

Measuring the Masses Part 1: U.S. Federal Census Records 1910-1950

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History

Since 1790, the United States federal government has been taking a count of its population every ten years. This included all residents, citizens, and non-citizens in the United States and its territories. The National Archives have released every census from 1790 to 1950.

The government collected the data to gather information about its population count, gather appropriate number of representatives for each state, divide taxation to the proper communities, and gather statistics for what the government wanted to discover.

Enumerators

An enumerator was the person who collected the data needed for the census. They were assigned a district in which they went door-to-door. They typically questioned the head of households or their spouse, but any adult in the home or nearby could be the informant. Starting in 1950, enumerators began to test self-enumeration forms.

Enumerator Instructions

Enumerators had to follow strict rules to ensure the accuracy and privacy of the data. They agreed to count every person in the district and to not purposely omit anyone. Enumerators had a right to receive truthful information for all questions. Even though they were allowed to visit all dwellings in their assigned districts, they still agreed to secrecy.

Reading the enumerator instructions can improve your research by enabling you to analyze the census record better. You will learn who likely gave the information, explain why someone appears to be missing, possible answers to the questions, and more.

1950 Enumerator Instructions

The 1950 census enumeration began on 1 April 1950. On 15 April 1950, all tourists were counted on the "T-night". Therefore, those individuals traveling would not be skipped. All can be found on the Population Schedules. The 1950 census also included instructions about the Self-Enumeration forms, which occurred in certain districts in 15 counties in Ohio and 3 counties in Michigan.

1940 Enumerator Instructions

The census enumeration began on 1 April 1940. Similar to the 1950 census, there was a date set aside for tourists to be counted, which was 8 April. The enumerators used Hotel lists which were copied over to the Population Schedule, so there could be errors. Because of boundary changes in Europe, birthplaces were given specific instructions and would be based on their 1937 location. Alaska was enumerated early, beginning in October 1939. This will help you calculate birth years based on ages.

1930 Enumerator Instructions

The 1930 census enumeration began on 1 January 1930. Families that were absent during enumeration would be contacted by enumerators to gather information. If they were unreachable, the enumerator was instructed to ask neighbors to provide the information. This means there is more chance of errors in the records. Again, birthplaces in Europe were given special attention, so read the instructions to get more information. Alaska began enumeration in October 1929.

1920 Enumerator Instructions

The 1920 census enumeration began on 1 January 1920. Children under five years old would include their age in months and years. There were also special instructions for the birthplaces of those countries affected by WWI. Alaska started its census in July 1919.

1910 Enumerator Instructions

The 1910 census began on 15 April 1910. Children under the age of two would include their age in months and years. Again, some birthplaces in Europe had special instructions. Alaska began enumeration in December 1909.

Population Schedules

Population Schedules are the forms used to record every person in the household. Much of the information stayed the same between census years:

Name	Birthplace	State
Relationship to head	Naturalization Status	Sheet/page number
Race	Occupation, industry, class	Street, avenue, road
Sex	Enumeration District	House/apartment number
Age	Town	Dwelling number
Marital Status	County	Farm

Each census included additional questions. It is important to understand the differences to know which record can help you the most. The additional information is as follows:

1950 Census

Home on 3 or more acres	If looking for work
What person was doing last week?	Do they have a job?
Did they work last week?	How many hours work last week?

1950 Census – Supplementary Questions

If living in same house in 1949	Number of weeks working in 1949
If living on farm in 1949	Wages earned in 1949
If living in same county	Household wages in 1949
County and state in 1949	*Previous job
Parents birthplace (county)	*If married more than once
Highest grade completed & attendance	*Number of years in marital status
Number of weeks looking for work	*How many children woman borne

*Asked of the last sample line

1940 Census

Informant Identified	If in school, housekeeping, unable to work
Highest grade completed	Hours working
Residence in 1935	Number of weeks worked in 1939
If working for government	Wages made in 1939
If looking for work	If received money other than wages

1940 Census – Supplementary Questions

Parents birthplace	If deductions made from wages
Native Language	If married more than once
If veteran of the U.S. military	Age at first marriage
If have a Social Security number	Number of children

1930 Census

Rent or own home	Parents' birthplace
Value of home	Person's native tongue
Radio set	If employed
Age at first marriage	Line number for unemployed
If able to read or write	If veteran of U.S. military

1920 Census

Rent or own home	If able to read or write
If owned, free, or mortgaged	Parents' birthplace
Year of immigration	Person's native tongue
Year of naturalization	Parents' native tongue

1910 Census

Number of marriages	Person's native tongue
Number of years married	If able to read or write
Number of children born	If owned or rented
Number of children living	If owned free or mortgaged
Parents' birthplaces	If survivor of Civil War
Year of immigration	If blind, deaf, or dumb

Genealogical Value

The federal census records are the fundamental resource for United States research. They not only give you a record every ten years of your ancestors' lives, but they provide key information including the following: name, residence, relationship, birth, marriage, immigration, naturalization, occupation, education, neighbors, and more.

The information gathered from census records can lead you to many records such as vital, church, immigration, naturalization, land, military, newspapers, land, and other records.

The information is only as reliable as the informant, which is not always known in census records. It is likely a responsible adult member of the household but could be neighbors. Be cautious with the reliability of the information provided since the person could have lied due to concerns with privacy or legal authorities.

Using the Records

To make the most of the record, read every column in each census record. To help you with this, transcribe the document and view the original image. Locate every census your ancestor should be in, moving backward in time. Copies of transcription forms can be found below.

All U.S. Federal Census records have been indexed, but you still might struggle to find them. Make sure to not just look for your ancestor, but others in their household and neighbors. Try a variety of spellings, including wildcards in your search. Many websites have census records, so search all of them. Locate other records around the time and place to determine if other records could lead you to the census.

Finding

Many websites have the indexes and images of the U.S. Federal Census Records. To help with your search, understanding the basic facts of your ancestors will help you know if you are looking for the correct person. Other resources can aid in searching and understanding the census. Below are some helpful websites I've used.

Helpful Resources

FamilySearch U.S. Census Records –

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list?count=20&cqs=United+States+Census>

Ancestry U.S. Census Records –

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>

MyHeritage U.S. Census Records –

<https://www.myheritage.com/research/catalog/category-1100/us-census>

FindMyPast U.S. Census Records –

<https://www.findmypast.com/search/historical-records>

Steve Morse Enumeration District Finder –

<https://stevemorse.org/census/unified.html>

NARA –

<https://www.archives.gov/research/census>

Census Bureau

<https://www.census.gov/>

Enumerator Instructions –

https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/census_instructions/

Transcription Forms –

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Forms

<https://www.ancestry.com/c/census-forms>

<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms>

FamilySearch Wiki –

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Federal_Census

www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Using_the_Census_to_find_other_records_about_ancestors