

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 contain basic vital and biographical information, can help piece together a timeline of your family history, and provide clues to other genealogical records. Also, census records are easily accessed by anyone looking to engage with genealogical research!

Population Schedules

The primary census records created by each federal census are called the general population schedules. However, other population schedules were enumerated including:

- Schedule 2s (1850 & 1860) - enumerated enslaved people by their enslaver, age, gender, and color rather than by name.
- Veteran schedules (1890) - enumerated Civil War veterans & widows; most of the 1890 census records were lost in a 1921 fire.
- Native American schedules (1900 & 1910) - enumerated Native American households along with the general population; requested additional information including tribe, citizenship status, taxation status, and more.

Other schedules exist for military personnel and residents of certain institutions, such as jails and hospitals, for various federal census years. These were often placed at the end of the rest of the county's population schedules and were sometimes separated completely when the records were microfilmed.

Where can I find Census records?

AncestryLibrary and FamilySearch are great places to start, though many other databases contain census records. Check out the genealogy databases available via PPLD at our [genealogy webpage](#). From these databases, you can search across all census records or within specific census year record sets.

The [National Archives and Records Administration](#) (NARA) website has more information on censuses and where they can be accessed.

Nonpopulation Schedules

Various schedules exist enumerating factors other than populations. These include:

- Mortality schedules (1850-1880 federal census & several 1885 state censuses) - enumerated people who died in the 12 months prior to the census date; includes similar information to population schedules.
- Agricultural schedules (1850-1880) - enumerated some farms including info on owner, acreage, crops, livestock and more.
- Manufacturing schedules (most censuses 1810-1880) - enumerated manufacturing businesses; includes info on type of business, materials used, labor costs, and more.
- The 1935 Census of Business - enumerated many businesses; much information was discarded, but info on many industries still available, including banks, real estate, and radio broadcasting.

The [NARA website](#) provides much more information on nonpopulation schedules including where you can access the records.

Beyond the Federal Census

In addition to the federal census, many 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.



The FamilySearch Research Wiki is a great resource to learn more about census schedules. Be sure to peruse the pages listed in the "Links to United States Census-related articles" box!

Searching the Census - Strategy & Tips

Search Every Census:

Each census offers unique details and helps build a timeline in 10-year increments.

Start Recent:

Begin with the latest census (e.g., 1880 before 1870) for clues to earlier records.

Search Strategies:

- Search broadly first; fill in known fields but leave some blank.
- Narrow gradually by adding details or adjusting "exactness" settings.
- Be flexible with spelling; use wildcards (? for one letter, * for multiple letters).
- Explore the [Soundex Indexing System](#) for phonetic matches (e.g., Stewart/Stuart).
- Try different combinations of names and details.
- For women, search maiden and married names.



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.

If You Can't Find Them:

- Search surname in exact location.
- Look for family members or neighbors.
- Use partial names or remove names entirely and search by other details.
- Broaden or remove age restrictions.
- If address is known, browse by enumeration district.
 - If address is unknown, use city directories or other sources to find it.
- Limit searches to census records or a single census year.
- Try a different database—indexing and corrections vary.

Information you might find on a Census:

- Name
- Age
- Birthplace
- Parents' birthplace
- Relationship
- Marital info
- Number of children
- Naturalization info
- Race
- Gender
- Veteran Status
- Native language
- Parents' native language
- Occupation
- Income, property values
- Education, literacy
- And more...

Additional Resources

PPLD Website:

Genealogy database and reference material access.

SteveMorse.org:

Census enumeration district finder tool and more.

Atlas of Historical County Boundaries:

Track county boundary changes over time.

Enumerator instructions:

Online access to questionnaires from prior censuses.