

# MAKING SENSE OF THE CENSUS

## USING THE CENSUS MAKES SENSE

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Census: in the United States, a counting of population by the government every ten years from 1790 through the present. It is essential in US research and can be very important in international research as well. (British censuses are 1 year later.) Not all equally valuable but look anyway—for everybody.

Look for all family members who would have appeared in a census—even if they aren't in the same household anymore.

Look for your all people in **every** census they would have appeared in, no matter WHERE they may have moved to.

Censuses can give clues:

- a. to family makeup at a particular time period in history
- b. occupation, crops, income (useful in sorting people with the same/similar names living in same place)
- c. real estate ownership—leading to land records
- d. education—possibly leading to year books, or historic school records

If your family would have appeared in a census, look at that census! Consider copying it for your records. Do not copy ONLY your family excerpt from the census. Get the entire page. In some communities, you may end up knowing who everyone on a given page is & how they are related to you and to each other.

Search the neighborhood to see who else is living there: future spouses, siblings, grandparents, etc. Maybe from same place “back home.”

Look for international censuses for immigrants. (Hint: Only US, Canadian and British censuses will be in English.)

1. Look at **all** the censuses an ancestor would have appeared in. Important enough to repeat many times!!!
2. Document each of the censuses in your records. (Helps you plan other work you need to do if you've missed one.)
3. Search for entire family groups, even the siblings (another reason to use family group sheets).
4. Parents may have moved in with “other” children than the one you are descended from.
5. Understand that the literacy level of census takers may vary. Spellings, (especially of immigrants) were not cast in granite.
6. When names and ages are similar in two families, look for other clues that might separate the families into yours and theirs. (They may turn out to be cousins.)
7. If something doesn't seem to fit, it may not be the right family.
8. Census word pictures are a micro-picture of daily life as it appeared on the day the census taker called.
9. The census was meant to be a political document, rather than a specific family historical document. Genealogists often would have asked for other information.

The most recent censuses, two sets of questions were asked: a long and short form. Cross your fingers and hope your family got the long form. The purpose for international censuses may be different from US censuses, and so ask different questions.

The historic purpose in the US:

- a. statehood
- b. representation in Congress
- c. voters
- d. military potential
- e. veterans (potential for pension obligations)
- f. home radio ownership (constructing relay towers for the signals) in 1930

US: 1790 through the present, with released through 1940. The US releases the census after a 72 year privacy consideration, 110 years in Great Britain and Canada.

W. Dale Clark Library resources: 1790 through 1860, with 35 states complete through 1900, + the entire extant 1890 census & veterans schedules. 14 states are complete through 1930 (and some counties).

Ancestry library version on library computers with library card.

Provides My Heritage online through your home computer (with your current library card)

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

1. Computer printouts limited to the size of typewriter sheets, which may not be large enough to read well vs. double the size at the library from the film.
2. "Cleaned up" images on-line may change the names.
3. Skipped images on-line occasionally. Use both film and online resources for best success when both available.

A Census Helper will aid in online or film searches. It will remind you what each of the columns is talking about when you're down at the bottom of the page.

Make a photo copy and write down the documentation on that sheet: year of the census, state and county, reel number, enumeration district if given (essential for large urban areas), page number (you may want to use both the hand written and the stamped page numbers where there are both), and where you obtained the record (library, family history center, on-line.)

If you do not make a copy, transcribe information very carefully. There are forms (check [www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com) or [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)) you can transcribe onto that will remind you to fill in all the given information...but don't forget to check out those neighbors!!

Filing: consider putting it in a special folder for census copies by geographic areas, rather than in a family folder. You will need far fewer duplicate copies.

If you can't find who you are looking for, **consider going line by line**. Name variations, spelling variations, and handwriting may obscure your family member, but you may recognize something that someone not related will not.

Can't find somebody? Consider using nicknames, middle names, initials, alternate spellings, and other 'wildcards' to help locate missing people if you are sure they are supposed to be there in the census. Flexibility counts...they may have been missed or could be living elsewhere. (1870: it is estimated only 70% were counted, especially in South) Try using just a first name or an unusual name of the spouse or children.

Work from the known to the unknown and look in each census they would have appeared in, even if you think you know the information.

Using pre-1850 censuses:

1. Compare with 1850 & other later census schedules. (Use the form in William Dollarhide's The Census Book)
2. Combine with other records, such as wills, deeds, & school records to identify unnamed people.
3. Look for voter registration and tax records for evidence of majority.
4. Watch marriage records closely for more than names of the bride & groom.
5. Combine with church and cemetery records where available.
6. Use the numbers of people & age groups to identify correct family members & whether you have them all.
7. *Caution: Non-family members are counted with the family and there is no way to identify servants and other relatives without careful comparison with other records.*

If using slave schedules, you will need to use not only the slave schedules but study the owner's family that they were with as well.

Just because you lose first names and ages in the earlier censuses, it doesn't mean that you are "done". It means that you will have to work harder and look at more records to get the information, no matter what ethnicity your family was.

Don't forget to check for international censuses, especially if your family just immigrated in the last 100 years.

Look for all family members in all censuses, even if it means looking for several family groups in the same census year.

Ancestry at the library is starting to get more international censuses.