

U.S. Census Research: Facts, Tips, and Tricks

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Below you'll find a list of my tips and tricks, as well as helpful facts, about US Census research. For the most part, this is done by year, but the beginning is a short introductory to census research and then generalized census tips. If you have one that is not on this page, by all means, [send it to me](#) as I will be updating this article periodically! Good luck everyone!

Introduction

Census records are probably the number one tool used by genealogist, and for a good reason: census records list the locality (at least at the state level) of the ancestor; census records give at least an estimated birth date, if not the full date; census records can tell you what county, state, or country your ancestor was born in; census records, after 1850, can tell you who all were living in a household, perhaps an in-law, which can give a clue to the maternal line of the family; census records 1860 and before can tell you if they owned slaves and how many; slave schedules for certain years even give the approximate age of the slave (although no name); later census records can tell you how much value their land and other property had; census information can give you their occupation, or at least tell you if they worked in the agricultural, commercial, or manufacturing industries; census information can tell you in a child was in school, if anyone in the family was illiterate, if anyone in the family was deaf, blind, or mute; later information can tell you how long a couple have been married, if they were married within the year, and give clues to whether this is their first marriage or a later marriage. With all this information, it's not wonder census records are so popular with genealogists.

One of the first and perhaps greatest assets of census information is that it provides a locality of your ancestor. This is very helpful for digging for other records. Without knowing at least the county your ancestor lived in, it will be near impossible to locate birth, death, or marriage certificates. Earlier census records listed only county and town within a state and sometimes just the county. Not only that, but some of these records were put in alphabetical order rather than by the order of households visited which can make searching through earlier records less useful. Later census records are the best source of census information that gives more specific locality. Starting with the 1850 census, whole households were listed rather than just head of the household, so more of a sense of order came to census records (more about this later), and households were listed in the order visited rather than alphabetical. The closer the record is to present day, the more information on locality given. With census records from the 1900's, it becomes commonplace to see households broken down by street and sometimes even the house number was give for each household.

Not only do census records provide a locality for ancestors; however, they can help to straighten out a family line (or confuse them even further in some cases!). For instance, say you have an ancestor named Peter Black (which I do), who was alive in 1850. If you perform a quick index search of 1850 census records, you could end up with a list of a dozen or more hits. If you know where Peter lived in 1850, you can narrow it down. If you know he lived in the west/central part of Illinois, you can narrow it down to the county level if you know what counties are located there. If you know what county he lived in, say Vermilion Co., IL, then you can start your search there and if it's not him, spread out a

little bit. For earlier census years, before everyone in the household was enumerated, this can actually make it more difficult to find your ancestor. An example is my ancestor David Bradford. The 1790 census enumerates 3 men named David Bradford in North Carolina. This can create a lot of confusion while searching census records. Two men named David Bradford are enumerated in the same county, so how do you tell which is your line? For this, you need to have an idea when your David was born and then compare the ages to the approximate ages in the census record.

Earlier census records do not give exact age or year of birth. The 1790 census is the hardest to use for age as it sorts free white males in to 2 age groups: over 16 and under 16. Free white women are grouped together into one category, as well as "free colored" and slaves. Later census records are broken up more and more so that age groups are under 10 years of age, 10-16 years of age, etc. This definitely helps to narrow it down, but not by a lot. Finally, with the advent of the 1850 census, actual ages for each person are given. Since the 1850 census counts and records every person in the household, they are finally able to give exact ages for each person, rather than an estimate. For the pre-1850 census, the 1820 is perhaps the most useful for free white males. The reason for this is that two groups are 16-18 and 16-26. This appears confusing, but can be quite useful. If there is a male who is between the ages of 19-26, he will also be counted both in the category for 16-18 and 16-26. Many make the mistake of thinking this means these are 2 separate boys, but in reality, they are one and the same. On the other hand, if you have a 17 year old boy in the house, he will only be counted for the 16-18 group and not in the 16-26. This helps you narrow down the age to be between 16-18 years old. Unfortunately, the 1820 census does not do this for girls.

