Census Techniques and Strategies
for Finding Elusive Ancestors

Jason B. Harrison

FamilySearch
harrisonjb@familysearch.org

Few records provide as much detail about a person or family as a census. They also supply researchers with important clues that can lead them to other sources. As a result, they are often one of the first record types consulted.

In the past, researchers relied heavily on published indexes, Soundexes, CD-ROM databases, and other finding aids to help them locate people in the census. Fortunately for us, technology has revolutionized the way we do census research. Today, census researchers are blessed to have the convenience of online field searchable indexes and high quality digital images.

Yet, in spite of this, researchers continue to have trouble finding people in the census. This class will discuss several useful techniques and strategies for overcoming the pitfalls and challenges of census research.

WHY CAN'T I FIND THEM IN THE CENSUS?

There are a number of reasons why researchers might not find a person in the census. Consider the following:

- Name variations
- Misspelled names
- Transcription errors
- Informant mistakes
- Falsified information
- Narrow search parameters
- Inadequate indexes
- Incomplete databases
- Illegible records
- Lost or destroyed schedules
- Enumeration omissions

Too often inexperienced researchers are quick to conclude that a person or family was missed by a census enumerator, when in fact, they were not. It is true that some people were missed. However, the number of people overlooked or missed by enumerators is relatively low.

For increased success finding people in the census, always assume that a person was enumerated. If after an exhaustive search a person is not found, try again later. Postponing the search will often give the researcher a chance to gain some additional insights and perspective necessary for solving the problem.

TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES

1. Select a Specific Census to Search
Avoid the temptation to search all of a website's databases at once. Instead, focus efforts on a specific census database such as the 1940 U.S. federal census. This will limit the search results to manageable levels and increase the likelihood of finding your ancestor.

2. Begin a Search with Minimal Information
One of the most common mistakes beginners make searching the census is entering too much information. This often eliminates any results from being returned. Start your search with minimal information, such as the person's name and place of residence. If there are too many results, add more information.

3. Search for Exact Matches
Web-sites such as FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com allow users to search for "exact matches only." Use this feature to eliminate unwanted search results.

4. Try a Soundex Search
Soundex is a method of indexing names by their phonetic sound rather than exact spelling. This can be helpful with surnames that vary slightly in spelling, such as "Stewart" and "Stuart." Ancestry.com users can select the **Soundex** option when performing an Advanced Search. The option is used in conjunction with the "Exact Matches" feature.

5. Don't Rely Solely on the Soundex
Using the **Soundex** search option, when available, does not guarantee that all variations of a surname will be returned. You may have to try an alternate spelling. Remember:

- Names that sound alike do not always have the same Soundex code. For example, Huff (H100) and Hough (H200).
- Names that sound alike but start with a different first letter will always have a different Soundex. For example, Curl (C640) and Kearl (K640).
- Names with silent letters code differently. For example, Beau (B000) and Beaux (B200).
- Names with prefixes may or may not have been coded with the prefix. For example, Van Cleve may have been coded (V524) or simply (C410) for Cleve.

6. Browse Page by Page
When all else fails, perhaps it's time to consider browsing the census page by page. For small districts or towns, this option is quite feasible. Large cities, on the other hand, would be a monumental undertaking. Although not desirable, this method does work.

7. Search by Surname and Location
Sometimes researchers know where a person was living but still cannot find them. Often a slight deviance in the name is the problem. Search by surname only, restricting the search to a specific state, county, district, or town. Start at the lowest level of jurisdiction, such as the town—and work up to the county or state level.

8. Search by Given Name and Location
Census enumerators or indexers may have misspelled or misread the surname. Try restricting a search to a specific state, county, district, or town, and then search by given name only.

Common given names are likely to yield far more results, so it may be necessary to add some additional information, such as a date or place of birth, to narrow the results.

9. Search for Initials

Sometimes census enumerators were just plain lazy! Instead of recording a person's given name, they only recorded their initials. For instance, the enumerator of the 1850 census of Socorro, New Mexico Territory, recorded only initials for approximately 70% of the towns' inhabitants. Remember, initials may have been used for first name, middle name, or both.

