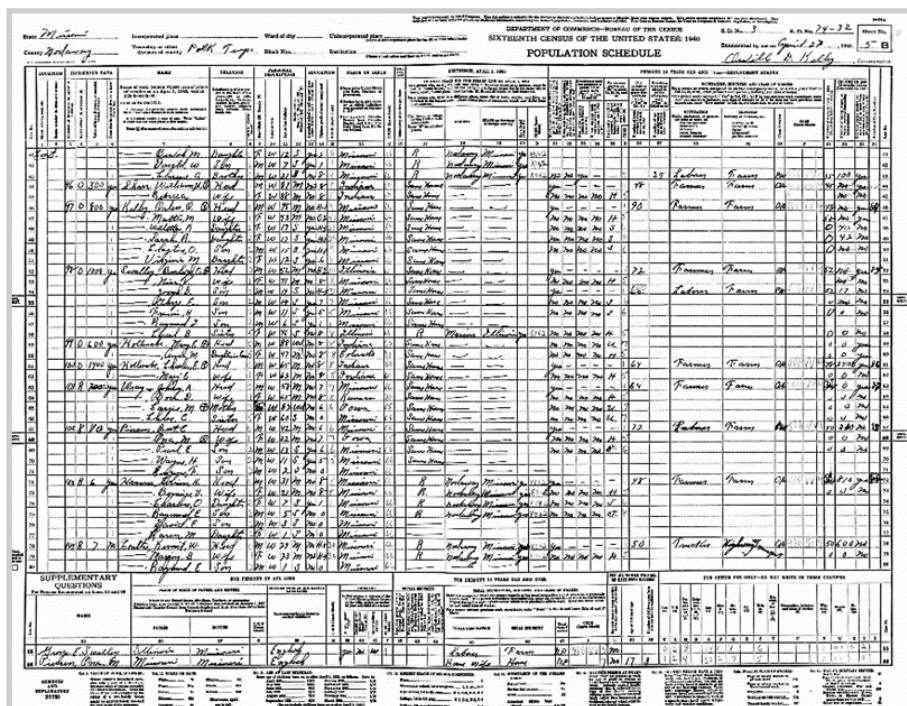# Census Records

Basic Search Strategy

1. From a genealogy database, start with a broad search. Fill in the information fields you know, but it's okay to leave fields blank.

2. Narrow your search with more details or filters. Note that more information can alter how the databases ranks your search results or exclude record matches if the details are incorrect, misspelled, or transcribed incorrectly.

Information you might find on a Census:

- Name
- Age (+/- birth year)
- Birthplace (state/country)
- Relationships
- Marital status
- Parents' birthplace
- Mother tongue
- Number of children
- Naturalization status
- Race
- Gender
- Veteran Status
- Native language
- Occupation
- Income, property values
- Education and literacy

1940 Federal Census

Why the Census?

Beginning in 1790, the U.S. Federal Census is conducted every 10 years. Mandated by the Constitution, the census provides data used to determine the allocation of federal funding and the number of seats each state holds in the House of Representatives.

For genealogists, these records document the movement and changes of American families each decade. Census records can help piece together a timeline of your family history.

Where can I find Census records?

AncestryLibrary (accessible from ppld.org) and FamilySearch.org are great places to start, though many additional genealogy databases provide access to census records.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) details when specific censuses and schedules were conducted and where they can be accessed:

https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/census/online-resources

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Census Records

Are you not finding an ancestor? Try these search tricks:

- A name may have been misspelled, misheard, or miscopied:
    - Use alternate spellings
    - Remove first name or surname from your search
    - Use wildcards: ? replaces a single letter, * replaces zero/more letters
      (e.g. Sm?th* will match Smith, Smyth, Smythe, Smithers and Smithson, etc.)
    - Use the Soundex Indexing System[1] to search for surnames based on how they sound
    - Remove names entirely and search only using other fields
- Try different combinations of information (names, dates, locations, etc.)
- Search using both married and maiden names (female ancestors)
- Remove or broaden your ancestor's age
- Start with the most recent relevant census, then work backward in time
- Browse the census by enumeration district (the geographic area covered by an enumerator) or use other sources (e.g. city directories) to find your ancestor's address. Then search for their enumeration district[2]
- If an ancestor was missed during the initial enumeration, check the end of the census, special schedules (e.g. agricultural), or state or local censuses (usually mid-decade e.g. 1865).
- Search for family members (your ancestor may have lived with them) or neighbors (they may be relatives)
- Try the same search using a different database

Additional Resources

Information about Soundex[1]
https://www.archives.gov/research/census/soundex

Enumeration District Finder[2] (search by address)
https://stevemorse.org/census/unified.html

Blank Census forms and headers
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/
United_States_Census_Forms
https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms

The Newberry Library's Atlas of Historical County Boundaries
https://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/

Enumerator instructions
https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/
census_instructions/

Learn More

NARA Introduction to Census Records
https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/
census/about

FamilySearch Research Wiki
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/
United_States_Census

NARA Resources for Genealogists
https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy

Tip! Take census records with a grain of salt. Names, ages, occupations, etc. could have been incorrectly recorded. When relationships are included, these are likely, but not proof of, family relationships.

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