Beginning with the 1850 census, birthplaces were also given for each person, as well as the parents in many years. This can be very helpful to have. The problem with this is that birth places given are not always correct. For instance, you may have an ancestor enumerated 1850-1910. Each year, their birthplace is given as a different place, so which one is correct? In instances like this, I prefer using the earliest record and starting my search there. The reason is that they are younger and more likely to be accurate. If in 1850 they were still a minor living with their parents, that would be your best bet. But don't discount the later years either until you find out for sure. Experience has taught me that someone might remember being born in one place because all their siblings were born there and it was their hometown, but in reality, they may have been visiting family and years later remember, "Oh! Wait a minute, I was born *here*, not *there*! I can't believe I forgot that." My paternal grandmother did that.

Proceed with caution: A few warnings for using census information

Some of the warnings I can give you on census research is that, even though many census records for a family are accurate, they are not absolute facts written in stone. So you have your great grandma's birth certificate that says she was born in 1885 and the 1900 census says 1887? Don't just assume that is the wrong person! Maybe it really is the wrong person, but record that information just in case. Most likely, the person giving the information couldn't remember the exact date. Read more about [why dates don't match](#) in a terrific article written by Melody Lassalle.

Do you have an ancestor who immigrated to the country? Do you have an ancestor that migrated from one part of the country to another? What about an ancestor who moved from one state to a neighboring state? Possibly an ancestor who moved from one county to another within the same state?

How about an ancestor who stayed in the same place their whole life? If any of the above describe your ancestor, don't just assume that their surname would be written correctly. Many people before the turn of the century were illiterate and couldn't spell their own last name. On top of that, many times census takers wrote surnames (and first names) as they sounded. Census enumerators were not necessarily from the same area as your ancestor. Have an ancestor named Barringer, like me? Be sure to check other spellings like "Bearinger." Was your ancestor foreign, maybe German? If so, it may have sounded more like "Baaringer" to the census taker. Ancestor not foreign? Maybe the census taker was, or maybe not foreign, but from a different part of the country with different accents. A good example of a "versatile" surname is Kerns. I've seen well over 20 different spellings for just one family line! Here is an odd one, I have an ancestor surnamed Foxworthy. Another researcher and I spent years looking for them in the IL census. She finally found them listed as "Coxweathen"! Our only explanation for that is the Foxworthy's were from VA and the census taker was not familiar with their accent. Bottom line – don't discard census information if it doesn't exactly match your information.

Year-by-year breakdown of census records:

1790:

States Available: CT, ME, MD, MA, NH, NY, NC, PA, RI, SC, VT

1800:

States Available: CT, DE, DC, ME, MD, MA, NH, NY, NC, PA, RI, SC, VT

1810:

Occupation

In 1810, census takers were instructed to get information regarding manufacturing. However, since they were not told what questions to ask, the information collected varied widely.

Clues about livestock may lead to personal property tax records, kept by the county treasurer, county auditor, or equivalent official.

States Available: CT, DE, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, NH, NY, NC, PA, RI, SC, TN, VT

1820:

Immigration and Naturalization:

The 1820 census reported the number of "Foreigners not naturalized" in each household. Although this

does not specify which person(s) in the household were aliens, this clue should tip off the researcher to the following things:

- To search for known household members in immigration records
- To be alert to clues in other records that point to the suspected immigrant's possible foreign origins
- To search for possible later naturalization records for the suspected immigrant.

Unfortunately, there are relatively few ship passenger lists (immigration records) before January 1, 1820, when the Federal Government began requiring ship captains to present such lists to the collectors of customs.

Occupation:

The 1820 census reported the number of persons in each household who engaged in agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing.

Although not all farmers owned land or livestock, but if household members were listed in agriculture, it is worthwhile to check for deeds and mortgages in the county recorder's office, and for real and personal property tax records kept by the county auditor, county treasurer, or equivalent official.

If household members engaged in manufacturing, the researcher should examine NARA microfilm publication M279, Records of the 1820 Census of Manufactures (there are 27 rolls). According to the instructions given to the census takers, persons engaged in manufacturing included both employees in "manufacturing establishments" and "artificers, handicrafts men, and mechanics whose labor is preeminently of the hand, and not upon the field." The manufacturing census schedules in M279 include information about:

- The type of business
- Kinds and quantities of raw materials used
- Number of persons employed
- Number and type of machinery
- Expenditures for capital (equipment) and wages
- Type and quality of goods produced annually
- General remarks

Three considerations need to be made. First, a person listed as a manufacturer in the population census may not be included in the 1820 manufacturing schedules in M279. Second, a household may include only persons "engaged in agriculture" according to the population census, yet have a manufacturing schedule in M279. Third, persons who are not listed as head of household in the population census may have a manufacturing schedule in M279.

