
Section 1

Historical U.S. Censuses

Genealogists are avid users of the U.S. federal censuses available to the public. Most libraries or archives in the U.S. with large collections of census records on microfilm can confirm that fact. For example, in all of the regional branches of the National Archives, amateur genealogists represent 90 percent of the patrons using those facilities. Most of the regional archives provide a complete set of microfilmed censuses, 1790-1920, all in one room, an attraction most genealogists cannot resist.

Though most genealogists are familiar with the use of U.S. census records to help identify their

American ancestors, some facts about the censuses overall may not be obvious. Some hidden aspects to the various censuses may be missed by even experienced genealogists.

Perhaps a review of some of these obscurities may help a genealogist understand why certain census records exist while others do not, or why an ancestor does not appear when he should appear in a census. Hopefully, this information will encourage a genealogist to go back to the census records and look again for information that may have been missed the first time.

Why a Census?

Ask someone on the street why a census is taken in the United States every ten years. A common answer might be, “for taxes.” Several people might answer, “for reapportioning the seats of the U.S. House of Representatives.” Both answers would be correct.

In Article I, Section 2, the Constitution of the United States says:

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this Union according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other persons. The actual enumeration shall be made

within three years after the first meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent ten years, in such manner as they shall by law direct.

Beginning in 1790, the United States of America became the first country in the world to call for regularly held censuses. Note that the Constitution did not treat everyone as equal. “Free persons” excluded Indians living on treaty land and who were exempt from paying taxes (or voting). However, any male Indian who had joined the white population was taxed like whites and was considered a “free person” and had the right to vote. “All other persons” meant slaves, who were counted as 3/5ths of a person for determining

representation in Congress. This latter provision was to offset the large slave populations of states like Virginia and South Carolina, where, in 1790, slaves represented 39 and 43 percent of their population, respectively. In comparison, Connecticut and New Jersey had slave populations of 1.1 and 6.2 percent, respectively.

It may come as a surprise to some that “direct taxes” were authorized in the Constitution of the United States. But, except for one national direct tax levied in 1797 to defray debts left over from the Revolutionary War, Congress took more than 120 years to do it for real, when personal income taxes were first levied directly on individuals.

The primary action of Article I, Section 2, was to carry out a national census to be taken every ten years. As in so many other areas of the U.S. Constitution, the wisdom of the document is revealed in how it simply states what must be done and leaves the details of carrying out a census to Congress “in such manner as they shall by law direct.” For every ten years since 1790, Congress has enacted a law specific to and authorizing a census to be taken. None of the laws is the same, and each specifies more information to be gathered than in the preceding census.

After every census taken in the U.S., Congress first decides how many total seats there will be in the U.S. House of Representatives, then divides that number into the figure for the total U.S. population. This determines how many persons one congressman will represent. By dividing that number into each state’s population, it can be determined how many U.S. representatives can come from each state. After each decennial census, it is the responsibility of the state legislatures to decide the new congressional boundaries within their state, and to

ensure that each area is equal to that portion of population for one U.S. representative. The exception to this rule applies to states whose entire population is less than one congressional allotment—all states must have at least one U.S. representative.

The phrase in the Constitution, “the actual enumeration shall be made,” was debated early in Congress, because one could say that it meant an “actual count” and nothing else. From the first census of 1790 forward, however, more information has been included than just the tally of persons; and each subsequent census has included more information than the previous one. For this, genealogists are very grateful. However, the language of the Constitution also stated that Congress should carry out the censuses “in such manner as they shall by law direct.” That provision established that Congress could broadly determine the content and manner of taking censuses, and that provision has never been challenged judicially.

Ironically, in 1997, the Census Bureau announced that the census in the year 2000 would be the first census ever taken that would not attempt an “actual enumeration” of every citizen. They wanted to collect an actual count of 90 percent of the population, based on the return of census forms. This time, the Census Bureau wanted to “sample” (estimate) the remaining 10 percent rather than continually go back time and again to find the remaining persons who did not return the forms. But Congress challenged this “sampling” proposal because of the constitutional provision for an “actual enumeration.”

Census accuracy has always been a matter of contention. Over the years, several major cities have sued Uncle Sam because the cities thought they were unfairly deprived of

numbers, therefore, a loss of federal block grants based on population. Usually, the courts have held that under-counting in a census is an inherent part of taking a census, and no compensation or recounts were due. Exceptions to this were in 1870, when the northern cities of Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and New York City were each granted a second enumeration. A few southern cities

had also asked for a recount in 1870, without success. This may have been in keeping with the times; because after the Civil War, northern carpetbaggers were used as census takers in the South. They were known to under-count their enumeration districts on purpose in an attempt to keep the political influence of the South less important in Congress. In 1880, the city of St. Louis was granted a second enumeration.

The Early Census Takers

Since the first census of 1790, the states have not been involved in taking a national census except to review and act on the reports generated. The national census has always been a federal responsibility. Congress did not get around to creating a “Census Office” until just before the 1850 census. If it were not a responsibility of a state, who was the agency responsible for taking the censuses?

The first nine censuses (1790-1870) were conducted by assistant federal marshals of the United States Federal Court system. One U.S. marshal was assigned to each federal court district, and it was his job to hire and manage the assistant marshals to take the census in his district. In each territory, the territorial governor was responsible for the census enumeration.

