

Using the Census for Family and Local History: A Resource Guide for Public Libraries

Census Facts



The first full U.S. census in **1790** counted 3.9 million inhabitants.

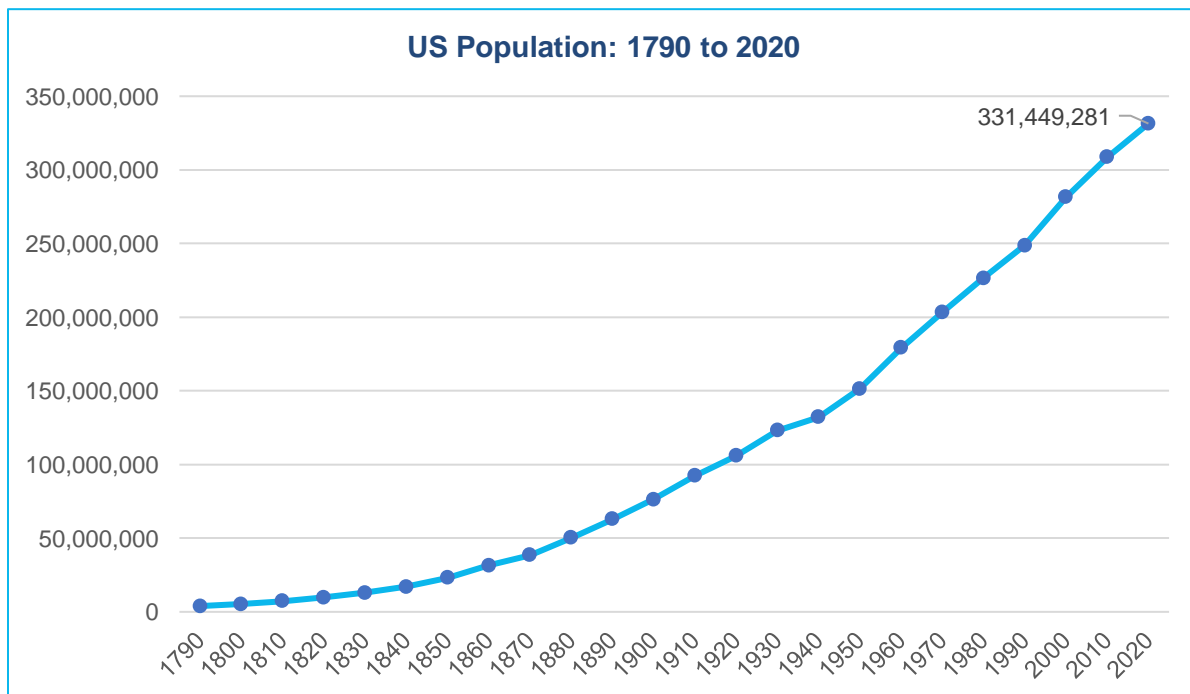


In **1850** the census started recording names of all household members.



Most returns from the **1890** census were destroyed in a fire in 1921.

Decennial census returns are released 72 years after their collection. The 1950 records will be released in 2022. The 2020 records will be released in **2092**.



Who Counts?

The decennial census is a key tool for local history and genealogy research. However, when undertaking that work it's important to recognize that the history of the census is also a history of inclusion and exclusion.

Take the chart above: the total population figures exclude **United States territories**. In 2020 the residents of American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands completed the census. Yet the total population figures reported [by decade](#) omit them. This is not a new problem. Historian Daniel Immerwahr notes that a 1910 report said the statistics covered only “the United States proper,” though that is not an official designation. This resulted in a picture of the population that differed from the reality. Including territories at the time, the largest minority population would have been Asian, the largest cities included Manila, and the geographic center of the country would have shifted west.¹

Certain groups have also been excluded from population counts in the past. The census counted **Native Americans** in some capacity starting in 1860. However, this count excluded “Indians not taxed” in 1860, 1870, and 1880, for which Indian agents only provided an estimate.² From 1900 on all Native Americans were enumerated on the general schedule.

