

Tips for Locating Hard to Find Census Records

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Brief history of the U.S. federal census

Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution states, “Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers....” The census was required to be taken every 10 years for taxation purposes and to determine each state’s number of representatives in Congress. For example, Pennsylvania has 17 congressional districts based on its population that was counted in the 2020 census. Today, there is one congressional district for approximately every 700,000 residents.

The first U.S. federal census was taken in 1790. The most recent one was taken in 2020. The details of the census cannot be made publicly available for 72 years. This is due to privacy concerns because the census contains personal information. The 1950 census became available in 2022. The 1960 census will become available in 2032.

- 1790 – 1840 censuses only list heads of household by name.
- 1850 census begins listing all free individuals by name. Slaves were tallied on slave schedules in 1850 and 1860.
- 1880 census adds relationships to heads of household and parents’ birthplaces for the first time.
- Most of the 1890 census was destroyed by fire. A special census of Union Veterans and their widows survives.
- 1900 census asks for month and year of birth along with year of immigration for people born outside of the United States.
- 1940 census includes a significant amount of occupational data.
- Native Americans were largely excluded from the census until 1880 because they were not taxed. In 1880 a special census was taken of Native Americans living in Washington Territory, Dakota Territory and California. In 1890 the government attempted to count all Native Americans in the census.

Why census records are important to a genealogist:

Census records can:

- Place a family in a specific time and place, so you know where to look for additional records
- Establish relationships with other people including family members and neighbors
- Reveal children you never knew about. If a child died young, one census record may be the only surviving record of that child.
- Help to break down brick walls in your research

Reasons a person is difficult to find in the census

- Person was missed by the census taker and was not counted

- Records were lost or destroyed
- A person's name is spelled incorrectly or inconsistently with other records
- The census taker was given incorrect information
- The handwriting is difficult to read and an error was made when the record was transcribed

Tips for locating hard to find census records

1. Focus your search to a single record collection.

- Don't do a general site search for the person. Only search the record collection where you are trying to find them.
- This will give you a more manageable number of search results and more search fields that are customized to that record collection.
- To do this, use the website's card catalog to find the record collection.

2. Use wildcards in your searches

- Wildcards help to capture spelling variations.
- A ? can be used to replace one letter.
Example: Higgins can be searched Higg?ns. This will capture search results for Higgins, Higgens, and Higgans.
- An * can replace a string of letters.
Example: Loughridge can be searched L*ridge. This will capture search results for Loughridge, Lockridge, Loveridge, Laughridge, etc.
- Multiple wildcards can be used at once and many combinations are possible.
Example: Breckenridge can be searched Br?ck*. This captured the search result Brackenbig.

3. Only search first names

- This is a helpful strategy when searching for a large family
- The strategy works better on Ancestry than FamilySearch because FamilySearch limits the number of people you can search for at one time.

4. Search for a household member with a common first name

- Common names are less likely to be misspelled or transcribed incorrectly

5. Search for abbreviated first names

- Common first names were often abbreviated in the census
- Examples include Wm for William or Jas for James
- Unless another user has attached a note to the record, abbreviations may not show up in search results when the full name is searched
- Online list of Abbreviations for English given names:
https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Abbreviations_for_English_given_names

6. Search for nicknames

- Many female nicknames were not derivative of given names
- Example: Polly was a common nickname for Mary

- c. Try Family Tree Magazine's female nickname searchable guide:
<https://familytreemagazine.com/names/first-names/female-first-names-nicknames/>
- 7. If your ancestor had a middle name, search for the middle name or initials in place of the first name**
- 8. Search for the people closest to your ancestor**
- a. Examples can include Parents, siblings, spouse, in-laws and children
 - b. When you find these people, look at the other members of their household and their closest neighbors
- 9. Think like a detective and use profiling in your search**
- a. Create a profile of your ancestor with the facts that you know about them which would be included in a census record. Search for a person who fits that profile instead of searching for someone with your ancestor's name.
 - b. This strategy works best when you are confident about where your ancestor was located geographically, and when they had a unique characteristic that would have been recorded in the census. This may include:
 - i. Unusual occupation
 - ii. Birthplace in another state or country
 - iii. Marital status listed as Divorced
- 10. Don't limit your search results too much**
- a. Your ancestor may not be where you expect them to be, or they are exactly where you expect them to be, but because of a boundary change they are suddenly in a different town or county
 - b. Your ancestor's age could be wildly inaccurate in a census
 - c. Keep an open-mind and consider different possibilities

Persistence is key! Try different strategies and different websites. If you are confident about where your ancestor was located at a given time, try searching the census page-by-page.

Census substitutes

- 1. State or territorial census records
 - a. Comprehensive list of state and territorial censuses is available here:
https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/state_censuses.html
 - b. If records survive but are not available online, check state archives, state historical societies or state libraries
- 2. City or county directories
 - a. Only lists heads of household
 - b. Check Ancestry's directory database or local historical societies to find directories
- 3. Tax lists
 - a. May only list Males over the age of 21 who owned property
 - b. Check county archives or historical societies to find records