

United States Census

Brief Census history

After the Revolutionary War, our government found itself in charge of a nation and had no idea how many people it was expected to govern. So it was decided a census was needed.

The United States was the first country to call for a regularly held census, specifically called to be taken every ten years. The Constitution required that a census of all "Persons... excluding Indians not taxed" be performed to determine the collection of taxes and the appropriation of seats in the House of Representatives.

US marshals were in charge of taking the 1790-1840 censuses. In 1850 the newly formed Federal Census Bureau took this and all future censuses. US enumerators were instructed to take down the names of the family as it was composed on the Official date of the census - not the day of the actual visit.

Official census dates were;

First Monday in August 1790-1820

June 1 for 1830-1880

First Monday in June for 1890

June 1 for 1900

April 15 for 1910

January 1 for 1920

April 1 for 1930 forward

Although the new government needed to accurately count the population the average resident was extremely distrustful. There were numerous people who had memories of European governments that used census to access direct taxes, tract people of a particular religion, etc. The people weren't happy about giving information to the government so the 1790 census was extremely narrow in scope, restricted to a count of the people with very large groupings by age for both male and female with only the "Head of household" listed by name. They do, however, list adults who had a surname different from the head of household and will usually pick up a child who had a different surname.

The censuses from 1790 to 1940 increasingly gathered more information about a family and the questions asked reflected the current interest of the government in that particular point in time. The first census was interested in how many people resided in the new US and their approximate ages. By the 1940 census the questions had grown to include such things as marital status, whether a person owned or rented their home, were they citizens, information on education levels, and whether the family owned a radio.

Despite inaccuracies, unreadable handwriting, faulty copies and numerous other obstacles, family historians still turn to these records frequently because of the wealth of information we find in them.

In the 1940s the census bureau microfilmed an abundance of paper schedules because of storage problems. Microfilming was in its infancy and not all microfilmed copies are readable, but unfortunately, the original schedules were destroyed after being microfilmed, so that there is NO opportunity to re-film them.

The volunteers who are indexing the census are struggling to read old handwriting, squinting at bad ink, watermarked copies, etc. The census schedules we see on microfilm today are copies of the originals or copies of copies. The information should always be taken with a grain of salt and cross checked against other sources. In using any of the indexed census, always remember that they are subject to errors and omissions. They should only be a finding aid and should never be used in place of a search of the actual microfilmed pages. No one can spot your ancestor's name quicker and more accurately than you. Read the census yourself, there is more there to glean.

Census records should be compared census by census to verify the accuracy of the information. They should never be used as a stand alone source, but should be used to aid in further research of local records; marriage records, tax lists, probate and court records, voting records, deeds, vital records, obituaries, church and cemetery records, newspapers, school records, land, and war records. Use of the census records can pinpoint a family in time and space and give you an abundance of clues, but they are not the end all of your research. Use every scrap of information on each census schedule as a pointer to send you looking for the appropriate source documents.

Prior to 1900 most families did not move as a single family unit, Mom, Dad and kids, rather they moved with other family members, extended family, neighbors or good friends. It was only after the 1900s that families started moving as single units.

Some families could be listed more than once in a census. Because of the time it took to complete some of the censuses, especially in rural areas, families often moved and ended up getting counted twice, not always with the same information. For this same reason some families were missed entirely.

Enumerators

The enumerator was given a sample of the 1790 census form and was expected to make his own copies. Early census takers were required to furnish their own paper, quills, and ink and be responsible for any other expenses incurred. Many census takers watered down their ink to make it go farther and the quality of their writing instruments often left a lot to be desired. Census takers were required to rule the paper to fit the format the government mandated and to bind the schedules themselves. Therefore, not every census schedule was made of high quality papers. Since census takers were paid by the number of names they recorded sometimes the cost and problems of taking the census far exceeded their payment.