The federal court districts did not always match up with state boundaries. For example, at the time of the 1790 census, there were 16 federal court districts, but only 14 states. Vermont entered the Union as the 14th state in early 1791. Soon after, Congress passed a special law to include Vermont in the first census, with a census day designated as the first Monday in April, 1791, and with five months allowed to take the census there. In

1790, Virginia had two federal court districts, each with their own United States Court House. One Virginia district had the same boundaries as what was to become the state of Kentucky in 1792. Massachusetts also had two federal court districts, one of which had the same boundaries as the future state of Maine. The rest of the states had federal court district boundaries that were the same as their state boundaries in 1790. In subsequent censuses, several states had more than one federal court district. Today, some larger states have as many as four or five federal court districts.

The 1790 census was taken for determining seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Since people living in territories did not have representation in Congress, no perceived need existed for a census to be taken in the old Northwest Territory or the Southwest Territory. Soon after the law providing for the 1790 census was enacted, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, perhaps as an afterthought, wrote a letter to the governor of the Southwest Territory (the territory that became the state of Tennessee in 1796). Jefferson asked Governor Blount if he wouldn't mind taking a census, even though it was not required under the law; and he had

neither money allocated, nor a federal marshal to do it. But, since he knew that Blount had “sheriffs who will be traversing their Districts for other purposes,” Jefferson wondered if the Governor could ask them to take a census “arranged under the same classes prescribed . . . for the general census.” Blount complied, in a way, by providing the secretary with a count of the territory’s inhabitants but without listing their names. His report was dated 19 September 1791. Presumably, Jefferson would have asked the same for Governor St. Clair of the Northwest Territory in 1790, but St. Clair was up to his neck fighting off Indian attacks and not available for much else that year. No enumeration of the Northwest Territory was taken until 1800, which in that year had been reduced in size with the creation of Indiana Territory.

Before the 1790 census, there was much debate in Congress about the various aspects of the first census, including the compensation for an assistant marshal. Several members of Congress were worried that the amount was not high enough to attract people to the job. One member of Congress reminded his colleagues of the Bible story about King David, who was blamed for a terrible plague in Israel immediately after a census was taken. The representative from New York remembered that back in the 1770s most of the residents of a New York town had fallen sick right after they had been visited by a British census taker. The representatives wondered if taking a census would ever be possible, given the prevailing superstitions about censuses overall. Nevertheless, in the end, a sum of about \$44,000 was spent in taking the 1790 census which was reported to the President in a pamphlet of fifty-six pages. In comparison, the 1990 census was reported in over 1,200 volumes.

Compensation paid to the assistant marshals who were taking the 1790 census was set by law to be \$1.00 for every 300 persons in cities and towns containing more than 5,000 people, and \$1.00 for every 150 persons in rural areas. However, the law allowed the U.S. marshal to pay \$1.00 for every 50 persons in areas determined to be sparsely populated or difficult to reach, subject to a ruling by the federal judge in his district. Each assistant marshal was given a sample copy of the 1790 census form; and he was expected to make all his own copies, ruling the lines of the forms himself. He was also required to pay for his pens, ink, paper, and all other expenses incurred in taking the census.

Samuel Bradford, the assistant marshal for the city of Boston, began his work door-to-door on 2 August 1790, and by 21 August had completed his enumeration. His notebook shows that the work required seventeen working days. He enumerated an average of more than one thousand persons per day. As his compensation was \$1.00 for every 300 persons, his earnings amounted to about \$3.30 per day, a figure much higher than his rural counterparts and not a bad wage for 1790.

Mr. Bradford could have learned how to increase his pay even more by the example of Clement Biddle, the U.S. marshal for the state of Pennsylvania. Biddle was in charge of the 1790 census taken in that state. Coincidentally, in 1791, Biddle published a directory of the city of Philadelphia, which, apparently, was a profitable success. Comparing the names in the 1791 directory with the 1790 census returns for Philadelphia reveals that Mr. Biddle added very little to his directory. Publishing the city directory may have been a plan of Mr. Biddle’s all along—the Philadelphia census list included occupations for heads of household, which, of course, was information repeated in the Biddle directory.

Still, most census takers were not having much job satisfaction. For example, after taking the Morgan County, North Carolina, census in 1790, the assistant marshal there wrote a few words of complaint at the end of his list of names:

I have been Closely Employd Since the 25 of December Last. One Other man has been closely Employd Since the 6th of January; one other has been Employd Since the 12 of January; a third one Since the 1st of March and Two others A Week Each and all had Since to fall behind. After riding horses almost to Death. This is a True State of Facts. No one Man Can Number the People in the District of Morgan Going from House to House in 18 Months I Aver, and if there is no Provision to Collect the people in the Next Law, no man that understands will have anything to do with it.

At the end of the 1820 Hall County, Georgia, schedules, the assistant marshal wrote the following:

The difficulties were very considerable that attended taking the census, in the first place, the inhabitants are very dispersed, in the second place the country being but lately settled, there are but few roads, in the third place great part of the Country are very Mountainous, and in the fourth place it was, except in the oldest settled parts, difficult to get nourishment for either myself or horse, and often when got, had to pay very high, in the 5th place had often to travel a considerable distance through fields to get to the dwelling cabins, often, and generally, drenchd in dew, particularly in August and September; and often had to walk many miles where it was so steep that I could not ride, or even set on my horse.

