

US CENSUS HISTORY & DETAILS

(Excerpted from various sources by W. D. Kivett – November 2002 – Updated July 2010)

We have always been a counting nation. We talk about the gross national product, the industrial output, consumer spending, energy consumption, et cetera. In recent years we have heard about how important the census is and what it means to count all of the people.

Since the beginning of recorded history, kings have numbered their subjects in order to tax them. In England's American colonies, ministers and elders kept church records which provided a list of the chosen, and the damned. An increase in population was taken in New England as a sign of God's favor toward the Puritan church. Some of the colonial governors were ordered from time to time to take counts for the Board of Trade of England.

The early American people were very suspicious. Therefore they were often evasive and uncooperative. So, our US census came about as a result of a compromise by our founding fathers. The Articles of Confederation were weak, and the Congress could not tax. So, the Constitutional Convention in 1787, included provisions that the membership in the House of Representatives along with taxation should be based on population. The delegates agreed for a census to be taken within three years and every ten years after the initial census, according to Article 1, Section 2.

The First (1790) US Census:

On March 1, 1790, Congress approved the census law, and it was carried out by United States Marshals with assistants of their choice under the supervision of the Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson. For this first US census there were no standardized questionnaires, or schedules, as they are called today. Only 6 simple questions were asked: The name of the head of the family, number of persons in each household of the following descriptions: free white males of 16 years and upward; free white males under 16 years of age; free white females including heads of households; all other free persons; and slaves.

The 1790 census takers were paid only a pittance, and had to provide their own pens and paper. It is recorded that the Marshall and his assistants got a total of \$250 for taking the 1790 census of the entire State of Georgia. Poor transportation, uncertain boundaries, a scattered population, suspicious people, all caused problems. This first Federal census took 18 months to complete, at a cost of \$44,377.28. A total of only 3,929,214 people were counted of an expected population of over 4 million. Government officials were immediately concerned about the political effect of an unexpectedly low population count. President Washington explained the problems encountered, and gave assurance that "our real numbers will exceed, greatly, the official returns."

Today complete 1790 census schedules for only the following states survive: Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Vermont. Original 1790 census schedules for the entire states of Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, Tennessee (southwest territory) and Virginia somehow did not survive. The counties of Granville, Caswell, and Orange are missing from today's surviving 1790 North Carolina census. Delaware and Kentucky reconstructed much of their lost 1790 census information from local and state tax lists. Virginia did a similar 1790 census reconstruction, but included only 39 of the original 80 counties that were originally enumerated. 1790 census reconstruction attempts from various sources for the states of Georgia, New Jersey, and Tennessee likewise resulted in incomplete coverage.

American censuses from 1790 through 1850 were posted publicly, in order to facilitate corrections and additions.

The Second (1800) US Census

The census of 1800, completed at a cost of \$66,109.04, said there were 5,308,483 people in the United States. This census added some items of location not included in the first census, such as county, parish, township, town or city where the heads of households resided. Like the 1790 census, only heads of households were listed by name. Separate categories were shown for household members of: free white males and females under 10; 10 and under 16; 16 and under 26; 26 and under 45; 45 and up; number of all other free persons except Indians not taxed; number of Indians not taxed, and number of slaves. Census takers were paid \$1 for every 100 persons recorded in a county, or sometimes \$1 for each 50 persons in a city area. Microfilmed schedules for this 1800 census for 14 states survive today. Family head entries were usually by order of enumeration.

The Third (1810) US Census

As in earlier censuses, only heads of households were listed by name. Separate age categories for males and females were: 0 to 9; 10 to 15; 16 to 25; 16 to 26; 26 to 45; and 45 up. Single categories were also included for the total number of “other free persons”, and total number of slaves in each household. In 1880 the census added an inventory of manufacturers to measure the industrial capability of the country to better access its ability to fight wars. Census takers were paid between \$50 and \$500 for their work. This time 7,239,881 residents were counted at a cost of \$178,444.67. Microfilmed schedules for 16 States of this 3rd US census survived. Craven, Greene and New Hanover counties of North Carolina are missing.

The Fourth (1820) US Census

This is the first US census that included the State of Georgia. That year a total of 9,633,822 people were counted. Census costs had risen to \$208,525,99. As in earlier censuses, only heads of households were listed by name, gender, and race. Separate age categories for males and females were: 0 to 10; 10 to 16; 16 to 18; 16 to 26 (some duplication); 26 to 45; and 45 up. The number of slaves per household were first indicated in 1820 by gender and age categories of: under 14; 14 to 26; 26 to 45; and 45 up. In 1820 the census listed the number of “foreign nationals” in each household. Also, for the first time schedules included the number of people in each household engaged in agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing.

