

# Census Records

## Why the Census?

The U.S. Federal Census has been enumerated, or counted, every 10 years since 1790. Mandated by the Constitution, the census provides data used to determine the allocation of federal funding and the number of seats each state holds in the House of Representatives.

For genealogists, these records document the movement and changes of American families each decade from 1790 to 1950 (the most recent year available to the public). Census records can help piece together a timeline of your family history.

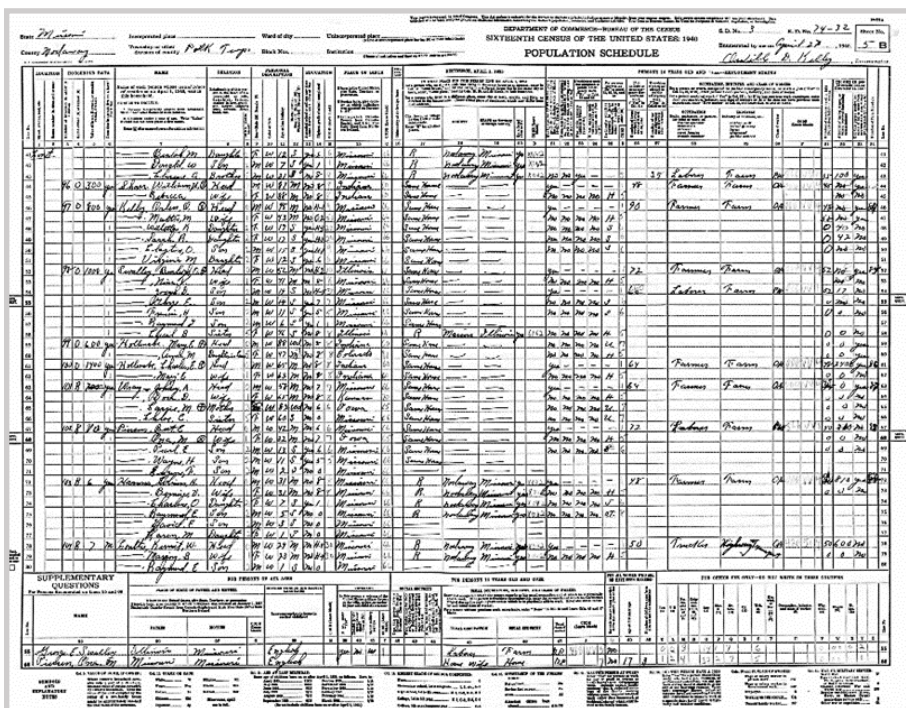
## Where can I find Census records?

AncestryLibrary (accessible from [PPLD's Regional History and Genealogy page](#)) and FamilySearch.org are great places to start, though many additional genealogy databases provide access to census records. From these databases, you can search across all census records or within specific census year record sets.

The [National Archives and Records Administration \(NARA\)](#) details when specific censuses and schedules were conducted and where they can be accessed.

### Tip!

Take census records with a grain of salt. Names, ages, occupations, etc. could have been incorrectly recorded. When relationships are included, these are likely, but not proof of, family relationships.



1940 Federal Census

## Basic Search Strategy

1. From a genealogy database, start with a broad search. Fill in the information fields you know. It's okay to leave fields blank.
2. You can narrow your search results with more details or filters. Note that the amount and types of information you search for will alter how the databases ranks your results and may exclude potential record matches. If your ancestor doesn't appear in the search results, experiment with different combinations of information.

## Information you might find on a Census:

- Name
- Age (+/- birth year)
- Birthplace (state/country)
- Relationships
- Marital status
- Parents' birthplace
- Mother tongue
- Number of children
- Naturalization status
- Race
- Gender
- Veteran Status
- Native language
- Occupation
- Income, property values
- Education and literacy

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Creator: Cara Ramsey, PPLD Regional History & Genealogy

Last revised date: 7/6/2022



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## Non-Population Schedules

When we talk about the census, we are often referring to the federal population schedule. There are additional schedules used by federal, state, and local governments to gather specific information for administrative decisions:

- Mortality Schedules
- Slave Schedules
- Veteran Schedules
- Agricultural Schedules
- Manufacturers/Industry Schedules
- Military, Native American reservations, and other institutions were occasionally enumerated separately

*Use of these schedules varied by year, so consult [the NARA website](#) for specific details about when and where to find them.*

## Beyond the Federal Census

In addition to the nationwide federal census, states, Native American reservations, schools, colonies, and territories enumerated their own censuses. These are often irregular and not comprehensive. Some are available through online databases, while others, often kept by archival repositories, are more difficult to locate and access.

## Additional Resources

- [Blank Census forms and headers \(NARA\)](#)
- [Census Enumeration District Finder](#)
- [Atlas of Historical County Boundaries](#)
- [Enumerator instructions](#)
- [Information about Soundex](#)
- [FamilySearch Research Wiki](#)
- [PPLD Regional History and Genealogy](#)

## Not finding an ancestor? Try these search tricks:

- A name may have been misspelled, misheard, or miscopied:
  - ✓ Use alternate spellings
  - ✓ Remove first name or surname from your search
  - ✓ Use wildcards: ? replaces a single letter, \* replaces zero/more letters
  - ✓ (e.g., Sm?th\* will match Smith, Smyth, Smythe, Smithers and Smithson, etc.)
  - ✓ Use the [Soundex Indexing System](#) to search for surnames based on how they sound
  - ✓ Remove names entirely and search only using other fields
- Try different combinations of information (names, dates, locations, etc.)
- For female ancestors, search using both their married and maiden names
- Remove or broaden your ancestor's age
- Start with the most recent census enumerated during an ancestor's lifetime, then work backward in time
- If you know your ancestor's address, [look up their by enumeration district](#) (the geographic area covered by an enumerator), allowing you to narrow down to that district's portion of the census for browsing. If you don't know their address, use other sources (e.g., city directories) to track it down
- If an ancestor was missed during the initial enumeration, check the end of the census, special schedules (e.g., agricultural), or state or local censuses, which were frequently enumerated mid-decade (e.g., 1865)
- Search for family members (your ancestor may have lived with them) or neighbors (they may be relatives)
- In databases, limit your search to include census records only, or even search within a single census year (e.g., 1940)
- Try the same search using a different database (variations in indexing and corrections can make a difference!)

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