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Analysis of the Use of United States Federal Census Records in Genealogical Research

by Shannon Gorman

The original purpose of Federal Census records was to enumerate the inhabitants of the newly formed country. Census records were not used to obtain financial information about citizens until 1850. Along with the actual census, other forms were sometimes attached. The other forms were called Schedules, and they were used for gathering a variety of information.

Census records from **1790-1820** were handwritten, not on preprinted forms. These handwritten records resulted in documents that were often hard to read, or contained less or more information than was requested. The first year the government provided a standard form was **1830**. From **1790-1880** census takers collected data by **civil district**. It was up to the District Marshall to subdivide the civil district so that no census district contained more than 10.000 people. This is important when conducting genealogy research in large cities. Your ancestors may be in a Civil District other than the one you have assumed they would be.

The use of the word Color instead of Race in the early census records was not my doing. The word Race was not used on the census records until 1900.

The **1810** census was a handwritten population census of Free White people and Slaves. The category for Free White was broken down in age range and sex. The Slave Category was a total number of slaves with no breakdown by age or sex. The only name listed was the Head of Household. There was no enumeration of Free Colored people.

The 14 March 1820 Census Act required that enumeration should be by an actual inquiry at every dwelling house, or of the head of every family within each district. This indicates that the 1810 census was not completed by inquiry of the individual, but rather of someone who knew the people in the area. The Head of Household is the only name given.

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The **1820** census, also handwritten, was the first census to ask for:

- Free White Males age 16-18 (federal government wanted to know who was available to serve in the military)
- Foreigners Not Naturalized
- Employment- Agriculture, Commerce or Manufacturing
- Age Range and Sex of Slaves
- Age Range and Sex of Free Colored- . Native Americans would have been enumerated as Free Colored Persons in the 1820 Census. Free Colored meant anyone who was free and who was not White

The **1830** census was the first census to be enumerated on a preprinted form provided by the government. ALIENS, foreign born not naturalized, was still on the Free White section.

Difference from 1820 Census:

- Line Number is the first column. This is important because it gives a frame of reference for who lived near whom.
- The category for Free White Males age 16-18 is not on this form.
- There is no employment information requested.
- Deaf, Dumb, and/or Blind category is added. Free Whites are enumerated separately from Slaves and Colored Persons, who are enumerated together for this category.

The **1840** Census contained a lot of information useful to genealogy researchers.

- Military Pensioners- Revolutionary War specifically mentioned
- Employment: Mining, Agriculture, Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade, Navigation of the oceans, Navigation of the canals, lakes and rivers, Learned professional engineers.
- Schools Category (broken down by school level)
- Added Insane to Deaf, Dumb, Blind- took Slave out- only two categories enumerated are Free White and Colored.
- The main categories have changed order to White/Free Colored/Slaves. This can be confusing when transcribing census records from decade to decade

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The **1850** Census is the census is one of the favorite census records for genealogy researchers.

- New Category-Dwelling Number, then for Family Number <u>in order of visitation</u>. This is important because more than one family could be in the dwelling, or more than one dwelling could be on the property.
- New- All free persons in the abode as of 1 June 1850 are listed by name.
- New-Race enumeration changed from Category to Column so that all named persons could have race listed. The only choices under "Color" were White, Black or Mulatto (no Native American, Hispanic, Asian)
- Profession or Occupation for persons over age 15
- New-Value of Real Estate- first time this was asked on a census
- New- Place of Birth of all persons in the household
- New-Married within One Year- first time this was asked on a census
- New-Attended School within a year
- New-Over age 20 and cannot read and write
- Modified- Deaf, Dumb, Blind, Insane, Idiotic, amended to included Pauper or a Convict.
- Removed-Alien category taken out- no questions on naturalization. This is unfortunate from a genealogy research point of view.

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The **1860** census featured only one difference from the 1850 census, there is a column for Personal Estate Value. For genealogy researchers, this is a good question. Many people had personal property, but did not own real property. For person privacy purposes, this is not a good sign, the Federal Government has figured out how to use the Census for more than enumerating the inhabitants of the United States of America.

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The **1870** Census had important changes from 1860 Census

- First census that lists every person in the abode regardless of Color
- New-Color was expanded to include Indian and Chinese
- New-Column for selecting if the parents were foreign born.
- New-Column for selecting if born within census year
- Modified- Cannot Read/Write are in separate columns
- New Constitutional Relation Columns
  - Number of male citizens over age 21
  - Number of male citizens over age 21 who's right to vote is denied on grounds other than rebellion or other crime.

The **1880** Census is a bonanza for genealogists. It was the last census to have a Mortality Schedule attached and the first Census to be Soundex Coded- but only for families with children under age 10.

Changes from 1870
  - New- Column added for Street number
  - New- Column added for House number
  - New- Birthplace of mother and father
  - New- State relationship of each person to Head of Household
  - New- Marital Status- single, married, widowed/divorced
  - New- Occupation of each person listed
  - New- Unemployment-number of months unemployed
  - New- Temporary illness or disability on day of census taker visit
  - Modified- if born within census year- give months in fraction format
  - Modified- pauper and convict status no longer on census.

The 1890 census lost to fire. The Schedule for Union Soldiers Pensions survived. This is helpful in most states.

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The **1900** Census was the first real update in twenty years. Many children were born and moved out of their parents' homes between 1880 and 1900.

- Modified- Name- surname first
- Modified- omit children born since 1 June 1900- enter only people living on 1 June 1900
- New- Color or Race- <u>first use of term Race</u>
- New- Columns for the month and year of birth for every person.
- New- Number of years of <u>present</u> marriage
- New- Number of children born to a mother
- New- Number of living children
- Citizenship Modified- immigration year, number of years in the U.S., naturalization
- Occupation Modified- to each person 10 years or older
- New- Education used instead of School- attended school, can read, write, can speak English.
- New- Home Ownership- owned free or mortgaged, farm or house, number of
    - farm schedule
- Removed- Category for deaf, dumb, blind

The **1910** Census is a modified version of the 1900 census, with the exception of the Survivor the Civil War category. **The 1910 Census features separate Indian population schedules**. These Indian schedules record the Indian Tribe or Band.

- Modified- Enumerate only people alive on 1 April 1910.
- Modified- Citizenship- select either Naturalized or Alien
- Modified- Language spoken if not English
- Modified- Employment- new category- self employed or employee
- Modified- Homeownership- owned or rented
- Modified- Blind both eyes one column, deaf and dumb one column
- **New- Military service- survivor of Civil War**

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The **1920** Census

- Modified- Enumerate persons alive on 1 January 1920
- Modified- Home Ownership- owned free and clear or mortgaged
- Modified- Mother Tongue of Mother and Father- this is helpful when looking for county or origin of your ancestors.

The **1930** census takers recorded the actual date of enumeration on each page of this census, allowing the genealogy researcher to pinpoint ages more correctly.

- Modified- Enumerate persons alive on 1 Apr 1930
- New- monthly payment on home mortgage, or rent.
- New- owned radio set
- New- does family live on a farm
- New- age at first marriage
- New- language spoken in home before coming to US
- New- Special codes- no description on form
- New- Class of worker
- New- Veterans- year and expedition

The **1940** census was released by the federal government on April 2, 2012. Please see the National Archives web page 1940 Census Records for information about this census. The public can view the 1940 Census online at http://1940census.archives.gov/ .

The Unified 1940 Census ED Finder iby Steve Morse can help you find the Enumeration District Number you need to conduct a search of the 1940 census for your ancestors without a surname index. Steve Morse also provides 1940 Enumeration District Maps.