The Congress needed to spend enough money to attract people to the job but as always with the Government they didn't want to "overpay". The pay was finally set at \$1.00 for every

300 persons counted in cities and towns containing more than 5,000 people and \$1.00 for every 150 people in rural areas and \$1.00 for every 50 people in sparsely populated or hard to reach areas. This \$1.00 for every 50 people was to be determined by the area's Federal Judge.

Prior to the 1850 census each census taker was responsible for being sure that all names in a given area were recorded and they mapped out their own route. With the 1850 census they were given a map and instructions on the order in which to take the census. In far flung counties a census taker covered a lot of ground to reach each household. If he reached a farm and no one was home, who could responsibly answer the questions? The census taker might record information from personal knowledge, talk to neighbors, children, servants, laborers, visiting relatives, and guessed at the rest or left blank. Thus the information on a given individual can vary from census to census according to the person who was furnishing the information and the circumstances surrounding the visit. The census takers didn't consult any type of original records; all information was passed verbally and from memory. In families that had 10 or even more children, it wasn't unusual for one to be overlooked or for birth dates to get mixed up between children. When asked what year they immigrated, whatever their answer, it was written down.

Those methods resulted in huge variations in responses over a 10 year period. The foreign accents of recent immigrants played havoc with even phonetic spelling of surnames but they were instructed to record names as they SOUNDED. Since many of the people interviewed were illiterate they could not spell their names, even if they had been asked.

Remember that when you are actually using the census records for your research you start with the most recent census and move backwards, and each move backwards gives you less information.

1790-1840

These censuses made no determination whether everyone in the household were immediate family members. They could be servants, laborers, relatives, or boarders. The census takers were instructed to put everyone who was living in the home as of the census date. These set of census records were similar in content with some variations.

The 1790 census of the US was interested primarily in how many people resided in the newly formed country and their approximate ages. Official census date on first Monday in August.

Name of head of household
All others tallied by marks in categories
Age
Sex
Race
Slaves



1790 - US population 3.9 million (3.2 million free, .7 million slave). The jurisdiction of the original 13 states canvassed an area of seventeen present states. Schedules survive for 11 of the original 13 states. Official census date on first Monday in August.

The 1800 and 1810 census was not a lot different from the 1790 except the age groupings were expanded.

1800 - US population 5.3 million (4.4 million free, .9 million slave). Official census date on first Monday in August.



1810 - US population 7.2 million (6.0 million free, 1.2 million slave). Official census date on first Monday in August.

The 1820 census has caused considerable problems because of two of the age breakdown columns. The 1820 census added a column for males 16-18 because the government wanted an idea of the number of males that could qualify for military duty. Males listed in this column were also listed in the 16-26 year old column, though the first column was not counted into the population.

1820 - US population 9.6 million (8.1 million free, 1.5 million slave). Official census date on first Monday in August.



With the 1830 census, the census takers began using uniform printed schedules. The census broke down the age grouping into 5 year intervals from birth to 20 years and 10 year intervals from 20 to 100 yrs. This census was aimed at finding out how many school age children there were in the US and shortly after this census the government started requiring that each state and county set aside school land for the building of schools. The amount of land to be set aside was calculated based on this census.



1830 - US population 12.9 million (10.9 million free, 2.0 million slave). Official census date took place June 1, 1830.

In 1840 it had been 60 years since the Revolutionary War and the government was interested in how many Revolutionary Pensioners were still living and how old they were. The government was paying pensions to men who had served in the Revolutionary (and other) Wars and were interested in how much longer they would be paying these pensions. Each of these pensioners was listed by name and age. The government was also interested in how many children in the household were attending school and what level of education they were receiving.

1840 - US population 17.1 million (14.6 million free, 2.5 million slave). Official census date was June 1, 1840.



1850-1890

The 1850 was the first census to list all members in a household by name.

An original and two copies were to be made of the census. Congress authorized the first "Census office" but taking of the census was still under the jurisdiction of the US district courts and the US marshals.