The Census Day

In each enabling law authorizing a census to be taken, Congress specified a “census day” for gathering the census information from each household in America. From 1790 to 1820, the census day was the first Monday in August. The census day was not the day the enumerator arrived at a household; it was the day for which all the statistics of the census was collected. The actual instructions given to all the U.S. marshals before the 1820 census explains:

. . . all the questions refer to the day when the enumeration is to commence; the first Monday in August next. Your assistants will thereby understand that they are to insert in their returns all the persons belonging to the family on the first Monday in August, even those who may be deceased at the time when they take the account; and, on the other hand, that they will not include in it, infants born after that day.

Similar instructions have been given for every census, 1790-1990, but with different census days. Table 1 shows the census day for each census, 1790-1920, and the time allowed to take the census.

Census Year	Census Day	Time Allowed
1790	2 August	9 months
1800	4 August	9 months
1810	6 August	10 months
1820	7 August	13 months
1830	1 June	12 months
1840	1 June	18 months
1850	1 June	5 months
1860	1 June	5 months
1870	1 June	5 months
1880	1 June	1 month
1890	1 June	1 month
1900	1 June	1 month
1910	15 April	1 month
1920	1 January	1 month
1930	1 April	1 month

South Carolina could not complete its 1790 enumeration in nine months. The U.S. marshal complained that he was having great difficulty finding people to take the job because of the resistance to the census being taken. A Charleston jury met to decide the fate of six

persons who had “refused to render an account of persons in their households as required by the census act.” A South Carolina census taker was brought on trial for neglect of duty. He did not complete the census in his district. These and other problems led to South Carolina being granted an extension; and the census returns were dated 5 February 1792, a full eighteen months after the census day.

Genealogists should record two dates when copying information from the censuses, the census day and the enumeration date. No matter how many months it took for an enumerator to reach a house, he was supposed to gather the information as if time had stopped on the census day. However, we will never know for sure if the enumerator always followed his instructions. Every person whose regular abode was in a particular household on the census day was to be enumerated, even if a person were away at the time of the enumeration.

From Table 1, which shows the census days, 1790-1920, note that the census day changed from the first Monday in August in 1820 to the first day of June in 1830. If one is researching families appearing in the 1820 and 1830 censuses, looking at these censuses again may be important. Since the census days for 1820 and 1830 are not exactly ten years apart, the two-month difference may reveal some surprising results. For example, if a person were born between 1 June 1820 and 7 August 1820, that child would appear in the 1820 census in the “under 5” category. But in 1830, that same person would appear in the “under ten” rather than the “of 10 and under 16” category, since the person had not turned 10 yet. Comparing the other age categories for a person appearing ten years later and not in the correct age category may give a clue to a person’s date of birth within a two-month period.

The Census Counting Machine

Table 1 also shows the time allowed in the legislative act for taking each census, 1790-1920. Note the change from 1840 when eighteen months was deemed necessary to take the census; while in 1850, only five months were allowed. The reason for this change has an interesting history:

Soon after the Census Office was created in early 1850, two young men from Poughkeepsie, New York, approached the director with a proposal. They had invented a “counting machine” they thought could help in tabulating the census returns. They demonstrated a prototype machine that used flat metal cards with slots and holes punched in them in a precise pattern so that a metal rod could be passed through the holes and slots

and lift out certain cards with holes in the same location. By a process of elimination, cards with a particular pattern of holes could be removed; and in the process, they could be counted.

The director of the new Census Office was impressed. The two men opened a business and with the Census Office’s good recommendation, borrowed a small sum. The new company developed a working model of the machine; and within a few weeks, the machine proved so reliable that the Census Office decided to use it in the tabulation of the 1850 census. They estimated that it would cut the time to take the census from eighteen months to five months, and that is the time they recommended to Congress in their

budget request. Since the 1850 census, the Census Office has used the counting machine in every census taken. In fact, every year after that, the machine was improved in speed and

accuracy. That little two-man company that presented their invention to the Census Office back in 1850 goes by a different name today. It is called the IBM Corporation.

Early Census Losses

The 1790 law required the U.S. marshals to deposit the original returns from their assistants with the clerks of the U.S. District Courts. These name lists remained in the clerks' offices, while the marshals' summaries from the various districts were sent to the president of the United States. The law required that the president receive "the aggregate amount of each description of persons within their respective district." The marshals were to "file the original returns of their assistants with the clerks of their respective district courts, who are hereby directed to receive and carefully preserve the same."

This requirement was repeated in the enabling laws for the 1800, 1810, and 1820 censuses. The president was to receive not the name lists, but summaries of the census tallies. This fact contradicts what several well-known publications use as the reason for many early census losses. For example, several genealogical reference books say that when the British burned Washington in 1814, the earliest census returns were destroyed. This incorrect statement can be found in National Archives guides, Family History Library guides, and repeated in many other publications. The only census schedules that could have been in Washington, D.C., in 1814 were the 1810 schedules for the District of Columbia which had its own U.S. District Courthouse. Since the 1810 D.C. schedules are lost, they may have been the only censuses destroyed when the British burned Washington in 1814.