The Fifth (1830) US Census

For the first time, in 1930 two copies of uniform pre-printed census sheets were completed. One was sent to the clerk of District Court, and the other to Washington. Each 18 inch wide by 15 inch long form contained spaces for listing 28 different families. Again, like all the earlier censuses, only heads of households were listed by name, gender, and race. Age categories were however expanded greatly to show separate listings for males and females of age range: under 5; 5 to 10; 10 to 15; 15 to 20; 20 to 30; 30 to 40; 40 to 50; 50 to 60; 60 to 70; 80 to 90; 90 to 100 up. Again, the number of slaves included in a household slaves were categorized by age ranges and gender. In addition to the number of “non-naturalized foreigners” in each household, separate categories were added to show the number of persons per household classified as “deaf and dumb” and blind. This census count included 5,318 people on ships at sea.

The Sixth (1840) US Census

In 1840 the US population had grown to a total enumerated of 17,069,453 including 6,100 on ships. Again, two copies of the pre-printed schedules were completed and sent to the District Court and to Washington. This 1840 census was similar to that taken in 1830, but some categories were added aimed at better determining the resources of the nation. To that end, household members were numbered into 6 categories of industrial occupation. Also, the number of persons per household judged “idiotic or insane” were shown, as the number literate, and pensioners of the Revolutionary or other military service – an

important new source of genealogical data. By combining with age range, one can usually deduce from these listings in which conflict the head of household participated. This 1840 and all prior census records were open for public viewing and comment. Many criticisms had arisen over the years for all the discovered errors.

The Seventh (1850) US Census

This census marked a great departure from the earlier six. For the first time all members of each household were named, and sex, race, and estimated age were listed. Also, another 3rd copy of the schedules were made. One went to the local county court, another to the appropriate Secretary State, and the third to Washington. A total of 23,191,876 people were listed. Six different census schedules were taken in 1850. In addition to the usual one listing free whites, a separate schedule was made for slaves, another for those who had died during the year, and three others for occupational and social data. For the first time, records were made of the value of head of household's personal and real estate, as well as their occupation, birthplace, literacy, school attendance, and whether married during that year. Because of the inclusion of all this data, and the names of household members, this 1850 census is considered by genealogists as the most important early American source of family records. Hence, microfilm copies of these 1850 census schedules are widely available in libraries and on-line for most States.

The Eighth (1860) US Census

This 1860 census is very similar to that taken in 1850. It is remarkable in that it pictured conditions and families just before the outbreak of the American Civil War. As such, it is the last census where a separate schedule for slaves was completed. By comparing these listings to those taken in 1870, and 1880, some idea of the disruption of this great conflict and the following era of Reconstruction and emerges. For the first time, in 1860 Indians living in non-Indian households were counted, but those considered non-taxable were not counted.

The Ninth (1870) US Census

This 1870 census, like the country itself, suffered greatly from the effects of the Civil War. This was the first census to contain no information about slaves. Spoilsmen controlled the work of taking of the 1870 census. Often recently appointed US Marshals looked upon the census as an opportunity to distribute the work to political cronies. In the South, the entire workforce was taken from the Republican Party, including some Blacks who could neither read nor write. The Superintendent of the Census, Francis Amasa Walker, had no control over these Marshals nor the quality of the work of their lackeys. Newspapers of the time widely criticized this census, and its surviving microfilmed schedules are known today to be fraught with many errors and omissions. One example of it's political tone is the inclusion of a category of "persons denied the right to vote for other than rebellion". Like the 1860 census, separate schedules were completed in 1870 for those who died during the year.

The Tenth (1880) US Census

By 1880 Marshals were replaced by civilian census supervisors, pay was better, and confidentiality was protected by law. The result was a much more accurate census. Some 200 women first appeared as part of the force of 50,000 enumerators. For the first time, in addition to listing the names of all the individuals in each household, their relationships to the head of house were indicated – another great piece of documentation for the future genealogist. The place of birth of each person, as well as that of their father and mother were listed. Later, in the 1930's this 1880 census was partially "Soundexed". Those wishing to easily locate heads of households in all census schedules prior to 1880 had to rely on bound index volumes, organized by states.

The Eleventh (1890) US Census

Whereas all the censuses before had required copies of all or part of the schedules to be filed in the local county clerk of court's office, this was not done for the 1890 census. The one and only set of original schedules was sent to Washington for safekeeping. This unfortunate change later would become disastrous. Of all the censuses taken, perhaps none might have been more critical to studies of immigration, industrialization, westward migration, and characteristics of the general population of the rapidly changing nation than that of 1890.

The Department of the Interior administered this 1890 census. Much like the 1870 census, political patronage was the primary criteria for selection of the nearly 47,000 enumerators. No examination as to qualifications was required. Records were supposed to reflect the status of the population on a uniform date – June 1. Separate schedules for each household were introduced. Among the new questions asked were the number of children born to married women, and the number still living. Additional questions pertained to Civil War service. Some information was translated from the handwritten schedules to a new electrical counting system using Hollerith punched cards, like those made famous in the 2000 Florida elections, to facilitate the rapid tabulation of data. By July 1, 1890, counting had been completed to show a total US population of 62,979,766.