1850 - US population 23.2 million (20.0 million free, 3.2 million slave). The 1850, and all later censuses list the names and ages of every free person in every household. Official census date was June 1, 1850.

Name of each person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June 1850 was in this household

Age

Sex

Color - White, Black, or Mulatto

Profession, occupation or trade of each male person over 15 years of age

Value of real estate owned

Place of birth, naming state, territory, or country

Married within the year



Attended school within the year
Persons over 20 years of age who cannot read and write
Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict

1860 was the last census before the Civil War. This is the last stable time before the Civil War split families, before the time thousands of people were killed and before the great migrations started that moved people all over the country.

1860 - US population 31.5 million (27.5 million free, 4.0 million slaves). Official census date was June 1, 1860.

Name of every person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June 1860 was in this household

Age

Sex

Color - White, Black, or Mulatto

Profession, occupation or trade of each male person over 15 years of age

Value of real estate

Value of personal estate

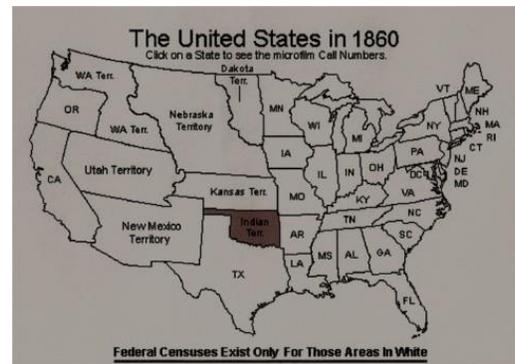
Place of birth, naming the state, territory, or country

Married within the year

Attended school within the year

Persons over 20 years of age who cannot read and write

Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict



During the Civil War women and children were much on the move. They moved to "safer" areas farther behind the lines of fighting, they moved to distant relatives for either safety or because they couldn't continue to run their farms without male labor. Faced with hunger and danger many moved in with relatives or friends. And, many women followed their husbands, from post to post, war zone to war zone, some taking their children and some sending children to relatives or friends.

Their children, especially daughters, were sent to other places for safety while married women remained on the farm or stayed and ran a family business. While away daughters married men far removed from their own neighborhood or they married service men they met who were stationed in the towns they were visiting. Many women lost their husbands during the Civil War and returned to their Father's home or went to live with other relatives. Widows remarried between the 1860-1870 censuses and marriage licenses weren't always recorded where we would expect to find them. Many women seemingly vanished between this census and the 1870 census.

In the Civil War a huge number of courthouses were burned. Records that can never be replaced were lost during this war.

Whether deaf and dumb blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict
Male citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards
Male citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards where rights to vote is denied on other grounds than rebellion or other crime

This is the first census after the Civil War. This census identifies the survivors of the Civil War and many "yours, mine and ours" families. This census should be carefully compared with the 1860 census to spot those family members missing. And, this is the first census that took place after the great migrations following the Civil War. Many men returned home to find their homes, farms or businesses in ruins. Many men who had never been out of their own "neighborhoods" had seen a lot of country during their Civil War travels and they were ready to start over in new places, usually places that they had been to during the War.

This is the first schedule that shows Free Families of Color.

The Congress changed the rules for the 1880 census. In the past the taking of the census was handled by the US district courts with a US marshal in charge. From 1850-1870 a Census Bureau office was opened during the taking of the census and then closed after the count was completed. With the 1880 census the Congress gave the Census Bureau office control of the census. They hired their own census takers and the US district court and the State department was removed from the census taking.

The original and one copy of the census were authorized by Congress. The originals were to be bound by the county, and were to stay in the county courthouse and the copy was sent, this time, directly to the Bureau of the Census in WA. No longer did the census schedules travel from census taker, to US Marshall, to US district court clerks, to department of state and then to WA. The Census Bureau made sure the copy was made, and made sure that the original schedules were deposited at the local courthouses.