In 1830, Congress passed a law calling for the return of the original censuses for the years 1790-1820. The original census returns were to be sent to Washington by the various clerks of the district courts—the same clerks who had been admonished in earlier laws to "receive and carefully preserve" the original census returns. Obviously, some clerks failed in their duties. According to the provisions of the 1830 law, the census schedules of 1790-1820 for the two districts of Massachusetts (Massachusetts and Maine) were transferred to Washington. Also transferred were the 1790-1820 original censuses for the states of New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

Certain original census returns were lost before enactment of the 1830 law, or the law was ignored by clerks of the district courts. Georgia's 1790, 1800, and 1810 census returns never reached Washington; and what happened to them is not known. Even worse, the first four New Jersey censuses, 1790-1820, were never received at Washington. Also lost were the 1790 returns for Delaware and Virginia's two federal court districts (old Virginia, including present-day West Virginia and the district which later became the state of Kentucky) and the states of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee for 1800. In addition, the census returns for the Northwest Territory and Indiana Territory, which both had complete censuses taken in 1800, never reached Washington. The 1810

census schedules for Tennessee and the territories of Michigan, Missouri, and Mississippi were also not received at Washington and are presumed lost. See Table 2 for a complete summary of census losses, 1790-1820.

All of the statewide census losses occurred in the first four censuses taken, 1790-1820, with the exception of the 1890 census. More than 99 percent of the original 1890 schedules were destroyed in a fire in the Commerce Building in Washington in January 1921. Most of the early losses occurred before 1830. The failure of some clerks of the district courts to comply with the 1830 law asking for the return of the original censuses may account for most of the losses. For example, the 1820 Michigan census returns were found where they had been all along—in the office of the clerk of the district court in Michigan, but discovered many years after the 1830 law had demanded their transfer to Washington.

There is a slight possibility that some early 1790-1820 lost censuses still exist. If any of the old censuses have survived, they are probably buried in some sub-basement or attic of a federal courthouse district—because that is where they were first deposited.

Table 2 shows the status of censuses from 1790 to 1820. A dash in a column means a census

was not taken for that state in that year. “Lost” means the census returns never reached Washington in 1830 and were probably lost. “Extant” means the manuscripts of the census returns survive, and microfilmed copies of them are available.

Table 2
Summary of Statewide Census Losses, 1790-1820

State/Territory	1790	1800	1810	1820
Alabama	—	—	—	lost
Arkansas	—	—	—	lost
Connecticut	extant	extant	extant	extant
District of Columbia	—	—	lost	extant
Delaware	lost	extant	extant	extant
Georgia (1)	lost	lost	lost	extant
Illinois	—	lost	(2)	extant
Indiana (3)	—	lost	lost	extant
Kentucky	lost	lost	extant	extant
Louisiana	—	—	extant	extant
Maine	extant	extant	extant	extant
Maryland (4)	extant	extant	extant	extant
Massachusetts	extant	extant	extant	extant
Michigan	—	—	lost	extant
Mississippi	—	lost	lost	extant
Missouri	—	—	lost	lost
New Hampshire (5)	extant	extant	extant	extant
New York	extant	extant	extant	extant
New Jersey	lost	lost	lost	lost
North Carolina (6)	extant	extant	extant	extant
Northwest Territory	—	(7)	—	—
Ohio	—	—	lost	extant
Pennsylvania	extant	extant	extant	extant
Rhode Island	extant	extant	extant	extant
South Carolina	extant	extant	extant	extant
Tennessee	—	lost	lost	(8)
Vermont	extant	extant	extant	extant
Virginia (9)	lost	lost	extant	extant

Notes:

1. Three counties are missing from the 1820 Georgia schedules.
2. Of Illinois Territory’s two counties in 1810, Randolph is extant and St. Clair is lost.
3. Missing from the Indiana 1820 schedules is Daviess County.
4. Three counties are missing from the Maryland 1790 schedules.
5. Missing from the 1790 New Hampshire schedules are thirteen towns in Rockingham County and eleven towns in Strafford County.
6. Missing from the North Carolina schedules are three counties in 1790, four counties in 1810, and six counties in 1820.

7. In 1800, about a fourth of the population of the Northwest Territory was in Washington County, whose census was discovered among the papers of the Ohio Company in Marietta, Ohio. All other counties were lost.
8. In 1820, two federal court districts were in place in Tennessee, one with a U.S. Courthouse in Nashville, the other in Knoxville. The original censuses returned to Washington according to the 1830 law were from the Nashville district only, representing the western two-thirds of the state. The twenty eastern counties enumerated within the 1820 Knoxville district were not received in Washington and are presumed lost.
9. The “Heads of Families” index to the 1790 census includes Virginia. However, these names were extracted and compiled from county tax lists of Virginia, 1785-1787.

Census Copies, 1790-1820

In the first four censuses, the assistant marshals were only required to make one set of the name lists they had collected. Sometimes, however, census takers made copies of their work. This can be seen in certain states of the 1790-1820 censuses where all the names are listed for a county in alphabetical order, obviously compiled from an earlier draft. With no requirement that a copy be made of the name lists, any such earlier drafts were probably discarded.

The format of the schedules for the first six censuses (1790-1840) was a listing with only the names of the heads of household, but with age brackets for males and females included in each household.

