

Understanding the Federal Census

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CENSUS RECORDS

- Census was taken every ten years in the US beginning in 1790, but many of the earliest years are now missing for certain areas/states. The earliest enumerators were only required to make one copy of the census schedules and these were kept by the district court at the local level. In 1830, Congress passed a law that required that these local areas “turn in” their census copies to the Federal Government. By this time, many of the schedules were missing or had been destroyed. If your ancestor lived in Tennessee you can expect to find records for your ancestor in 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930 and 1940. North Carolina records are sparse as well—1790 (incomplete), 1800 and 1810 (incomplete), and 1820 (incomplete). 1830 – 1840 are pretty much intact.
- Where are the 1950 – present censuses? Census records are only released after 72 years and the 1950 census will not be available until 2022.
- The 1890 census was destroyed in a fire, and only a few scattered pages remain.
- Misspelled names? The enumerators wrote down the information, not your ancestors and many times they were not the best at spelling. Often they wrote down what they heard and guessed at how to spell it.
- Ages don’t match? In theory since the census was taken every ten years, your ancestor should age ten years with every census, right? Wrong. Especially prior to 1900, many people didn’t know their exact birth date and they guessed at how old they were with each census.
- Ancestor missing from a census? Is it possible? Yes, it’s possible, but not very likely. There are a few people who managed to miss the census enumerator, but this was rare. Usually, the enumerators were local residents who knew the area and knew where many of the homes were located, even those “way up in the holler.” If a family was moving during the time of the enumeration, they might be missed. Families with illegitimate children sometimes hid these children (and sometimes even the mother) from the enumerators and many were not counted, especially in the censuses prior to 1880.

- Ancestor enumerated twice in a census? Is it possible? Yes! There are a number of reasons that this might happen and it was fairly common for children, especially in rural areas. It took several weeks for an enumerator to complete his task and they didn't always follow the rules they were given. Sometimes a child would be at home during the enumerator's visit and when he arrived at another relative's home, that same child might be visiting there and enumerated there, as well! People often moved during the census, and may be enumerated at both places.
- Different years, different questions. 1850 is the first census year to list each person in the household by name. The earlier census records (1830 and 1840 in Tennessee) only bear the name of the "head of household" and only enumerated others in the household by age group and sex. The 1880 census was the first census to list the relationship to the head of the household. The 1900 census asked each woman how many children she had borne to her and how many were living at the time of the census. Some censuses list actual addresses, how many years a couple has been married, race, birthplaces and information regarding occupations. Not all censuses bear the same information.
- Where can I look at census records for free?
 - **www.familysearch.org** is a website supported by the LDS church and you may look at many records with a simple registration.
 - **Heritage Quest online**. Some local libraries offer this service through their website. In order to access, you must have a library card and enter your individual library card number when prompted. With the library card number, you can access the website from your home computer.
 - Many larger libraries and some smaller ones have subscriptions to **Ancestry.com** and you can view the website for free while at the library.
 - There are some transcriptions of various census records in book form and many are found in the library.