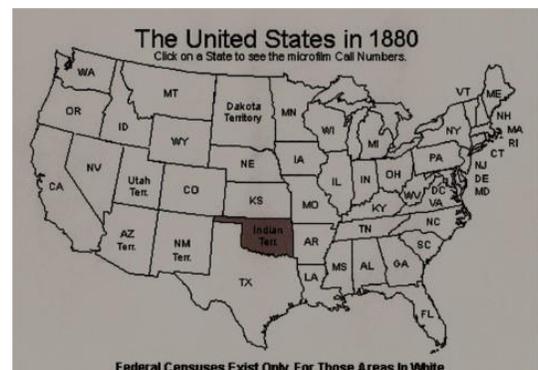
The Census Bureau hired 5 times as many census takers in 1880 as were used in 1870. This resulted in a speedier census, but also insured as much as possible, that every person got counted.

The enumeration date of the census was 1 June 1880 with only 1 month to complete the census. This speedier count resulted in less people being missed than in any prior census. 1880 was the first to list relationship to the head of household and where their parents were born.

1880 - US population 50.2 million. Official census date was June 1, 1880.

In cities;

Name of Street
House Number



The name of each person whose place of abode of first day of June 1880 was in this household.

Color - White, Black, Mulatto, Chinese, Indian

Sex

Age at last birthday prior to June 1, 1880. If under 1 year give months in fractions, such as 8/12, counting back eight months from June, born October 1879.

If born within the census year, gave the month

Relationship of each person to the head of the family whether wife, son, daughter, servant, boarder, or other.

Single

Married

Widowed, divorced

Married during census year

Profession, occupation or trade of each person male or female

Number of months this person has been unemployed in this census year

Is the person (on the day of the enumerators visit) sick or temporarily disabled, so as to be unable to attend to ordinary business or duties? If so, what is the sickness or disability?

Blind

Deaf and dumb

Idiot

Insane

Maimed, crippled, bedridden, or otherwise disabled

Attended school within the census year

Cannot read

Cannot write

Place of birth of this person, naming state or territory of U.S. or the country if of foreign birth.

Place of birth of the father of this person, naming state or territory of U.S. or the country if of foreign birth

Place of birth of the mother of this person, naming state or territory of U.S. or the country if of foreign birth

On the 1880 census there was an additional set of schedules: The "Supplemental Schedules 1-7: Defective, Dependent and Delinquent Classes". If a person fell under this category, the census taker was required to go to one of the 7 schedules set aside for these categories and ask additional, probing questions.

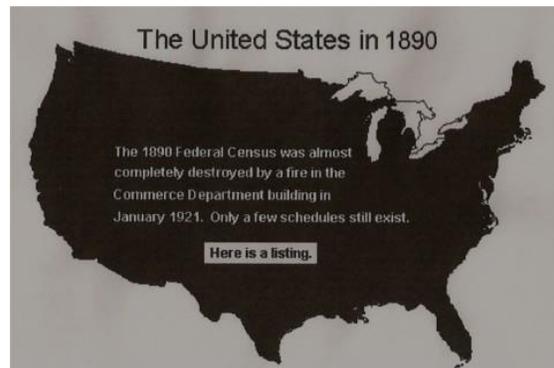
In 1890 the Census Bureau created a completely different method of recording the census. One that has never been repeated. Each family was enumerated on one sheet of paper. With the added volume of paper (about 5 to 10 times the size of the 1880 census where from 5 to 10 families were recorded on one page). Congress decided to finance just ONE set of schedules for the census and no copies were made.

From a genealogist's point of view this was an incredible mistake since the 1890 census was 99% destroyed by a fire in Washington DC in 1921.

1890 - US population 63.0 million.

Destroyed by fire in Washington DC in 1921 - only a few counties in the country remain.

Substitute; pension rolls, tax rolls, city directories, etc.



1890 Veterans Schedule - an alternative set of census records exist enumerating those who had served (or their widows) in the military during the War of the Rebellion.