States Available: CT, DE, DC, GA, IL, IN, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MS, NH, NY, NC, OH, PA, RI, SC, TN, VT, VA

1830:

Immigration and Naturalization:

Like the 1820 census, the 1830 census reported the number of "ALIENS--Foreigners not naturalized" in each household. As with the 1820 census, this should tip off research to search immigration records, and later naturalization records.

States Available: AL, AR, CT, DE, DC, FL, GA, IL, IN, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MS, MO, NH, NJ, NY, NC, OH, PA, RI, SC, TN, VT, VA

1840:

Military:

The 1840 census asked for names and ages of "Pensioners for Revolutionary or Military Services, Included in the Foregoing [Household]." Pensioners included both veterans and widows. This information about pensioners should lead the researcher to Revolutionary War military service and pension records. The pension files, which are especially useful, have been reproduced in [NARA](#) microfilm publication M804, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files (2,670 rolls). Military service records are also available on microfilm; for more information see listings for Record Group 93, War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, in Microfilm Resources for Research: A Comprehensive Catalog (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1996), which is available through [NARA](#). Since elderly persons usually resided with kinfolk, the pensioners' presence in these households should be a clue that the pensioner may be related to someone in the household.

Occupation:

The 1840 census reported the number of persons in each household who were employed in:

- mining
- agriculture (researchers should check land and tax records kept by county officials)
- commerce manufactures and trades
- navigation of the ocean, lakes, and rivers
- learned professions and engineers.

States Available: AL, AR, CT, DE, DC, FL, GA, IL, IN, IA, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MS, MO, NH, NJ, NY, NC, OH, PA, RI, SC, TN, VT, VA, WI

1850:

Marriage:

The 1850 census indicate whether the person had married within the year. "Within the year" means during the year before the official census day, that is, between June 1, 1849 and May 31, 1850, for the 1850 census as the official census day was June 1, 1850.

States Available: AL, AR, CA, CT, DE, DC, FL, GA, IL, IN, IA, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, OH, OR, PA, RI, SC, TN, TX, UT, VA, WI

1860:

Marriage:

Like the 1850 census before it, the 1860 census indicates whether the person had married within the year. In this case, "Within the year" means between June 1, 1859 and May 31, 1860 as the official census day was June 1, 1860.

States Available: AL, AR, CA, CT, Dakota Territory, DE, DC, FL, GA, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, NE, NV, NH, NM, NY, NC, OH, OR, PA, RI, SC, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WA, WI

1870:

Marriage:

Like the 1850 and 1860 censuses, the 1870 census indicates whether the person had married within the year. In this case, "Within the year" mean between June 1, 1869 and May 31, 1870 as the official census day was June 1, 1870.

Immigration and Naturalization:

The 1870 census has a check mark for "Male Citizens of the U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards." This can be especially helpful if the person was a foreign-born citizen because this means he become naturalized by 1870. This can help narrow down the dates to look for naturalization records for this person.

Another clue to help with figuring out when a line came to the United States, the 1870 census have check marks if the person's parents were "of foreign birth."

States Available: AL, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, Dakota Territory, DE, DC, FL, GA, ID, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, OH, OR, PA, SC, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WA, WV, WI, WY

1880:

Birth:

The 1880 census indicate the person's parents' birthplaces.

Marriage:

Like the 1850-1870 census, the 1880 census indicates whether the person had married within the year.

In this case, "within the year" means between June 1, 1879 and May 31, 1880 as the official census day was June 1, 1880.

States Available: AL, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, Dakota Territory, DE, DC, FL, GA, ID, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, OH, OR, PA, SC, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WA, WV, WI, WY

1885:

Believe it or not, there was actually an 1885 Federal census conducted, but only a few states were listed.

States Available: CO, Dakota Territory, FL, NB and NM

1890:

Please [visit NARA's site](#) to learn more about the fate of the 1890 census

1900

Birth:

The 1900 census indicate the person's parents' birthplaces.

Marriage:

The 1900 census gives the number of years of marriage for each married person

Immigration and Naturalization:

The 1900 census reports the person's year of immigration to the United States. This information can help in locating a ship passenger arrival list.

