Hide and Seek in the U.S. Census

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Introduction

Census: Latin - a count of people and their property for tax purposes.

 It was created by the Constitution (Article I, Section 2). The Federal Census was to enumerate everyone living in the United States for the purpose of determining fair representation in the House of Representatives.

The first census after the American Revolution was taken in 1790, under Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, and a Federal Census has been taken every 10 years since 1790.

Privacy laws in the United States stipulate that a census is not released for 72 years after it is taken. The 1950 Census will be released in 2022.

Value of the Census

The census is one of the most useful tools for the family historian/genealogist.

The census provides a "snapshot" of a family every 10 years and beginning with the 1850 census, it provides names, dates, and places. Beginning in 1880 and continuing through the 1940 census, it provides relationships within the family. It also provides age, gender, occupation, who the head of household was, address of family home, education, nationality, native tongue and citizenship. It can show you what the socio-economics were for the neighborhood your family lived it. It may be the only record of the individual or family. About 90% of U.S. citizens are found in census records. The census can extend your pedigree. They give clues for searching other records.

Problems with the Census

It is an oral history and no proof was required to verify what information was given to the enumerator. The census taker wrote what was heard (mispronounced or misspelled names were the result) and they may have had bad handwriting. The early census records do not indicate who the informant was and not everyone was enumerated. There was a lack of cooperation from citizens who did not want to answer the questions or who gave deliberate, false information (such as correct age of an individual).

Poor storage, effects from moisture, faded ink, insects, and rodents have affected the quality of the records. Indexing errors cause searching problems.

Variations of names and name spelling can be a problem and the use of nicknames often entered into the census. Enumerators were paid by the name and if the family wasn't home, the information may have been given by a neighbor, servant or employee. Sometimes the family member who was the informant didn't know the correct dates and may have given an "educated" guess.

There is always a chance that your relative was skipped in a given census, especially in remote rural areas. They may have missed a house, found no one at home or the family might have been transient. More likely, though, your hard-to-find ancestors are in the census in an unexpected place or with a strange name.

Methodology

Search for your ancestor in every census during their lifetime. For example, if a person lived from 1835-1932, you would search the following censuses: 1840, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930.

"Roll" the census record - look at pages before and after the one where you found your family listed. For a thorough search, check all pages for the area for which the census was taken (e.g, all of Columbia County in Pennsylvania, or all of Benton in Columbia County, Pennsylvania). Families often lived in close proximity to one another and you can discover other family by using this method.

Look at the transcribed information (what was indexed) but be sure to look at the original image of the census page. You will often find indexing errors, especially including spelling of names. Indexing by companies is often out-sourced to India or China and the indexer is not familiar with the English language or the names of a particular region.

Look at all the "extra" information on the census page. Different years of the census contain different "extras".

Census Records 1790-1840

These early census records include the name of the head of household, statistics on household members (male by age group, female by age group, free African Americans).

There were no printed forms until 1830 and Marshalls used whatever piece of paper they had on hand.

These early census records have value when locating and verifying the family. When you know the basic consistency of the family group, the census can verify the number of children in the household and may provide information on children that do not show up on later censuses. This can help you identify family members who may have lived and died during that ten year period. To most effectively use these census records it is helpful to map the information by listing the tick marks by gender, age and extension for birth year range.

Clues that these "tick" marks leave include possible deaths - so check for death records or obituaries; possible marriages - look for marriage records; look for land records that may include names and family members listed; look for will or probate records.

Capturing information from the census

When recording information from the census record, copy and paste the URL, the indexed transcription of the record, the source citation provided on the website where you found the census record and save a digital copy of the record to your document file. You can also create a source and input the digital image into that to the individual you are researching source in FamilySearch Family Tree. It is helpful to

use a snipping tool when doing this - either a built-in snipping tool on your computer or a tool such as Irfanview.

When saving digital images, be sure to label each document . One possible format would be:

Census_1910_US Federal_McHenry, Abe, Millie, Eli, Mary, Grace, Marie, Raymon Hess (hired man), Wilson McHenry (hired man)

Special Census Records

Census records other than Population Census can include the following:

Native American Census - 1885-1940 - The data on the rolls vary, but usually given are the English and/or Indian name of the person, roll number, age or date of birth, sex, and relationship to head of family. Beginning in 1930 it also includes the degree of Indian blood, marital status, ward status, place of residence and sometimes other information.   There is not a census for every reservation or group of American Indians for every year. Only persons who maintained a formal affiliation with a tribe under federal supervision are listed.