Although details of the census were kept secret by law, like the 1870 census, complaints of inaccuracy, fraud, and political intrigue arose. Some of the supplemental schedules were mysteriously burned or destroyed in March, 1896, prior to the publication of summary statistics. However, the general population schedules were reported to have survived. Despite ongoing requests from the chief of the Bureau of the Census founded in 1902, no secure storage facility had been funded by 10 January, 1921. On that night all the eleven US census schedules were stored in the Commerce Building in Washington. The first ten census schedules were stored on the upper floors, but those for the much-questioned eleventh were neatly piled on pine shelves in an unlocked file room in the building's basement. Those for the 1900 census had not yet been moved to the Commerce Building for "safe" storage, and the 1920 census enumeration had not yet begun.

About 11:00 that evening a fire of undetermined origin broke out in this Commerce Building. Firemen responded quickly and after a few hours had the blaze extinguished before any structural damage could result. However, some of the contents of the lower floors were burned, and water used in extinguishing the flames made its way to the basement.

The next morning was an archivists' nightmare. Water was ankle deep in the basement, covering many of the records stored there. A quick assessment indicated that 25 percent of the 1890 census schedules were destroyed, and 50 percent of those which remained would require salvaging from the water and smoke damage. It was estimated that these efforts would take up to 2 years to complete, as some badly damaged records would have to be re-copied. Fortunately, those first ten sets of census schedules stored on the upper floors had remained relatively undamaged. Just imagine what genealogists would be left with today if the fire had not been put out so promptly!

Political ranging over the recovery efforts continued until 1933, while the remaining soaked records continued to deteriorate from lack of attention. It is not clear exactly when the remaining possibly 75% of the 1890 census records were finally purposely destroyed to fulfill a 1933 act of Congress – sometime between 1933 and 1935. In the 1940's a few schedules from scattered states that survived the final destruction were discovered and microfilmed onto 3 reels, and a printed index was made. These 3 reels contain around 6,160 names of the originally tabulated nearly 64 million..

In addition to those 6,160 names, a set of 1890 schedules listing Military pensioners also survived. Those were microfilmed and provide some few more clues to those living in 1790. Ironically, just one day after the 21 February 1933 act by congress to destroy the remaining 1890 schedules, the cornerstone for a new National Archives Building was laid by President Herbert Hoover.

The Twelfth (1900) US Census

Being in a different location, the 1900 census schedules survived the 1921 fire. It contained much of the same information as that documented in the 1890 census, but is generally considered a more accurate one. It tried to include all Indians for the first time. For the first time, the birth month and year for all individuals was listed. Like the 1890 census, columns was included on the schedules to indicate the number of children wives had given birth to, and how many were still living in 1900. This simple addition helps indicate deceased infants who may have been born and died between census intervals. This census is indexed by the Soundex system on handwritten cards for which microfilm reels are available.

The Thirteenth (1910) US Census

This 1910 census was the first one conducted by the Bureau of the Census. As such, enumerators were first given open competitive examinations administered nationwide. Records shown on the schedules were similar to those in the 1900 census. More attention was given to people's occupation. Also there was an entry as to whether a person was an "employer" or "employee". The forms used to survey Indians also recorded their tribe or band. Survivors of the Union and Confederate army and navy were indicated. A total of 1,784 microfilmed reels were required to cover all the 1910 schedules. This census was also indexed by the Soundex system, this time on typed cards for which microfilm reels are available.

The Fourteenth (1920) US Census

Although completed over the first few months of 1920, this census was to reflect all individual's status as of 01 January, 1920. Enumerators were not authorized to ask for proof of any supplied data, nor the correct spelling of the person's name! One can deduce possibilities for error from such. No longer did the census takers ask about Civil War service, but they did record reported date of naturalization of immigrants, and their "mother tongue". Because of political changes in Europe brought about by WW-II, special attention was given to try to correctly identify the country of origin for European immigrants. Indians were included with other races in a common schedule for the first time. Also, for the first time residents of the territories of Guam, American Samoa, and the Panama Canal Zone were included. By act of congress, the original schedules were destroyed after converting to microfilm reels. This census was also indexed by the Soundex system, on handwritten cards prepared in the 1930's, for which microfilm reels are available.

The Fifteenth (1930) US Census

This 1930 census just became available to the public in 2002. In 1952 the Director of the Census and the Archivist of the United States agreed that population schedules were to be transferred to the National Archives "with the provision that they are to remain closed for 72 years after the enumeration date of each census" for privacy reasons. This was authorized by Federal Law (Title 44, US Code, Section 2108). In addition to information found in earlier "modern" census schedules, for the first time in 1930 there was an entry to record the ownership of a radio! This census was also indexed by the Soundex system, on handwritten cards prepared in the 1930's, for which microfilm reels are available.

The Sixteenth (1940) US Census

Look for public release of this census first listing many still living folks in the spring of 2012. But, do not expect too much. Reports indicate that this census was not "Soundexed". Also, it may be some time after release that sites such as Ancestry.com can provide their advanced indexing system so useful in searching for individual names. Researchers may for a time have to resort to the old fashioned page-by-page scan, making suspected geographical location of searched for families necessary to shorten research time.