- Name of surviving soldiers, sailors, marines and widows
- Rank
- Company
- Name of regiment or vessel
- Date of enlistment
- Date of discharge
- Length of service
- Post Office address
- Disability incurred

The 1890 census asked the most extensive questions of any census up to that time. The population census was probably the most critical to studies of immigration, industrialization, westward migration and characteristics of the general population than this census. One of the items that partially survived the fire was the Veteran's Schedules for 1890 for the Special census of union veterans and widows of veterans.

1900-1940

1900 census is the only census that has month and year born for each individual as well as their age. How many years married, how many children, and how many children were still living at the time of the census.

1900 - US population 76.2 million. Official census date was June 1, 1900.

In cities:

Street

House number

Name of each person whose place of abode on June 1, 1900 was in this household. Include every person living on June 1, 1900; omit children born since June 1, 1900.

Relationship of each person to the head of the family.

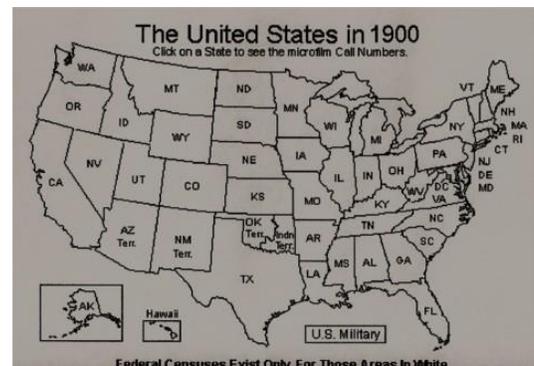
Color or race

Sex

Date of birth; Month, Year

Age at last birthday

Whether single, married, widowed, or divorced



Number of years of present marriage
 Mother of how many children
 Number of these children living
 Place of birth of each person and parents of each person enumerated. If born in U.S., give state or territory. If foreign birth, give the country.
 Year of immigration to the U.S.
 Number of years in the U.S.
 Naturalization
 Occupation, trade or profession of each person 10 years of age and over
 Months not employed
 Attended school (in months)
 Can read
 Can write
 Can speak English
 Owned or rented
 Owned free or mortgaged
 Farm or house
 Number of farm schedule

1910 How many years married, how many children, and how many children are living at the time of the census. Whether a survivor of the Union or Confederate Army or Navy. UA - Union Army, UN - Union Navy, CA - Confederate Army and CN - Confederate Navy.

1910 - US population 92.2 million. Official census date was April 15, 1910.

Street, avenue, road, etc.

House number or farm

Number of family in order of visitation

Name of each person whose place of abode on April 15, 1910 was in this household. Include every person living on April 15, 1910, omit children born since April 15, 1910.

Relationship of the person to the head of the family

Sex

Color or race

Age at last birthday

Number of years of present marriage

Mother of how many children

Number of children now living

Place of birth of each person and parents of each person enumerated. If born in U.S., give state or territory. If foreign birth, give the country.

Year of immigration to the U.S.

Whether naturalized or alien

Whether able to speak English; or, if not, give language spoken

Occupation, trade or profession of this person

General nature of industry, business, or establishment in which this person works.

Whether an employer, employee, or working on own account

Whether out of work on April 15, 1910

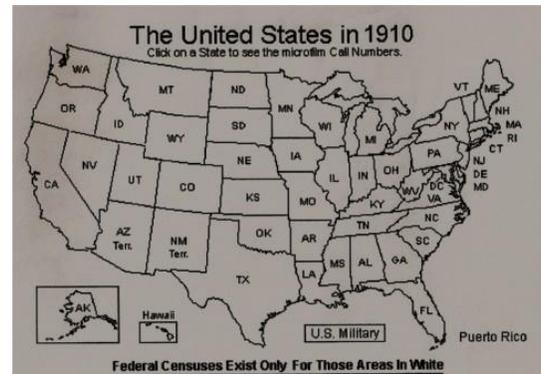
Number of weeks out of work during 1909

Whether able to read

Whether able to write

Attended school any time since Sept. 1, 1909

Owned or rented



Owned free or mortgaged

Farm or house

Whether a survivor of the Union or Confederate Army or Navy

Number of farm schedule

Whether blind (both eyes)

Whether deaf and dumb

1920 is the first time the US continental map has no territories and is complete. It gives no indication about marriage or how many children were in the family as the 1910 census did.