A special consideration unique to the 1820 form asks for all males “16-18” years of age and in another column, all “males 16-26” years of age. The purpose of these two categories was to determine the number of young men in the U.S. of military age. If a male was shown in the 16-18 column, he would also be in the 16-26 column.

To confirm this, add all the marks for males and females, then go to the far right-hand side of the form and find the “total number in the household” figure. If a male were in the 16-18 category, and at least one male was in the 16-26 category, the number in the “total number” column should confirm that a person was not counted twice. Further confirmation of this can be found in the 1820 instructions to the U.S. marshals which read as follows:

It will be necessary to remember, that the numbers in the columns of free white males between 16 and 18 . . . must not be added to the general aggregates, (they) will all be repeated in the column of those between 16 and 26.

Genealogists who have recorded the number of persons and age categories from the 1820 census need to understand the significance of the added male “16-18” category. One should go back to the same census sheets to confirm that the correct number of persons in the household were noted. It may be enlightening to learn about that “extra” young man in a family in 1820 found no where else.

Census Copies, 1830-1840

In a change of policy, the laws authorizing the 1830 and 1840 censuses required that two copies of the census schedules be prepared. One would be retained by the clerk of the

district court, the other sent to Washington. Congress had decided that one copy of the name lists was not enough; and after the experience of several earlier census returns

disappearing, they asked that the clerks prepare a name-by-name copy. Several examples show that the copy, not the original, was the census schedule sent to Washington. Only the Washington copies of the censuses were transferred to the National Archives and microfilmed many years later. What happened to the various copies retained by the clerks for 1830 and 1840 censuses is a mystery.

Scanning any microfilmed census schedules and looking at the handwriting is one way of learning if it is the clerk's copy or the original. If the handwriting changed from one assistant

marshal's district to the next, then the records are probably the originals, not the copies. If page after page of the handwriting is by the same person, crossing over various town, district, or county boundaries, then it is probably the clerk's copy, not the original.

It is known that various clerks of the District Courts complained loudly about having to make extra copies of the census schedules—they did not think that Congress had provided enough funds for the extra work. As it turned out, the clerks' involvement with census taking ended with the 1840 census.

Census Copies, 1850-1870

The first Census Office began operations in 1850, and a new set of procedures for taking the census was put in place. Although the door-to-door census takers were still the assistant marshals of the Federal District Court system, the clerks of the District Courts were taken out of the census business. For the 1850 through 1870 censuses, they were replaced by the secretary of state in each state or territory.

The job of the new Census Office was to collect the census schedules and prepare the reports after the various U.S. marshals and secretaries of state had completed their work. The Census Office did not have complete control of the job, nor did it even hire its own census enumerators. After each enumeration from 1850 through 1890, the Census Office was disbanded, then recreated again ten years later. The Census Office did not become a permanent federal agency until 1902, when it was named the Bureau of the Census. Since about the time of World War I, the agency has been more often referred to as the "Census Bureau."

Enabling laws for the 1850, 1860, and 1870 censuses asked for an original and two additional copies of the census schedules to be prepared. This was a result of a new procedure for handling the census schedules that began in 1850. Upon completion of an enumeration, the original schedules for an entire county were placed in public view at a county courthouse. Copies of the census schedules were made with the following procedure:

- A complete set of the original census schedule for one county was displayed at each county courthouse after the censuses for 1850, 1860, and 1870.
- The supervising assistant federal marshal made a complete copy of the name lists for the county or counties under his jurisdiction. A "clean copy" of the countywide schedules was to be sent to the state or territorial secretary of state, and the original schedules were to remain in the courthouse for the applicable county. The new copy was to become the "state copy."

- The state or territorial secretary of state received all of the copies of county schedules for his state, then made a “federal copy.” The state copy was to be retained at the secretary of state’s office. The federal copy was to be sent to the Census Office in Washington.

The original copy of the census schedules made by an assistant marshal in each county was supposed to remain in that county, but it is not known if the marshals always followed their instructions. It is disappointing that so few of the original censuses for 1850-1870 have ever been found in county courthouses. A few years ago, a genealogist looking through case files in a county probate court noticed that many packets of files were wrapped with strips of paper. Unwrapping these packets revealed that the strips of paper were torn off that county’s original 1850 census pages. One county’s officials obviously had little regard for their old censuses. They used them for scrap paper.

The same is true for the census schedules retained in the offices of the various secretaries of state. It is not known what happened to most of the state copies of the 1850-1870 censuses. One explanation is that they may have been given to various state representatives and senators as “mailing lists” for their counties and districts.

Genealogists should remember that when reading the microfilmed censuses for 1850-1870, they are handwritten copies of the original, or even copies of copies of the originals. If a genealogist is reading a copy (perhaps one that is twice removed from the original), does that explain why an ancestor’s name is misspelled, or not there at all?

In a few cases, we have evidence that the originals and state copies of the 1850-1870 censuses were better versions than the microfilmed federal

copies. A few county originals and a few state copies, such as those that exist for Minnesota and Wisconsin, have been found. The Wisconsin State Historical Society has the original state copies of Wisconsin 1850-1870 federal censuses. By visiting the Society’s library in Madison and comparing the original state copy with the microfilmed federal copy, one will see some dramatic differences.

