often parents lived with one of their children later in life.
- In addition to the U.S. Federal Census, there are also various state census records. Check those.

Genealogy Links

Census References

Enumerator Instructions www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/census_instructions/

Census Timeline and Questions usa.ipums.org/usa/resources/voliii/measuring_america.pdf

Census Forms

www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms

www.ancestry.com/cs/census-forms

www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/questionnaires/