

Chapter 2: *Finding Your Ancestors in Census Records*

United States Census Records

Article 1, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution authorized the taking of a national census in the United States every 10 years to enumerate or count the population for apportioning representatives to the lower house of Congress. The first census was conducted in 1790 and included the 13 original states as well as the districts of Kentucky, Maine, Vermont, and the Southwest Territory (Tennessee). Over time the Federal census included more detailed questions that reflected the social, ethnic, financial, and occupational status of ordinary Americans. (National Archives and Records Administration)

In 1790 the first United States census was compiled for the purpose of determining the number of delegates each state could send to the House of Representatives (one delegate for every 30,000 people). Federal census records have been compiled every ten years thereafter. Unfortunately, the 1890 federal census was almost completely destroyed by a fire in 1921.

The 1950 U.S. census will be available to the public in April 2022.

Information in Census Records

Information contained within each census varies. The following information is commonly contained within census records:

- Head of the household (1790–1840 censuses) and number of family members (male and female).
- Gender and approximate age of those in the household (beginning with 1850 census).
- All members of the household, with names, ages and birthplaces—state or country only (beginning with 1850 census).
- Parents' birthplaces—state or country (beginning with 1880 census); relationship to head of household.
- For foreign-born persons, the year of immigration and naturalization (beginning with 1900 census). The 1900 census also contains the month and year of an individual's birth.

Information in Indexes to United States Federal Census Records from 1790-1880

Prior to searchable online databases, it was necessary to have an efficient way of searching the censuses. To facilitate efficient searching, various indexes were created.

Information in Indexes to United States Federal Census Records from 1790–1880

- Printed indexes and on CD-ROM, 1790–1860 (some for later years).
- 1880 US census index available online at www.familysearch.org (also on CD).
- Indexed by name of head of household.
- Names of district/town and county of residence for each head of household.
- Provides volume/page numbers of the original census record.
- Soundex indexes for 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920 census schedules and 1930 for some southern states.
- Indexes are available at the Family History Library, HBL, and other libraries.
- Indexes and 1790–1930 census population schedules are available on line at www.ancestry.com, www.familysearch.org and at www.heritagequestonline.com

Censuses in Online Databases

Today there are many online databases where censuses may be searched. Searching censuses online is more time-efficient and will *typically yield* the desired results. However, there may be times when you are unable to find an ancestor in a census by searching an online database. In such instances it will be helpful to know how to search the census schedules using an index. The following are some searchable online census databases:

Ancestry.com www.ancestry.com

Ancestry.com contains all of the U.S. censuses and they are completely indexed. Ancestry.com is a paid fee database. However, BYU students are able to access the database from any computer connected to campus internet.

Fold3 www.fold3.com

Footnote contains the 1860, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 US Federal Censuses. The 1860 is completely indexed and the 1930 is 99% complete. The others are still in the process of being completed.

HeritageQuest Online www.heritagequestonline.com

HeritageQuestOnline contains all of the 1790-1920 census and part of the 1930 census. With this database, however, only the names of the heads of households have been indexed.

Records www.familysearch.org

FamilySearch has every U.S. census indexed and available to search. Some other census collections require that the user log in before they can view the image. By clicking on the link that says *United States*, and then narrowing the selection through the links on the left hand side

to just *Census and Lists*, you may view the U.S. censuses available at FamilySearch as well as many territorial and state censuses.

BYU Census Tutorial <http://census.byu.edu>

This is an online tutorial to help guide you through identifying, using, and searching census records for research. This site gives tips for finding people in specific years and information about the census records.

World Vital Records www.worldvitalrecords.com

World Vital Records is a paid-subscription website, but may be accessed for free by BYU students through the “Alphabetical List” on <http://lib.byu.edu/fslab>. This database contains searchable indexes of many US and state censuses.

Census Finder www.censusfinder.com

CensusFinder has many links to many censuses. In order to search a census, you must select a specific geographic location (such as a state or a county) in which to search.

Soundexes

The censuses taken in 1880 (partial), 1900, 1910 (partial), 1920, and 1930 (partial) have been Soundex indexed and names that sound alike (i.e. Snyder, Snyder, Snider) have been grouped together for indexing purposes.

Soundexed Census Records

- U. S. Census 1880, only households with children age ten years old and under
- U. S. Census 1900 and 1920 are completely Soundexed
- U. S. Census 1910 for some states (Soundex index and Miracode)
- U.S. Census 1930 for twelve southern states

To determine a Soundex code for a surname, use one of the following:

1. RootsMagic genealogical software program under Tools > Soundex Calculator
2. Use another genealogical software program
3. Search Google.com under “soundex calculator” (no quotes)
4. See Appendix E in the Religion C 261 syllabus, “Soundex Instructions”

Mortality Census Schedules, 1850–1880

Mortality schedules may be the only record of a person's death as many states did not begin to record deaths until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The 1850 and 1860 mortality censuses record the decedent's name, age, sex, color (black, white, mulatto), whether married or widowed, place of birth, occupation, month of death, cause of death, and the number of days sick. The 1870 and 1880 mortality schedules include the above information plus whether the decedent's parents were foreign-born, the attending physician's name, and where the person contracted the illness, if it were a disease. The race column expanded to include Indians and Chinese. (National Archives and Records Administration)

In 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880, mortality schedules were taken simultaneously with population schedules.

The following information is contained in the mortality schedules:

- Names of persons who died within the census year (usually from 31 May of the year preceding the census through 30 May of the census year)
- Birthplace (state or country only)
- Age at death
- Cause of death

State and Territory Censuses

Many states and territories took censuses similar to the U.S. Federal censuses. These territorial censuses were often taken in the years between federal censuses. Not every state and territory took censuses. Research outlines for each state will note if there are any state or territorial censuses for that specific location.

For the states that took censuses, the information included was often more complete than the information in the federal census records. Additional information contained in state censuses may include:

- County or town of birth
- Number of years of residency in the state

Helps for Finding Your Ancestor in Census Records

- Check alternate spellings.
- Check the FamilySearchCatalog (FSC) locality section for your state (and country) under “Census records,” or use the census microfilm register at the Family History Library or the family history center in the HBLL.
- Write to the state historical societies or state archives for census information.
- Check the FamilySearch Catalog (FSC) topics “Military records” or “Schools” or “Taxation” for special census and tax rolls that served as census substitutes, especially for the 1890 census.
- See *State Census Records* (Lainhart 1992) for a complete listing of state census records.
- Check every census schedule through 1930 in which a family appears. Note the family birthplaces, such as “Iowa” or “Ohio,” which may show a family’s migration.
- Look for all children of the ancestral family; elderly parents often lived with one of their children.

Many censuses have been partially extracted and published on CD, in book form, or on the Internet. A complete survey by state and county has been published in Thomas Jay Kemp’s *The American Census Handbook* (Kemp 2001).

Foreign Census Records

Most foreign countries kept census records. England and Wales began keeping census records in 1801, whereas Denmark began census records in 1769 and Norway in the 1600s. To find more information on the types of records created and kept in a specific area of the world, search the FamilySearch Wiki.

A growing number of foreign censuses are available at www.familysearch.org. These censuses currently include records from Argentina, Canada, Central America, Cote D’Ivoire, Czech Republic, British Isles, Estonia, Ghana, Germany, Guatemala, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway and Spain.

Cautions in Using Census Records

- Children dying in infancy or children moving away from the parental home before the census was taken are not included
- What appears to be a child before 1880 may be a niece or nephew
- The wife in the census may not be the mother of the children in the household
- Ages and birthplaces are sometimes wrong and often inconsistent from one census to another
- Some families do not appear on the census records