Harry Hollingsworth reported some of these differences in his article, “Little Known Facts About the U.S. Census,” *The American Genealogist* 53 (1977):11.

I have personally found many discrepancies between the Federal and State copies themselves, and vast differences between them and the originals (i.e., the county copies)! Whole names have either been changed or omitted. Ages have been copied wrong. Whereas, in the originals, the surnames of each family are generally written over and over again, in the copies the word “ditto” or its abbreviation “do” appears instead. When written over and over, a surname has much less chance of being written incorrectly! In one Federal entry, I find Rebecca Gey but “Grey” in the original. In another Federal entry, Amanda Vandyke appears, but she is Amanda A. Vanslyke in the original. Esther Hollingsworth of the original—the correct name—appears as Esther Hollenback in the Federal copy!

When Leland Meitzler was looking for his great grandparents in the 1860 Wisconsin census, he compared the state copy and federal copy. He found the name was spelled “Metzern” in the microfilmed federal copy, but correctly spelled “Meitzler” in the state copy. There are many other examples of the federal copy being in error; and specifically, common human errors were made while transcribing handwritten names and information from one document to another. Unfortunately, the federal copies of the 1850-1870 censuses—the copies with the most errors—are the ones available from the National Archives today, and the ones microfilmed for the public.

Census Copies, 1880

The last census conducted under the jurisdiction of the federal courts and the U.S. marshals was the 1870 census. In the enabling act for the 1880 census, the reconstituted Census Office was expanded and given a substantial boost in budget. However, the big change was that the Census Office, for the first time, was given full power to hire its own census takers and take full control of the job of taking the census completely. The federal court system was no longer involved, and the secretaries of state were bypassed as well.

The new, improved Census Office did a marvelous job of it; and the dramatic results compared with any earlier census were obvious. Five times the number of enumerators were used in conducting the 1880 census compared with the 1870 census. For the first time, the schedules listed relationships for every member of a household to the head. Not only was a birthplace given for each member of a family, but the birthplace of the parents was given. Also, the 1880 census tracts were organized into "Enumeration Districts." Each

district had a supervisor who managed the enumerators under him and managed the work of making copies of the census schedules that would go to Washington. In 1880, an original and one additional copy of the census schedules were made.

As with the 1850-1870 censuses, the 1880 original schedules were to remain in each county of the U.S. The original schedules were bound into books for each county, and this was the copy that stayed at the county courthouse. Meanwhile, copies of the original schedules were made under the supervision of a district supervisor, whose area of responsibility may have been part of a county, one whole county, or more than one county. The supervisor collected the schedules by Enumeration District and county and sent them off to the Census Office in Washington. So, the originals stayed in a county, the copies went directly to Washington—no district court was involved, and no secretary of state office made copies.

Census Copies, 1890-1920

Due to a fire, the only federal census schedules taken for the year 1890 were lost. What is not readily known is why only one copy was made, when earlier censuses had as many as three sets, and even the previous census for 1880 had two sets prepared.

In 1890, the Census Office created a completely different method of recording the census enumeration, one that was unique to the 1890 census and was never repeated. One family was enumerated on one sheet of paper, making the 1890 census schedules much

greater in volume than the 1880 schedules, where as many as ten families were shown on one page. With the increased volume of paper, Congress decided to finance just one copy and make any additional copies an option to any county in the U.S. that wanted their own set. The counties were required to pay for the cost of making their own copy of the census schedules.

It is not known if any of the 2,813 counties in the U.S. in 1890 paid to have an official copy made. Only two counties are known to have

surviving population census schedules for 1890—Washington County, Georgia, whose officials copied their census name lists into their county records; and Ascension Parish, Louisiana, where the original work copies of the 1890 census were found. Fragments of the schedules that survived the 1921 fire in Washington, D.C., are together on one roll of microfilm, all indexed, listing 6,160 persons out of the entire 1890 population of 62,979,766 people. Genealogists have learned to use substitutes for the lost 1890 census, in particular, the many city directories printed around 1890.

After 1890, the next three censuses revealed a population increase in the United States that rose from 62 million in 1890 to 106 million in 1920. The censuses of 1900, 1910, and 1920 again were enumerated in one set of schedules; and very few copies were made, if any. For each of these censuses, Congress required any county wanting their census schedules to pay for the cost of making the copy—but it is not known if any counties ever asked for their own copies.

During World War II, the problem of storage space became acute for the original census schedules held by the Census Office, part of the Commerce Department, in Washington, D.C. By 1940, the early census schedules from 1790 through 1880 had already been transferred to the National Archives; but the original schedules from 1900 through 1940 were still stored on several floors of the Commerce Building. To save space, the Census Office undertook a major project to microfilm the census schedules of 1900 through 1940; and when the microfilming was complete, the original census schedules were burned. Since then, genealogists have discovered that poor microfilming for various census schedules will never be corrected completely. The copies we read for 1900 and later censuses are now only available on microfilm. (It is hoped that the future technology of electronic image enhancement may be the answer to restoring the quality of the microfilmed census records into Compact Discs and other media.)

Changes to the Census Statistics, 1790-1920

As genealogists, we have been the beneficiaries of our federal government that took on more than the Constitution asked of them. From 1790 through 1840, the censuses have given us the names of heads of household, age categories of members of a household, and other facts about people.

