

" A Deep Dive into the US Census Records "

**Miles Meyer
RootsTech 2025**

The US Census is an important resource for research in the United States. It has changed greatly since the first federal census was performed in 1790. This presentation will discuss how the census has changed from 1790 to 1950, provide an explanation of the information that is available in the various census records, and how to develop that into a timeline that can be used to write a narrative for a family.

From 1850 to 1950, six basic questions asked in each census remained the same: name, age, gender, race, occupation, and place of birth. Relationship to head of household was asked from 1880 to 1950, and the citizenship status of each foreign-born person was asked from 1890 to 1950.

The information from each census alone gives you a snapshot of the family but by combining several census years together, you can begin to see patterns in occupations, residences, and many other characteristics that can help you build the story of your ancestors.

Tips for Searching the Census

- Generally, we would start with the most recent census and work backward.
 - You usually have the most information for more recent people.
 - Identify known family members that were present during the census.
 - However, for overseas researchers, it might be more helpful to begin your research with the first US census the immigrant person would appear in and work forward to more recent census records.
- Develop a search strategy.
 - Know who you are looking for and who is in the family.
 - Have a good idea about possible locations where they may have lived.
 - Know approximate birth years.
- If you can't find them, try searching for only the last name in the area you believe they lived in. Try various spellings.
 - Spelling may vary depending on who gave the information (family member, neighbor, etc.) and what the enumerator hears.
 - I had difficulty finding my Westerheide ancestor but was finally able to find them listed as Lesterhiden and Sisterhiden.

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Missing Census Records:

- 1790 – Delaware, Georgia, New Jersey, Virginia
- 1800 - Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, New Jersey, Virginia, Indiana Territory, Mississippi Territory and Northwest Territory (only Washington County records from the Northwest Territory survive)
- 1810 - District of Columbia, Georgia, New Jersey, Tennessee, Indiana Territory, Michigan Territory, Mississippi Territory and Louisiana Territory (Missouri). Partial losses include Illinois Territory where one of its two counties St. Clair is lost but Randolph records exist, Ohio Territory where everything is lost except for Washington County
- 1820 - Arkansas Territory, Missouri Territory and New Jersey. Partial losses: half the counties in Alabama and the Eastern Counties of Tennessee
- 1830 - Some countywide losses in Massachusetts, Maryland, and Mississippi
- 1890 – Much of the 1890 census was destroyed in a fire in 1921. An estimated 6,000 records survived including incomplete sets of schedules from Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas, and the District of Columbia.

What do I want to know and where is it?

- **Date of birth:**
 - Prior to the 1850 census, the age classes are too broad to estimate birth year unless you find the person in multiple census years.
 - 1840 census gives ages for Revolutionary War pensioners.
 - 1850-1950 censuses list person's age. Year of birth can be estimated by subtracting the age from the census year (generally assume +/- 2 years but it may be more).
 - 1870-1880 census list persons birth month if they were born within the year (June 1 of previous year to May 31 of census year).
 - 1900 census – lists person's month and year of birth as well as the age (be careful with this – there is no guarantee that it is correct).
- Some censuses list partial ages indicating age in months (e.g. 3/12 = 3 months).

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- **Place of birth:**

- Prior to 1850 census birthplace is not included.
- 1850-1950 censuses indicate a person's place of birth (country or state).
- 1870 census indicates if parents were of foreign birth by a check mark.
- 1880-1930 censuses list the state or country of birth for parents.
- 1940 census lists the state or country of birth of parents for those who had supplemental information (only 2 people per page).
- 1950 census lists the state or country of birth of parents for those who had sample question (5 per page).

- **Marriage date:**

- 1850-1880 census indicate if person was married within the year (usually June 1 of the year before to May 31 of the census year).
- 1900-1910 census list the number of years married for each person.
- 1930 census lists the age of first marriage.
- 1940 census supplemental data section asks if a woman was married more than once and age at first marriage.
- 1950 census supplemental question asks if married, widowed, divorced, or separated, how many years since this event occurred.

- **Number of children:**

- All of the censuses list the number of individuals living in the household.
- 1790-1840 censuses use tally marks to represent each person in the household. They may or may not be related.
- 1850-1870 censuses list people living in a household but not their relationships.
- 1880-1950 censuses list the relationships for each person to the head of household.
- The 1900-1910 censuses list how many children were born to the mother and how many are still living.

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- This is helpful in finding unknown children who may have died between censuses.
- 1940 census supplemental data lists total number of children born.
- 1950 census supplemental question asks if female and ever married, how many children has she ever borne, not counting stillbirths.
- **Immigration information:**
 - 1820-1830 censuses list number of individuals in a household who were of foreign birth and not a naturalized citizen.
 - 1850-1950 censuses list place of birth for the individual.
 - 1870 census has a column for "Male Citizens of the US of 21 years of age and upwards." If the person was of foreign birth and this column is checked he would have been naturalized prior to 1870.
 - 1880-1930 censuses list the place of birth for parents.
 - 1900-1930 censuses list person's year of immigration.
 - 1900-1940 censuses list person's naturalization status. **AL**=alien, **PA**=first papers, **NA**=naturalized.
 - 1900 census lists number of years in the US.
 - 1920 census lists year of immigration and naturalization.
 - 1940 census supplemental data lists place of birth for parents.
 - 1950 census asks if foreign born, is the person naturalized.
- **Military Service:**
 - 1840 census indicates if an individual was a pensioner of the Revolutionary War or other military service and gives the name & age.
 - 1910 census indicates if the person was a "Survivor of the Union or Confederate Army or Navy."
 - **UA** or **CA**=Union Army or Confederate Army
 - **UN** or **CN**=Union Navy or Confederate Navy

