

# Understanding the US Census Records



## History

- In 1787, the U.S. Constitution was adopted.
- Article I, Section 2 deals with House of Representatives and States, “The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years. . .”
- The first U.S. Census was conducted in 1790 by Federal marshals.
- Slaves were enumerated, but for apportionment purposes each counted as only three-fifths of a citizen.
- Since American Indians were not taxed they were not counted in the early census.

## Where are we now?

- The National Archives has the census schedules on microfilm available from 1790 to 1940. (Some original schedules were destroyed after they were microfilmed.)
- Most of the 1890 Census was destroyed in a Department of Commerce fire, though partial records are available for some states.
- From 1790-1840, only the head of household is listed and the number of household members in selected age groups. They have very little detail so it is hard to determine if it is our family.
- A law enacted in 1978, sealed the census records for 72 years. 1940 became available in April 2012. 1950 should be available in April 2022.

## Where to find Census online

- Access U.S. Census free through
  - FamilySearch.org
- Check with the US Gen Web project to see if census records from our states of interest have been transcribed (free of charge)
  - US-Census.org
  - Rootsweb.com/~census/states.htm
- Use Ancestry.com which is a subscription site



## Things to keep in mind

- The early census taker wrote down what he heard and didn't ask for spelling. They were focusing on just getting a count of people.
- From 1790 to 1840, they only recorded information about the heads of the household but they also enumerated (counted) the rest of the household by their age range. Sometimes we can use this information to validate other information we have.
- A lot of times the person's age was rounded it up or down. So, if the age ends in a zero, it is extra suspect (especially in the earlier censuses).
- 2/12 for age means the child is two months old as of date of the official census – not the date the census was recorded.



The first four, **1790 to 1820** was early August; from **1830 to 1900** it was June 1; **1910** was April 15; **1920** was January 1; **1930** on is April 1 or 2. So if the official date is August 6 and the census was taken in October, use the August 6 to calculate the age.

- If the parents were not available, census taker would question children, servants or neighbors.
- The questions asked changed for each census. For a complete description go the following website:  
<http://www.census.gov/prod/2000pubs/cff-2.pdf>

### **Was everyone reported?**

- Some states census records were padded to up the population count so that an area could qualify for statehood.
- States that wanted to decrease their taxes often under reported the census and whole areas were left out.
- Some people that were not home were just skipped or entire areas were overlooked.

### **The Process**

- Start with the latest census (1940).
- Work one family at a time and go back in order.
- Print off or electronically save the “transcribed” record as well as the census schedule.
- Keep a paper copy and/or electronic copy of each census image.
- We can also link both the image and the transcribed document within our genealogy database.
- Look at the other families on the schedule for other family members or future in-laws.
- If the family name is near top of page, look at previous page; if the family name is near bottom of page, look at next page.



### **Tips for filling in the gap**

- Take off the “Exact Name” box to expand our search for a missing year.
- Try variations of the first name.
- Check to see if they are living with another relative.
- Try searching a limited area without using last names. Example, pick a unique child’s name, show approximate DOB and father’s name.
- Try searching neighbor from other census where we found the family and see if they still on same street then look for our family.

## Be careful of the location

- Many towns, cities and counties have changed their names and boundaries over time. Some states were part of a territory during some of the censuses.
- The name of the location when the census was taken may not be the name of the location for the next census.
- Purchased software (very complete and available in Family History Center in Sacramento animap.com)
- Free website (not as complete) resources.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/townco.cgi



## Recording the information

- Have a hard copy or electronic copy of a blank census sheet for the year we are working on.
- Work from the original image – not just the transcribed record.
- From most website, we can copy the *transcribed* information and paste it directly into some our genealogy database.