10. Search for Middle Names

It is not uncommon for a person to go by his or her middle name, rather than his or her first name. For example, a North Carolina family listed all of their children by first name in the 1870 census and then by middle name in 1880. Most people wouldn't even recognize them as the same family!

11. Search Using Nicknames

A person may have been recorded in the census by his or her nickname. Don't be surprised to find Mary listed as Polly, and Elizabeth as Betsy, Bessie, Beth, or Eliza. A good list of traditional nicknames is provided in the FamilySearch Wiki (http://wiki.familysearch.org) in the article entitled, "Traditional Nicknames in Old Documents – A Wiki List."

12. Search for Other Family Members

Sometimes it is easier to find another family member in the census than it is to find your direct ancestor. When every name indexes are available, try searching for a person's parents, siblings, spouse or children. This is especially helpful if another family member has a unique name, like Theophalas Jones.

13. Search for Neighbors

If persons or families resided in the same place for an extended period of time, or if religious groups or community clusters migrated to new areas, then try searching for the neighbors. Censuses, land records, and city directories may help with identifying a person's neighbors. Be sure to check several pages before and after an ancestor's entry for all of the neighbors.

14. Use Wildcards

Some search engines allow users to use special symbols called "wildcards" to replace an unknown letter or letters in a word. This allows users to identify multiple variations of a name. Typically, users must provide at least three characters in order to use a "wildcard." The two most common wildcards are an (*) and (?).

An asterisk (*) replaces zero or more characters. So, if a person entered **Mar*** in the first name field, he or she might get results spelled "Mary," "Maria," "Mariah," "Martha," "Margaret," etc.

A question mark (?) replaces exactly one character. So, if a person entered **Sm?th** in the last name field, he or she might get results spelled "Smith" and "Smyth." Wildcard searching can be most useful when searching for first name variations.

15. Leave Out the Name Entirely

When all else fails, forego the name and search by other known facts. Using other criteria such as a person's gender, race, residence, and date and place of birth, can yield positive results.

16. Search Multiple Online Census Databases

Sometimes it's advantageous to search different online indexes. A name that may have been indexed incorrectly at one online website may be indexed correctly on another. The following websites (includes subscription websites), have online indexes to U.S. federal census records:

- *Ancestry.com* $
- *FamilySearch.org*
- *Findmypast.com* $
- *Fold3.com* $
- *HeritageQuestOnline.com* $
- *MyHeritage.com*

17. Search Published Indexes

Don't forget about the thousands of census indexes produced by volunteers and commercial enterprises. These indexes may be available in print, microfiche, CD-ROM, and on the Internet.

The Family History Library has an outstanding collection of published census indexes. To find them, do a "**Places**" search in the FHL Catalog, and then look under the topic "Census."

Thomas Kemp's *American Census Handbook* is another superb resource for identifying pre-1930 census statewide and county indexes.

18. Search for a Street Address

Searching by street address is an effective way to locate individuals whose names were misspelled by enumerators or misread by indexers. Census forms from 1880 to 1940 record street and house numbers for most urban households. Use contemporary city directories to locate a person's street address. Once a street address is obtained, use Google Maps (http://maps.google.com) and the "One Step" census resources at Steve Morse (www.stevemorse.org) to determine the precise enumeration district (E.D) Then browse the census E.D., and find the street and house number.

SUMMARY

Everyone at some point will experience difficulty finding a particular person or family in an online census database. When this happens, don't despair. Before conceding defeat, try incorporating the strategies and techniques discussed in this lecture. They work!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dollarhide, William. *The Census Book: A Genealogist's Guide to Federal Census Facts, Schedules and Indexes.* Bountiful, Utah: Heritage Quest, 1999.

Fryxell, David A. "Master the Census." *Family Tree Magazine* 8 (May 2007): 22-27.

Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy.* 3rd ed. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2000.

Kemp, Thomas Jay. *The American Census Handbook.* Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2001.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis, and Matthew Wright. "Census Records." *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy.* Ed. Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking. 3rd ed. Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2006. 157-220.