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- *Often these columns are overwritten with numbers like 2-1-0-0. These are notes for statistical analysis and do not have meaning for military status.*
- 1930 census records if a person was a member of the military mobilized for war or an expedition and indicates which event they fought in.
 - **Civ**=Civil War, **SP**=Spanish American War, **Phil**=Philippine Insurrection, **Box**=Boxer Rebellion, **Mex**=Mexican Expedition, **WW**=World War I
- 1940 census supplemental data indicates veteran status.
 - **W**=World War I, **S**=Spanish American War, Philippines Expedition or Boxer Rebellion, **SW**=Both Spanish American War and World War I, **R**=Peacetime Service, **Ot**=Any other
- 1940 census supplemental data also asks if person was a child of a veteran.
- 1950 census asks males if they ever served in the US Armed Forces (World War I, World War II, Any other time).
- **Property Ownership:**
 - 1790 census may list if the family lived in a house or a store.
 - 1850-1870 censuses list value of real property (land) owned by each person.
 - 1860-1870 censuses list value of personal property owned by each person.
 - 1900-1940 censuses indicate whether person owned ("**O**") or rented ("**R**") property.
 - 1900-1930 censuses indicate if the property had a mortgage ("**M**") or was owned free of mortgage ("**F**").
 - 1930-1940 censuses indicate the value of the property if owned or the monthly rent.
 - 1900-1910, 1930-1950 censuses indicate if they lived in a house or on a farm.
 - 1900-1950 censuses have a column for farm schedule.
 - The Farm Schedule or Agricultural Census is a non-population census that provides detailed information on farm production in the previous year.

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- **Education:**

- 1840 census lists number of individuals who were "scholars" and number of individuals in family over 20 years who cannot read and write.
- 1850-1940 censuses list whether person attended school within the year.
- 1940 census lists the highest grade completed (0, 1-8, H1-H4, C1-C5).
- 1850-1930 censuses list if person can read and write.
- 1850-1860 censuses list if they cannot read and write for individuals over 20 years of age.
- 1950 census education supplemental questions were asked for 5 people per page. Included highest grade attended, did they finish the grade, and did they attend school since February 1.

- **Occupation:**

- 1790 census may list occupation of head of household.
- 1810 census has blank lines where enumerators could indicate if family members worked in specific industries important to the location.
- 1820 census may list number of individuals in a family who were involved in agriculture, commerce, or manufacturing.
- 1840 census may indicate number of individuals in a family who were involved in mining, agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, navigation of ocean, navigation of inland waterways, or learned professionals/engineers.
- 1850-1940 censuses list the occupation of individuals over age 15.
- 1950 censuses list the occupation of individuals over age 14.
- Agricultural census schedules exist from 1850-1880; manufacturing census schedules exist for 1820 and 1850-1880.

- **Employment status:**

- 1850-1860 censuses indicate if a person is a pauper or convict.
- 1880-1900 censuses list number of months unemployed.
- 1910 & 1940 censuses list number of weeks unemployed.
- 1930 census lists if a person was unemployed.

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- 1940 census indicates if individual was employed by government work (WPA, CCC, etc.)
- 1920 & 1940 censuses list if person was an employee or employer.
- 1940 census lists number of weeks worked, average hours per week and annual income for 1939.
- 1950 census asks employment status and how many hours they worked in the last week.
- **Address:**
 - 1880-1950 censuses may list street name and house number.
 - Use this to search Google Maps, property appraisers' databases, real estate databases, etc. to get more information on the homes or properties.
 - 1880-1950 censuses include enumeration districts which can be found on enumeration maps.
- **Slaves:**
 - 1790-1840 censuses list number, sex, and range of ages of slaves.
 - 1850-1860 censuses have their own slave schedules listing each slave, their sex, and age.
- **Physical/mental disabilities:**
 - 1830-1870, 1910 censuses enumerate deaf, dumb, and blind individuals.
 - 1840-1870 censuses list number of individuals who were insane or idiots.
- **Were they techies?**
 - 1930 census lists if the family owned a radio.

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Resources for further information:

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

<http://stevemorse.org/>

<https://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/tEnumInstr.shtml>

<http://www.archives.gov/publications/record/1998/01/family-history.html>

<http://www.archives.gov/research/census/1850-1930.html>

<http://www.censusfinder.com/census-questions.htm>

https://www.censusrecords.com/content/1790_Census

https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/index_of_questions/1950_population.html

<https://www.archives.gov/research/census/1950/blank-forms>

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_1950

My Blogs:

<https://ourancestries.blogspot.com/>

<https://milesgenealogy.blogspot.com/>

OurAncestories Genealogy:

<https://milesmeyer1.wixsite.com/ourancestries>