From the 1850 census and on, the names of all members of the households in America are listed. With that kind of information available, census records have become essential genealogical sources.

The dramatic change in the number and type of questions asked on the 1850 census form

came about because of the influence of a group of men in America concerned with the collection of vital statistics. In 1834, a special organization was formed in Washington called the American Scientific Society. This is the same organization that currently has the longest consecutively published magazine in America, *The Scientific American*.

From its very beginning, members of this organization began lobbying Congress to add more statistical information in the decennial census schedules. There was no national standard for the collection of vital statistics in the U.S., and yet the country was experiencing continual epidemics of various diseases

that seemed to be localized in certain parts of the country. Gathering statistics about the number of deaths, causes of death, and so on was a growing concern expressed eloquently by prominent men of the American Scientific Society.

As a result, the law enacted for the preparation of the 1850 census included a new concept in which much more information was gathered. Also in 1850 a special schedule was added, called a “Mortality Schedule,” in which every person who had died during the previous 12 months was named, along with the cause of the person’s death.

From 1850 to 1900, it was believed that the federal censuses could provide the means of collecting national vital statistics. However, since the information came in ten year intervals, the statistics about births and deaths was not very meaningful for the period between census years. In 1901, Congress passed a resolution asking each state to gather information about births and deaths on a statewide basis. But, because Congress gave no money to the states to do it, it took several more years before it happened in every state. By 1925, all 48

states had laws requiring registration of all births and deaths.

Coinciding with these events, more vital records statistical questions were added to each census from 1850 to 1900 with the 1900 census having the most of these, e.g., age, plus month and year of birth; number of children born to a mother, and number still living, etc. But since 1900, census schedules have asked less of these types of questions, mainly because the matter of national vital statistics information had been handed over to the states.

There have been unique questions added for each subsequent census since 1920. For example, in the 1930 census, one of the questions was whether the household had a radio set. In 1940, there were some extra schedules that were not microfilmed, such as the “housing schedules” which asked several questions about construction materials, running water, and whether the house was served by an indoor flush toilet or an outhouse. Another 1940 statistic was each person’s address five years earlier: “In what place did this person live on April 1, 1935?”, to which a full address was to be given if different from the 1940 address.

The 1880-1920 Soundex Indexes

When Social Security began in 1935, the first old-age pension system was established for every citizen of the United States of the age of 65 or over. An immediate concern was how to prove an age for a person applying for social security, since not very many people could produce a birth certificate in 1935. Many people who were qualified could not prove their age.

To counter this problem, a special branch of

the Census Office was created, called the Age Search group. This group would take a person’s application for social security and attempt to find that same person in a census record where a name and age would be given. It was soon determined that indexes would be needed to speed up the work of finding a particular person’s name and age listing.

The Census Office hired the Rand Corporation to design an indexing system

based on phonetic sounds for a name, which become known as “Soundex.” Under the supervision of the Age Search Group, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed several hundred clerical workers to create the indexes to the 1880, 1900, and 1920 censuses. For several months, the WPA workers prepared index cards for heads of household from the 1880 census with children 10 years or younger, as well as the index cards for all heads of household from the 1900 and 1920 censuses. The Soundex code was given at the top of the index card, followed by the name of the head of the household. The names and ages of each member of the family were listed below, showing a citation to the census schedules on which they appeared. The cards were then arranged by the Soundex codes for each census index.

For the Age Search Group’s purposes, it was decided that the 1880 census did not need to be completely indexed. People in 1935 who were 55-65 years old would have been 10 years or younger in 1880. The 1880 Soundex, therefore, was to be used to provide another check to confirm a person’s age. Since the only copy of the 1890 census had been destroyed by fire, the Age Search Group decided they needed to have a complete heads of household Soundex for the 1900 and 1920 censuses.

In the early 1960s, the Age Search Group, on their own, undertook a census index of the 1910 census but limited the index to twenty-one states. The 1910 index was the first to employ the use of computers. Two systems for coding the names in the 1910 census were used. The coding used was either the Soundex or Miracode system, but both systems were exactly the same for coding a surname. (The index cards for

Miracode or Soundex differ only in the citation to a visitation [house] or page number on the full schedules.) Today, all the 1880-1920 Soundex cards prepared by the WPA for the Age Search Group have been microfilmed and made available to genealogists. The computer-generated 1910 Soundex/Miracode indexes were also microfilmed.

All of the Soundex cards have been heavily used. But clearly, the 1920 Soundex cards were the most heavily used by the census office’s Age Search Group. Evidence of this was seen at the top of the 1920 cards which were nearly black from thousands of thumbs and fingers passing over them. After the 1920 cards were microfilmed, it was nearly impossible to read the top of many of the cards because of this darkness. Since the Soundex code itself was at the very top of the card, it created a serious problem. However, genealogists may be pleased to learn that one company has been correcting this problem. Heritage Quest of North Salt Lake, Utah, maintains a complete microfilm set of the 1790-1920 censuses as well as all Soundex indexes. Since the 1920 Soundex index was first released in 1992, Heritage Quest (HQ) has been enhancing the images of the microfilmed Soundex cards, many of which are very difficult to read. Hundreds of master rolls of microfilm have been completely refilmed, photographically changing the light exposure to make the images more readable on subsequent copies. As a result, HQ’s set of microfilm for the 1920 Soundex is now more readable in many cases than are the microfilm masters at the National Archives. All of HQ’s microforms are available for sale; they now have made them available for sale on CD-ROM and for loan to its members.

