Finding Ancestors in US Census Records

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I) Why search the census records?

A. They contain more information than almost any other single document.
B. They show the growth and movement of families over time.
C. They give clues for locating additional records, such as birth and marriage records, passenger lists, and naturalization records.
D. They can be used to prove or disprove preconceived ideas about an ancestor.

II) Availability of U. S. census records

A. AncestryLibraryEdition through the St. Louis County Library website
B. HeritageQuestOnline
C. Fold3 (1860 and 1930)
D. FamilySearch.org (1880 and 1930 only; free database available from anywhere.)

III) The population schedules, 1790-1940

A) Background information on the U. S. Federal Census
   a. The census is taken every ten years.
   b. The first one was taken in 1790.
   c. The most recent census available to the public is from 1940 due to privacy restrictions (72 years).
   d. The 1950 census will be released in 2022.
   e. At HeritageQuestOnline, click on Research Aids, and note links to several helpful resources under Census.
   f. Census day (see Dollarhide on Recommended Resources for Census online at HeritageQuestOnline.com under Research Aids – Census – “Historical U. S. Censuses”)

B) Census forms, search pages, codes, and abbreviations
   a. Click on the Charts and Forms button at the top of the AncestryLibraryEdition home page.
   b. Click on Census Forms.
   c. Note how the questions and layout of the forms vary from year to year.
d. Note that the fields differ from decade to decade on the census search pages.

e. At HeritageQuestOnline, click on Research Aids.

f. Under Research Aids, click on Census Forms to see pages from Dollarhide’s census book (through 1930 only) or use the print version, pp. 125-183.

g. Also under Research Aids, note the U. S. maps from Thorndale’s map guide, which show the growth of the country from census to census. (See Recommended Resources for full citation.)

h. Go to www.stevemorse.org/census/codes.html to decipher the codes used in the census schedules.

i. Abbreviations used in the censuses can be found at HeritageQuestOnline.com under Research Aids – Census – “Published Statewide Censuses and Indexes, 1790-1930,” pp. 72-74 or print in Dollarhide, pp. 72-74.

C) Search 1900-1940
   a. Note: Always work from the most recent census available and work backwards in time.

D) The 1890 census
   a. Most of the 1890 census was destroyed in a fire in 1921 in the Commerce Department in Washington, DC.
   b. Fragments survive. Look in the Browse mode at Ancestry or Heritage Quest to see what is left, or check Dollarhide, page 59.

E) Search 1850-1880

F) Search 1790-1840
   a. Some records for 1790-1840 are missing, but in many cases, they have been reconstructed using tax lists, etc. Check Dollarhide for details.

G) The 1890 Veterans’ Schedule
   a. Can serve as a type of substitute for the 1890 population schedule.

H) The 1850 and 1860 Slave Schedules
   a. Includes the names of slaveholders
   b. Try searching with birth year and gender

IV) Non-population schedules for 1850-1880

A) The non-population schedules include:
   a. Agriculture
      i. This schedule shows crops raised, numbers of farm animals, etc.
   b. Industry/manufacturing
      i. This schedule shows value of business, supplies on hand, etc.
   c. Social statistics
      i. This schedule gives information on schools, libraries, newspapers, religious adherents, etc.
   d. Defective, Dependent and Delinquent (DDD)
i. This schedule gives information on people with some type of handicap. They may be institutionalized or at home.

ii. The DDD for St. Louis has been indexed by H&G and is available in print in the H&G Department and on the library’s website.

e. Mortality schedules for 1850-1885

i. On the mortality schedule homepage, look at the coverage available. Notice that Missouri is not included, but H&G has the microfilm for 1850-1880.

B) See Dollarhide, “Non-population Census Schedules” in print or online at HeritageQuestOnline for more information.

C) The following non-population schedules for Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Missouri are not available at AncestryLibraryEdition.com or at HeritageQuestOnline.com. The 1850 mortality schedules for all states are available at FamilySearch.org, and are on microfilm in the History and Genealogy Department at St. Louis County Library Headquarters as follows:

a. Arkansas
   i. Agriculture, 1850-1880
   ii. Defective, Dependent and Delinquent, 1880
   iii. Social Statistics, 1850-1870

b. Louisiana
   i. Agriculture, 1850-1880

c. Mississippi
   i. Agriculture, 1850-1880
   ii. Mortality, 1850-1880

d. Missouri
   i. Agriculture, 1850-1880
   ii. Defective, Dependent, Delinquent, 1880
   iii. Industry/manufacturing, 1850-1880
   iv. Mortality, 1850-1880
   v. Social Statistics, 1860

V) State census collections

a. Go to the AncestryLibraryEdition homepage and search for “state censuses” in the card catalog.

b. Click on the desired state census collection to search.

c. State census records are not available at HeritageQuestOnline.com.

d. To see what records are available for each state and year, check Lainhart on the Recommended Resources for Census Research handout.

VI) Problems in census research

A. Record missing (or maybe not)
a. Try finding another type of record to replace the missing census record, such as a tax list, city directory listing, etc.
b. If your ancestor did not move between censuses, try searching for the name of a neighbor.
c. Search by last name only, if it is not very common.
d. Try using your ancestor’s middle name rather than the first name, especially if he/she was German.
e. Try an abbreviation of the first name, for example, Fred instead of Frederick.
f. Try a nickname, such as Betsy, Betty, Beth, Eliza, Liza, Liz, etc. for Elizabeth.
g. Try both the English and foreign version of the first name, for example, Anthony and Antoine.
h. Try searching for the surname plus the spouse’s first name or the first name of a child.
i. Search by first initial of the given name only.
j. Leave out the name entirely, and search using the other fields.
k. Use the browse mode for the desired state, county and enumeration district, or browse through the entire county.

B. Surname misspelled
   a. Try alternate spellings of the name or use wildcards such as * or ?. For example, Gersh* for Gershwin, Gershberg, Gershenstein, etc., or M?ller for Miller or Müller.
   b. Search by first name only with some additional information, such as spouse’s name, birth date, etc.

C. Surname changed
   a. Try searching for the spouse, one of the children, or an in-law.

D. Bad penmanship
   a. See tips on deciphering handwriting on FamilySearch.org

E. Wrong information given
   a. Circled X on 1940 census.

F. County boundary changes
   a. Check Thornton on the Recommended Resources List

G. Duplicate entries
   a. Sometimes a person may show up twice at different addresses in the same census year. He/she may have moved to the new address before the census taker surveyed that particular area.

VII) **Recommended resources for census research**


Check the library’s online catalog for census indexes and transcriptions of special schedules. To find a census index, do a keyword search for [state] [year] [census] and you will get a list of hits. For example, here is the result for searching for Missouri 1910 census:

*Missouri 1910 Census Index*. North Salt Lake, Utah: HeritageQuest, 2003. CALL # R 929.3 M678

Note: Census indexes give page numbers, but the online genealogy databases use image numbers. They are not the same, but you can use the page numbers to help you find the image you need.


There are many locally prepared census indexes to various counties around the country. Check the library’s online catalog for holdings.