1920 - US population 106.0 million. Official census date was January 1, 1920.

Street, avenue, road, etc.

House number or farm

Name of each person whose place of abode on Jan 1, 1920 was in this household

Relationship of the person to the head of the family

Home owned or rented

If owned, free or mortgaged

Sex

Color or race

Age at last birthday

Single, married, widowed, or divorced

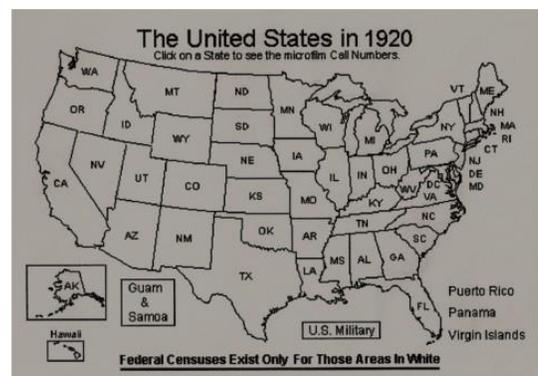
Year of immigration to the U.S. Naturalized or alien

If naturalized, year of naturalization

Attended school anytime since Sept 1, 1919

Able to read

Able to write



Place of birth of each person and parents of each person enumerated. If born in U.S. give state or territory. If foreign birth, give the place of birth, and, in addition, the mother tongue.

Able to speak English

Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done

Industry, business, or establishment in which at work.

Employer, salary or wage worker, or working on own account

No. of farm schedules

1930 - Indicates military service; Civil War veterans with CW, Spanish-American War - Sp, Philippine Insurrection - Phil, Mexican Expedition - Mex, and World War I - WW. In the 1930 census it states the age when 1st married.

1930 - Official census date was April 1, 1930.

Street, avenue, road, etc.

House number (in cities or towns)

Name of each person whose place of abode on April 1, 1930 was in this family. Include every person living on April 1, 1930, omit children born since April 1, 1930.

Relationship of this person to the head of the family

Home owned or rented

Value of home, if owned, or monthly rental, if rented

Has Radio

Does this family live on a farm

Sex

Color or race
Age at last birthday
Marital condition
Age at first marriage
Whether able to read and write
Attended school or college any time since Sept. 1, 1929
Place of birth of each person and parents of each person enumerated. If born in U.S. give state or territory. If foreign birth, give country in which birthplace is now situated. Distinguish Canada-French from Canada-English, and Irish Free State from Northern Ireland.
Language spoken in home before coming to the U.S.
Year of immigration to the U.S.
Naturalization
Whether able to speak English
Trade, profession, or particular kind of work, as spinner, salesman, riveter, teacher, etc.
Industry, business, as cotton mill, dry-goods store, shipyard, public school, etc.
Whether actually at work yesterday (or the last regular working day) Yes or No
If not, line number on unemployment schedule
Whether a veteran of US military or naval forces, Y or N
What war or expedition?
No. of farm schedules

The 1940 census was released 1 April 2012 and is the latest census to be opened to the public. Due to privacy issues, each census is released every 72 years after the census date, so the 1950 census is due to be released in April 2022.

1940 - Official census date was April 1, 1940.