Related to immigration, the 1900 census indicates the person's naturalization status. The answers are "Al" for alien, "Pa" for "first papers," and "Na" for naturalized.

States Available: All states

1910:

Birth:

The 1910 census indicate the person's parents' birthplaces.

Marriage:

The 1910 census gives the number of years of marriage for each married person

Immigration and Naturalization:

The 1910 census reports the person's year of immigration to the United States. This information can help in locating a ship passenger arrival list.

Related to immigration, the 1910 census indicates the person's naturalization status. The answers are "Al" for alien, "Pa" for "first papers," and "Na" for naturalized.

States Available: All states and Puerto Rico

1920:

Birth:

The 1920 census indicate the person's parents' birthplaces.

Immigration and Naturalization:

The 1920 census reports the person's year of immigration to the United States. This information can help in locating a ship passenger arrival list.

Related to immigration, the 1920 census indicates the person's naturalization status. The answers are "Al" for alien, "Pa" for "first papers," and "Na" for naturalized.

States Available: All states and Guam, Panama, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

1930:

The census day was April 1, 1930

A total of 32 questions were asked of each household, including 4 that were new. The new questions were as follows:

- Value of home, if owned, or monthly rental, if rented
- If they owned a Radio set
- Age at first marriage

This information is very helpful.

- Veteran

This can tell us a lot! First, if the veteran is elderly, they could have served in the Civil war (marked with a CW). Mostly likely though, they served in the Mexican war or World War I.

Another interesting tidbit is that only 12 southern states were soundexed, and in some cases, only part of the state was soundexed. Below is a list of states (and counties if a partial state) have a soundex available:

- Alabama
- Arkansas
- Florida
- Georgia
- Kentucky (only counties of Bell, Floyd, Harlan, Kenton, Muhlenberg, Perry and Pike)
- Louisiana
- Mississippi
- North Carolina
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Virginia
- West Virginia (only counties of Fayette, Harrison, Kanawha, Logan, McDowell, Mercer, and Raleigh)

A great source is [this site at NARA](#), all about the 1930 census and how to search the census.

Birth:

The 1930 census indicate the person's parents' birthplaces.

Immigration and Naturalization:

The 1930 census reports the person's year of immigration to the United States. This information can help in locating a ship passenger arrival list.

Related to immigration, the 1930 census indicates the person's naturalization status. The answers are "Al" for alien, "Pa" for "first papers," and "Na" for naturalized.

States Available: All states

1940 and on:

You won't find these census records in the archives or Family History Centers. Law stipulates that census records will not be made available until 72 years after the census. Why 72 years? Although I haven't found any specific information on this, I suspect it has to do with the life expectancy at the time of the passage of this law. If that is the case, in the future, this time might be extended if the US life expectancy continues to rise. Below are the dates that the next censuses will be released:

- 1940: 2012
- 1950: 2022
- 1960: 2032
- 1970: 2042
- 1980: 2052
- 1990: 2062
- 2000: 2072

Related Links for Further Reading:

- [All Census Records](http://allcensusrecords.com) (allcensusrecords.com)
- [Why dates don't match](#) (by Melody Lasselle)
- [Reexamining the Census](#) (by Melody Lasselle)
- [Special Federal Censuses](http://ancestry.com) (ancestry.com)
- [Download forms 1790-1930](http://ancestry.com) (ancestry.com)
- [Download forms 1790-1930](http://genealogy.com) (genealogy.com)
- [Download forms 1790-1920](http://FamilySearch.org) (Family Search.org)
- [Soundex System : How it Work](http://rootsweb.com) (rootsweb.com)
- [Geostat Historical Census Browser](#) (UVA)
- [Fate of the 1890 Population Census, part 1](#) (NARA)
- [Fate of the 1890 Population Census, part 2](#) (NARA)
- [Native Americans in the Census, 1860-1890](#) (NARA)
- [History of Enumeration Procedures, 1790-1940](#) (IPUMS)
- [Non-Population Schedules and Special Federal Censuses](#) (FamilyHistory101)
- [Every 10 years : Key to the United States Census, 1790-1930](http://genealogy.com) (genealogy.com)
- [1850 and 1860 Census, Schedule 2, Slave Inhabitants by David E. Paterson](#) (Afrigeneas.com)
- [Measuring America : the Decennial Censuses from 1790-2000, part 1](http://census.gov) (census.gov – includes census enumerator instructions and questions to ask)