Enslaved peoples were enumerated on the censuses between 1790 and 1840, but no demographic or personal information about them was recorded. In 1850 and 1860 enslaved peoples were enumerated on separate schedules that did include sex and age. Infamously, under the Three-fifths Compromise of the Constitution each enslaved person ‘counted’ as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of apportioning seats to states in the House of Representatives, giving greater power to slave states.

The struggle over including a question about citizenship on the 2020 census raised the specter of **misuse of census records**. Under a provision of the Second War Powers Act (passed in March 1942) the 1940 census was secretly used to target Japanese Americans for internment during World War II. The Census Bureau provided block-level information on where those of Japanese birth or descent lived in several western states. The Bureau also provided names and addresses of individual Japanese Americans living in Washington DC. While this may not have been illegal at the time, it was certainly ethically questionable.³

Despite limitations and past misuses, the census is a valuable tool for understanding the United States’ population and history, and its evolution reflects that history.

¹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2019), 13.

² James P. Collins, “Native Americans in the Census, 1860-1890,” *Genealogy Notes* (summer 2006): <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/summer/indian-census.html>.

³ Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History*, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 2015), 193-200; William Seltzer & Margo Anderson, “Census Confidentiality under the Second War Powers Act (1942-1947),” paper presented at the Population Association of America Annual Meeting, March 2007.



