The Federal Census is one of the most valuable sources of information as you begin your genealogical research.

Why the Census?

Beginning in 1790, the U.S. federal census is conducted every 10 years. 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 and contain valuable details about an ancestor’s birthplace, age, relation, occupation, and more. Using details from the census, you can piece together a timeline of your family history.

The details requested in the census vary by year, but information you might find includes:

- Name
- Age
- Birthplace (state or country)
- Parents’ birthplace
- Year of immigration
- Current address
- Marriage status
- Occupation

The amount and types of information collected in the census grew over time. As more states were added to the Union, they were also added to the census. The 1790 census, for example, included 13 states and a few additional territories and districts. Only the head of household was listed by name while remaining family members were tallied by category.

Tip: Keep track of the information available on each census: Ancestry provides a guide for each census year and Rootsweb provides a comparison chart. Blank census forms and headings are also available.
Searching the Census

All PPLD genealogy databases have varying access to U.S. census records (e.g. availability may be limited by certain date ranges).

Basic Search Strategy
1. Start broad. Fill in the information fields you know, but it’s okay to leave fields blank.
2. You can narrow your search with more details, but this can also unintentionally exclude an ancestor from your search if the details are incorrect or were spelled, written down, copied, or indexed incorrectly.

Not finding an ancestor? Try these tricks:
- A name may have been misspelled, misheard, or miscopied:
  - Use alternate spellings
  - Remove the surname from your search
  - Use wildcards: ? replaces a single letter, * replaces zero/more letters
  - Use the Soundex Indexing System to search for surnames based on how they sound instead of their spelling
  - Remove names entirely and search only using other fields
- Remove or broaden your ancestor’s age
- Look at the latest possible census and work backward
- Browse the census by enumeration district (the geographic area covered by an enumerator)
  - Discover your ancestor’s address through other sources and use this site to convert the address to an enumeration district.
- If an ancestor was missed during the initial enumeration, they may have been recorded:
  - In the back of the census
  - In a special schedule of the federal census (e.g. agricultural)
  - In a state or local census
- Search for family members or neighbors – your ancestor may have lived with them

Tip: Take census results with a grain of salt. Relationships, ages, occupations, names, and gender could all have been incorrectly recorded.

Keep in Mind

Not all census records are available
The most recent census record available to the public is the 1940 census. A 72-year privacy rule limits access to more recent censuses.

Not all census records survived
Fires and other disasters have destroyed portions of some of the earlier censuses. Only a small percentage of the 1890 census survives and varying states and years are missing from the 1790-1820 censuses.

State and Special Censuses
Governments at the state and local levels often took their own censuses. All levels conducted non-population schedules and special censuses to gather specific information (mortality, veterans, slaves, agriculture, etc.).

It's worth searching multiple databases
Some databases:
- have higher quality images that are easier to read
- have indexing errors
- allow users to make index corrections

Errors happen
Census enumerators may have made mistakes due to illiteracy and misspelling, or people may have lied when asked particular questions. 1790-1840 census enumerators occasionally made errors when they were required to make two copies of the census.

Learn more
For more about the history of the census, other census types, schedules, and more, visit Rootsweb.