Personal Census Search

The Age Search Group of the Census Office is still in operation. The services of this group can be used for a personal census search to locate one person in a census 1930-1990. The request must be for yourself, a deceased ancestor, or for any person alive today who provides written permission. The fee for the search is \$40.00 plus \$10.00 for a “genealogy” search (which adds the full

details for one person on a particular census schedule). The application for a search must be on a Bureau of Census form BC-600, “Application For Search of Census Records,” which can be obtained by writing to Age Search Group, Bureau of the Census, PO Box 1545, Jeffersonville, IN 47131, or by stopping by any local office of the Social Security Administration and asking for a copy of form BC-600.

County Boundary Changes

When using census records for genealogical research, it is important to understand how the old county boundaries changed over the years. Since the basic census enumeration unit in all censuses, 1790-1920, was a county, understanding the genealogy of counties is part of locating the place where an ancestor lived.

For example, if a genealogist knows that an ancestor lived in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in 1790, the county courthouse there is a resource for old deeds, marriages, and other court records, and a place where an ancestor’s name may be mentioned. In 1800, due to the formation of counties taken from Allegheny, there were nine counties covering the same area: Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, Mercer, Crawford, Erie, and parts of Armstrong, Venango, and Warren Counties.

Take the example of county boundary changes in Oregon. Any marriage for a couple in the little town of Linkville in Linn County in 1850 would have been recorded in Albany, the county seat; but in 1860, due to the formation of new counties in Oregon, all marriages performed in Linkville, now in Wasco County, were recorded in The Dalles.

In 1870, a marriage performed in Linkville was recorded in Jacksonville, the county seat of Jackson County (but later the county seat was moved to Medford). In 1880, a marriage performed in Linkville was recorded in Lakeview, the county seat of Lake County; and in 1890, for the first time, a marriage performed in Linkville was recorded in the same town since Linkville became the county seat of Klamath County—but then the name Linkville was changed to Klamath Falls. The boundaries of Klamath County have not changed since 1890.

Of course, the town of Linkville never moved. As the settlement of Oregon took place, new counties were created; and earlier county boundaries were changed, placing the town of Linkville-Klamath Falls in five different counties from 1850 through 1890. Therefore, all county records such as deeds, probates, marriages, etc., for a family that lived in Linkville, Oregon, are spread across the state and stored today in five different county courthouses.

These examples can be repeated in virtually every state. Table 3 shows that the number of counties in the United States increased from

292 in 1790 to 3,076 by 1920. It is common that genealogists attempting to identify the places their ancestors lived must first face the reality of changing county boundaries over the years.

A source that can be used to visualize the county boundaries for every county of the United States and for each census year is a

book by William Thorndale and William Dollarhide, *Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Census, 1790-1920* (Baltimore: GPC, 1987). This book has 393 maps showing each applicable census year and all county boundary changes, 1790-1920. Each map shows both the old boundaries and the modern boundaries for each state and census year, so a comparison can be made.

Table 3
Statistics of U.S. Censuses, 1790-1990

Year	U.S. Population	No. of States	No. of Counties	Territories included in Census
1790	3,929,214	14	292	Southwest (tally only)
1800	5,308,483	16	419	Northwest, IN, & MI
1810	7,239,881	17	574	IL, IN, MI, MS, LA (MO), & Orleans
1820	9,638,453	22	759	AR, MI, & MO
1830	12,860,702	24	988	AR, FL, & MI
1840	17,063,353	26	1,279	IA, FL, & WI
1850	23,191,876	30	1,623	MN, NM, OR, & UT/1851
1860	31,443,321	33	2,080	KS, NM, NE, UT, WA, Indian, & Unorganized Dakota
1870	38,558,371	37	2,295	AZ, CO, ID, NM, MT, UT, WA, WY, Dakota, & Indian
1880	50,189,209	38	2,570	AK, AZ, ID, NM, MT, UT, WA, WY, Dakota, & Indian
1890	62,979,766	44	2,813	AK, AZ, NM, OK, UT, & Indian
1900	76,212,168	45	2,862	AK, AZ, HI, NM, OK, & Indian
1910	92,228,496	46	2,962	AK, AZ, NM, HI, Puerto Rico
1920	106,021,537	48	3,076	[AK, HI, Guam, Midway,
1930	123,202,624	48	3,110	Canal Zone, Puerto Rico,
1940	132,164,569	48	3,108	American Samoa, Virgin
1950	151,325,798	48	3,111	Islands, & Wake Island]
1960	179,323,175	50	3,133	[Guam, Midway, Canal Zone,
1970	203,211,926	50	3,142	Puerto Rico, American
1980	226,545,805	50	3,137	Samoa, Virgin Islands, &
1990	248,709,873	50	3,141	Wake Island]

Notes:

1. Alaska is the only state without counties. The numbers above include the census subdivisions of Alaska.
2. In Louisiana, a parish has the same function as a county in other states.
3. Since 1790, there have been 138 counties reported in the censuses that have since been renamed or abolished and subsequently absorbed into other counties.
4. Through 1920, there were 44 cities in Virginia independent of any county.

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