Street, avenue, road, etc.
House number (in cities or towns)
Name of each person whose place of abode on April 1, 1930 was in this family. Include every person living on April 1, 1930, omit children born since April 1, 1930.
Relationship of this person to the head of the family
Home owned or rented
Value of home, if owned, or monthly rental, if rented
Does this family live on a farm
Sex
Color or race
Age at last birthday
Marital status
Attended school or college any time since Sept. 1, 1929
Highest grade of school completed
Residence as of April 1, 1935.
Place of birth of each person and parents of each person enumerated. If born in U.S. give state or territory. If foreign birth, give country in which birthplace is now situated. Distinguish Canada-French from Canada-English, and Irish Free State from Northern Ireland.
Citizenship of the foreign born
Persons 14 yrs old & over- employment status
Trade, profession, or particular kind of work, as spinner, salesman, riveter, teacher, etc.
Industry, business, as cotton mill, dry-goods store, shipyard, public school, etc.
Whether actually at work during the week of March 24-30? Yes or No
If not, line number on unemployment schedule
No. of farm schedules

Assumptions: Watch out for pitfalls;

Assuming that any or all of the information in the census records is correct. The enumerator may have asked the neighbors. Your ancestor may not have spoken English well, or at all, or could have misunderstood various questions. Verify all census information with other sources.

Assuming the children belong to the couple they are enumerated with (unless relationships are specified). They may be nieces and nephews, grandchildren, or even unrelated. Enumerators often got carried away with the ditto marks.

Assuming the children are those of the wife listed. They may be, but may not. Men have been known to marry women with the same given name. Always search for marriage records. Re-marriage was frequent as many women died in childbirth, leaving the father with young children to care for. The solution was to find a wife - and quickly.

Assuming that all the people listed in the families on the 1790 to 1840 censuses are related. They could have been farmhands or miscellaneous relatives living with the family. Often several generations resided together.

Assuming when a head-of-household is no longer enumerated with the family that he or she is dead. The old folks may have gone to live with a son or daughter. Always search for them in the homes of their children.

Don't assume a person was still living at the time of the census. The enumerator was instructed to take down the names of the family as it was composed on the official date of the census, not the day of the visit.

Brainstorming

Use wildcard * searches which needs at least 3 letters. Examples: Don* for Donald or Car* for Carolyn, Carrie, Carry, Fred* for Freddie or Frederick, etc.

Unknown or possibly mistaken letters are:

? for one letter

*for 0-6 letters

**for 0-7 or more letters

After general search check individually per each census.

Make a list of alternate spellings - phonetic flexible, be creative. Initials, first, middle or nickname, use of titles, Mr., Dr., Sister, Rev., etc.

Don't assume that all children in a household belong to head of family (1790) 1850-1870.

They could be relatives, boarders, friends, neighbors, etc.

Who gave info for census: spouse, child, neighbor, personal knowledge of census taker, etc.

Indexing errors

County maps - surrounding counties - when county was formed.

Census oddities

Being single, widowed, divorced or ages were based on the official census day not the day of the census taker's visit.

In some time periods, families may have re-used the name of a child who died at a young age.

Look-Alikes

In addition to the phonetic difficulties, we can also run into problems with names or letters that look alike.

Vowels, particularly a and o, are often mistaken for one another and many consonants can be easily mistaken for each other, particularly when penmanship clearly wasn't the records creator's strong suit. *A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, lists the following letters that are often confused:

L and S	K and R
T and F	O and Q
J, G, and Y	P and R
I and J	U and W

Looking forward

www.usa.ipums.org - census questions 1950 - 2000.

www.usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/tEnumForm.shtml

1950 census;

Additional employment related questions.

Additional veteran questions.

Does this person have a Federal Social Security Number?

1960

3xs the questions;

Having a flush toilet

Having a washing machine

Means of transportation to work

How much earned in a year

Do you have a TV?

1970-1980

Month & year of birth

Did you serve in military?

Was it during any war or conflict?

Income other than earnings

Cost of Utilities

1990

Additional schooling questions

Person's ancestry or ethnic origin

How many cars, etc.