Agricultural Census -1840-1910 - This can be used to fill in gaps when land and tax records are missing or incomplete. It helps to distinguish between people with the same names; it can be used to document land holdings of ancestors with suitable follow-up in deeds, mortgages, tax rolls and probate inventories; used to identify black share-croppers and overseers; to identify free black men and their property to trace their movements and economic growth

Manufacturing Schedules - 1810, 1820, 1840, and **1880** - cities of 8000 or more

Industry Schedules - 1850-1870

These Schedules are to assist in gaining information regarding manufacturing, mining, fisheries and mercantile, commercial and trading business with gross annual product of $500. or more. The listings may include name of company or owner, kind of business, amount of capital invested, quantity and value of materials, labor, machinery and products

Slave Schedules - 1850-1860

These were separate censuses - counted by age, sex and color; owners are listed; slaves often use owners' surnames; useful in African-American research

Social Statistics Schedules - 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880- Indication of whether literate, deaf, dumb, blind, insane, pauper or convict

Mortality Schedules - 1850-1885 - to determine who died and how they died - accident, disease, etc. This is useful in listing victims, tracing and documenting genetic symptoms and diseases, death dates and names of family members which can lead to obituaries, mortuary records, cemetery records and probate records; also gives clues to migration points.

Veterans Schedules - 1890 - Enumerated Union Veterans and Widows of Union Veterans of the Civil War

State Census

States which took censuses usually did so on the five year mark, every ten years (1855, 1865, etc.)

These records are most often found at the state archives or state libraries but many are on FamilySearch, Ancestry, MyHeritage and FindMyPast. You can also do a Google search for state census records. When trying to determine if your state had a census for a given year go to

http://www.newhorizonsgenealogicalservices.com/census-locator.htm

When looking for Colonial and Territorial Censuses go to

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/United_States_Census_Online_Genealogy_Records

Facts and Clues

The handout from last year's presentation on the Census can be found at **mesafsl.org** under the tab **"Annual Conference Archives".**   Click on **2015 ASU Institute** and scroll down to the last section of classes (in turquoise) and click on the **Handout** for the class title **"Census Records, A Veritable Smorgasbord of Facts and Clues".** This is a comprehensive list of facts and clues for each census year.

Tips for "seeking" and locating hard-to-find "hiding" family members

Search without using a surname. Look for given names of the family and include locations, birthdates, etc.

Search phonetically - what was pronounced or heard is often how people spelled

Check middle names and initials, too.

Use wildcards to pick up variations in names. (an asterisk * for one or more letters in a name; a question mark ? for a single character) An example would be the name *Lowe*. Use a ? to substitute one character, e.g. *Low?*   The results could be Lowe, Low, Lowd, Lows, etc. If using the * it might turn up variants such as Lowell to Lowenstein, etc.

Leave out the name entirely - search with other identifying information such as date and place of birth. This may turn up a female ancestor who remarried and is listed under a new married last name. If you question if this is the right woman, look for an obituary, household listings in other census years and the parents' names indexed in the vital records of children.

Search first name, age and birthplace of a parent and first name, age and birthplace for one of the children. Aged or widowed parents are often living in a child's household.

Search by surname and location.

Search without using a location (they may have been mobile and moved from place to place, or lived first with a daughter in one state and then with a son in another state). If you are stuck to location you may miss them.

Search using only the initials of the person.

Search for the person with the most unusual name.

Search for siblings, children, or other family members when you can't locate the individual you are seeking.

Locate a neighbor from a previous or later census and see if your family member is close by (FANS - family, associates and neighbors).

Don't let an age or birth year listed in the census thwart you from search results. The enumerators recorded the age as of the date the census was taken. Search within a range for the birth date to find these "age-hidden" ancestors. You may have to discount age and look at other clues like birthplace and relationships within the family.

Search census databases on other sites. Each site uses their own indexers and you may find variations from transcription to transcription.

Try to locate a state census - note how the names were spelled.

Use a city directory or try to locate where they might be. Use a directory for the year following the census since many directories were created right around census time.

Search for a mortality schedule. The 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880 censuses include a question about persons who had died in the year immediately preceding the enumeration.

Non-census records can help identify your ancestor when there are multiple matches with the same name. Try to determine geographic plausibility and look for relatives on the same or adjacent pages.

When there are missing or damaged pages, look for census substitute databases such as city directories, state censuses, tax lists and voter lists.

Keep up the search! They are worth looking for and tomorrow may be your lucky day!