Highlight all of the data  
Right click and select copy from popup menu  
In our genealogy database, go to the text portion of the source detail  
Right click and select paste from the popup menu  
We probably want to remove any hyperlinks  
We probably will need to type out the names and ages of the members of the household

Source Detail

## Source Clipboard

**Step 1** Click here to select or change the master source to cite.  
Master Source being Cited: California, Sacramento County, Brighton - 1940 - U.S. census

**Step 2** Fill in the detail information below.

\* Detail Information | \* Text/Comments | Multimedia | Overrides

Enter the actual Source Text (optional)

Value of Home or Monthly Rental if Rented: 1700 Attended School or College: No Highest Grade Completed: Elementary school, 8th grade Hours Worked Week Prior to Census: 40 Class of Worker: Wage or salary worker in private work Weeks Worked in 1939: 44 Income: 1850 Income Other Sources: No Neighbors: [View others on pagecgi-bin/sse.dll?db=1940ustfedcen&sin=C0000006&sv=m-t0627-00280-00734>](#) Household Members:

Name	Age

Add this Text to the Source Citation on Reports

- If we add any of our own notes, be sure to put them in brackets [ ] – example misspelling: PASTIN [PROTIN] Mary – this shows it is transcribed as PASTIN but should be PROTIN.

## Create a Census Summary Sheet

- This allows us to see what we have found, and what we still need to look for
- Mark a question mark for the ones we have looked for and still cannot find (Note: in Excel, we might need to enter an apostrophe in front of the ? so Excel don't think it is a formula)

					1940	1930	1925	1920	1915	1910	1905	1900	1895	1890	1885	1880	1870	1860	1850	
Henry KILE		1811	1866		---	---		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	IN	IN
Susannah COEN		1812	1868		---	---		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	IN	IN
Henry KILE		1846	1918		---	---		---	OK		OK		OK	KS	KS*	MO	IN			
Harriet Egbert		1848	1935		---	OKWA		OKWA	OK		OK		OK	KS	KS	MO				IN
David M KILE		1866	1947		OK	OK		OK	OK		OK		OK	KS	KS	MO	---	---		---
Alice DOWNING		1869	1950		OK	OK		OK	OK		OK		OK						---	---
Daniel Perry KILE		1867	1914		---	---		---	OK		OK		OK	KS	KS	MO	---	---		---
Icyfeen WOODS		1873	1970		?	?		?	OK		OK		OK				---	---		---
Anna M. KILE		1869	1941		OK	OK		OK	OK		OK		OK	KS	KS	MO	---	---		---
Judge Henry DeM MEESE		1856	1934		---	OK		OK	OK		OK		OK							
Mary Ellen KILE		1871	1919		---	---		---	KS	KS	KS	KS	KS	?	KS	KS	---	---		---
Alfred Lease SELLERS		1866	1920		---	---		---	KS	KS	KS	KS	KS							---
Mattie Mariah KILE		1874	1954		?	OK		OK	OK		IN				KS	KS	---	---		---
Marshall Ed HIBBS		1871	1956		?	?		?	OK		IN						---	---		---
John Thomas KILE		1879	1938		---	?		?	OK		OK		OK	OK	KS	KS	---	---		---
Cora Irene NEAL		1882	1956		?	?		?	OK		OK		OK				---	---		---

## Additional Census Resources

- **Mortality Schedules** are included in the 1850 through 1880 U.S. censuses that asked questions regarding those who died in the twelve months prior to the enumeration.
- **Agricultural Schedules** are available from 1850 through 1880. They include: name of the owner, agent, or manager; number of acres and cash value of the farm; crops and other items produced; number and value of livestock (horses, cattle, sheep, and swine); and value of homemade manufactures.
- **Slave Schedules** are included in 1850 and 1860. Individuals were not named but were simply numbered and can be distinguished only by age, sex, and color; the names of owners are recorded. However, some enumerators listed the given names of slaves, particularly those over one hundred years of age.
- **Indian Census Rolls** for 1885-1940 contains census rolls that were usually submitted each year by agents or superintendents in charge of Indian reservations.
- **State Censuses** were conducted by many states in between Federal Censuses. Some of the State Census had agricultural and mortality schedules. Some of these are available at FamilySearch.org. We can also try a Cyndi's List or Google Search for State Censuses.
- There was also an informative chart for state census information in the *Family Tree Magazine* July 2011 if we can get access to it.
- **U.K.** has censuses for 1841 to 1911 available for Scotland, England, Wales, Isle of Man and Channel Island. The 1921 is not scheduled to be available till 2022.
- **Canadian Censuses** for 1881 through 1911 free at [censusfinder.com/canada-census-records.htm](http://censusfinder.com/canada-census-records.htm)

