

10 Tips for Successful US Census Research

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Starting in 1790 and enumerated every 10 years, each US Census had its own specific questions as well as enumerator instructions. Besides Population Schedules other census resources include Enumeration District Maps, Non-population Schedules (Agriculture, Business, etc.), Mortality Schedules and special schedules such as the 1890 Veterans Census.



- Mistakes Happen!** Enumerators recorded responses to questions which could include incorrect data. Misheard information, a foreign accent, or even bad handwriting could impact data. Another frequent error: Some enumerators disregarded the Census Day and used the actual date of the visit.
- When was the Census Day?** The “Census Day” for the 1790 census was the first Monday in August (to catch farmers in their fields). But each census had its own Census Day set by Congress. Starting with the 1930 census, the Census Day is April 1.
- Note the Census Order:** House numbers and street names were not included in early censuses. Don’t assume that the census was taken in house number order. Look for the Family Number used. A close examination of house and family numbers show the actual walking route of the enumerator.
- Census Bureau Marks:** Once a form was submitted, certain fields were “coded” for statistical purposes. If you see marks and numbers in different handwriting or a different color, don’t panic! They were added later by the Census Bureau.
- Who Was the Informant?:** The 1940 Census asked enumerators to place an X or an X in a circle next to the name of the informant.
- How Long did the Census Take?** The first census in 1790 took 18 months to complete. Your ancestor was not always enumerated exactly on the Census Day. It could take days, weeks or even months to complete. Some enumerators would mark in the margins the day they visited a household.
- Derivative Document:** Don’t assume that the enumerator actually took the population schedule form with them during interviews. They may have used a copy of the form or used their own notes and then went home and completed the form.
- Look for Multiple Passes or Backtracking:** Review the entire enumeration district when looking at schedules. In 1940, enumerators were told to survey hotels, boarding houses and even campsites separately and list them on a specific page number.
- Enumerator Marks and Comments:** Some enumerators made comments in the margins of the forms. Some are notes and reminders such as (“day one ended here” with a line number) and others border on being gossipy (“house not clean”).
- Internet Archive:** There are over 24,000 sets of microfilm images available, provided by the Allen County Public Library and the US Census Bureau. These could be clearer than what you might find at Ancestry or Family Search.

Check out the **US Census Resource List** on the back page!

US Census Resource List

- **Census Instructions By Year – US Census Bureau**
https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/census_instructions/
- **Clues in Census Records, 1850-1930 - NARA**
<https://www.archives.gov/research/census/1850-1930.html>
- **Detailed Census Procedural Histories – IPUMS**
<https://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/tHistcensus.shtml>
- **Enumeration Forms and Instructions – IPUMS**
<https://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/tEnumForm.shtml>
- **History of Enumeration Procedures – IPUMS**
<https://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/enumproc1.shtml>
- **Index of Questions – US Census Bureau**
https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/index_of_questions/
- **Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses From 1790 to 2000**
https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2002/dec/pol_02-ma.html
- **Mortality Schedules – US Census Bureau**
https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/mortality_schedules.html
- **Nonpopulation Census Records – NARA**
<https://www.archives.gov/research/census/nonpopulation#intro>
- **Oral Histories of US Census Bureau Employees**
https://www.census.gov/history/www/reference/oral_histories/
- **Resources for Genealogists: Census Records - NARA**
<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/census>
- **Search Census Records Online and Other Resources – NARA**
<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/census/online-resources>
- **State Censuses – US Census Bureau**
https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/state_censuses.html
- **The American Census: A Social History - Amazon**
<http://amzn.to/2BPttla>
- **The Making of a Modern Census : the United States Census of Population, 1790-1940**
<http://www.worldcat.org/title/making-of-a-modern-census-the-united-states-census-of-population-1790-1940/oclc/35107167>
- **US Census - FamilySearch Wiki**
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Census