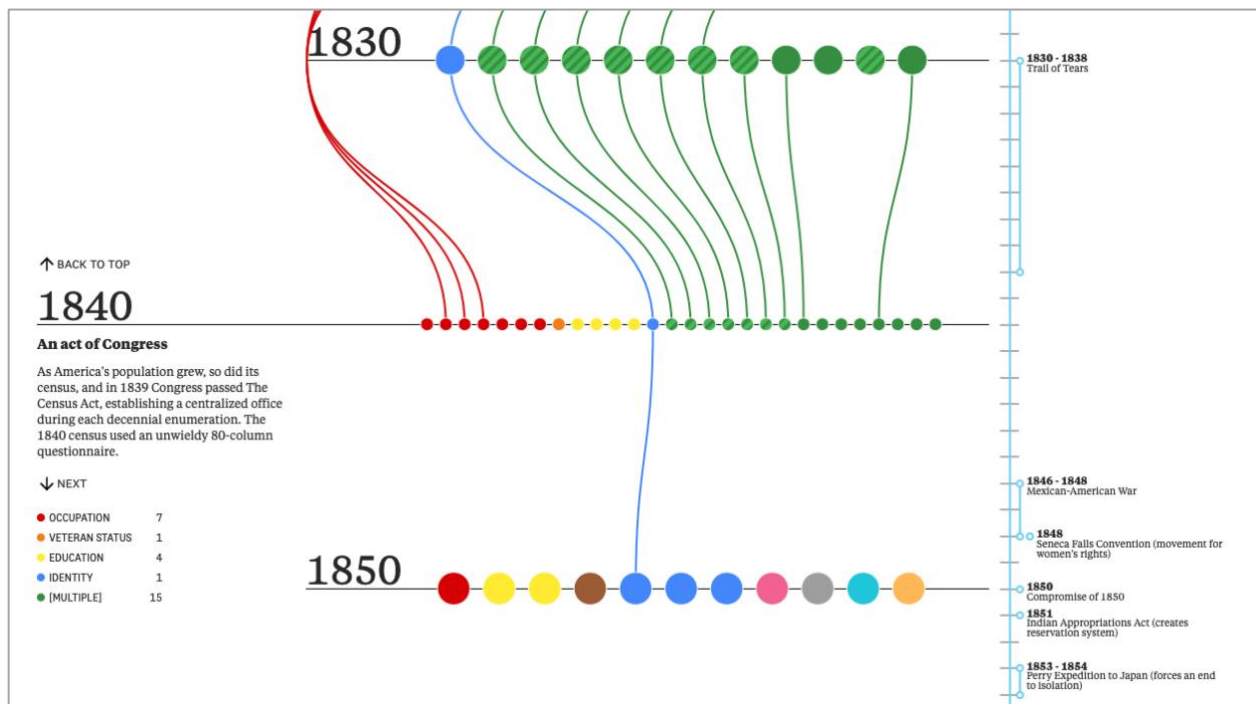
Resources: An Annotated List

Using the census for local or family history research may involve two types of sources: census data, and census records or returns. Historical data – whether aggregated at the local, state, or national level – can help you understand how a place and the people in it have changed over time. Records – the forms people fill out with their individual information – can be an invaluable tool for genealogical research. Records can also be used for local history, to create a more complete picture of the individuals who made up a community in the past.

History of the US Census

The US Census Bureau has a guide to its own [history](#) and a webinar recording of “[A Brief History of the Census 1790-2020](#)” (from Sept. 2020) is available giving an overview. The Library of Congress has also created [a guide](#) to reference publications and finding aids for researchers.

To explore how the questions asked on the decennial census have changed, *The Pudding* has published [an interactive visualization](#) that tracks questions by themes over time.



A [similar study](#) from the Pew Research Center focuses specifically on how the census has attempted to measure race over time. Explore the accompanying interactive [timeline here](#).

For a well-researched narrative history, check out Margo J. Anderson's book, *The American Census: A Social History*, 2nd edition (Yale University Press, 2015). Two books offer deeper dives into questions of race on the census: *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* by Melissa Nobles (Stanford University Press, 2000) and *What Is "Your" Race?:*



The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans by Kenneth Prewitt (Princeton University Press, 2013).

Historical Census Data

The decennial census determines the number of seats each state gets in the House of Representatives. Use the interactive [Historical Apportionment Data Map](#) to explore each state's change in seats and population per representative from 1910 to 2020.

[IPUMS](#), at the University of Minnesota, curates and disseminates datasets from around the world, making them more easily accessible to researchers. It includes U.S. census records from 1790 to the present. IPUMS [National Historical Geographic Information System](#) (NHGIS) provides summary statistics and GIS mapping files for censuses, allowing users to select and download data from different years and geographic levels. [IPUMS USA](#) provides microdata from decennial censuses since 1790 and the American Community Survey since 2000. These tools do require some expertise to navigate, so we recommend viewing the user guide and tutorials before jumping in. [IPUMS Abacus](#) is more user friendly, but does not currently provide data for any geography smaller than the state level.

Unfortunately, the Census Bureau's primary data tool, [data.census.gov](#), does not include data before the year 2000. Download PDFs of Census volumes and reports from the [Census Bureau Publications](#). Reports and tables from the decennial census can be found [here by decade](#).

The [Census Linking Project](#) aims to link individuals across decades, creating longitudinal datasets that can be used to study things like intergenerational mobility. Making use of this data will require some expertise.

The above are all free resources. [Social Explorer](#) is a subscription platform for data visualization and mapping that includes historic census data.

Historical Census Records

The backbone of much genealogical research, census records going back to 1790 are kept by the [National Archives and Records Administration](#). Access to them is provided through a number of other services including [Family Search](#) (free) and [Ancestry](#) (paid).

One challenge of using historic census records can be connecting people to specific locations. This blog post from the New York Public Library, "[Genealogy Tips: Searching the Census by Address](#)," explains the process of connecting a record to an address using enumeration districts.



Making Connections

Connecting what you learn from the census to other sources of information about the past can create a fuller picture of a family or community's history. For example:

- In "[Does My Town Have a Racist Past?](#)" James W. Loewen describes how students can explore whether their town was a '[sundown town](#),' a place that intentionally kept its population white. Census research provides a first step in the process.
- "[Discovering Your Neighborhood: How to Use National Archives Records to Find Out More about Where You Live](#)" provides an example of combining census records with real estate and insurance maps to explore a neighborhood's history.

Other types of sources that may be useful complements to the census include:

- Published volumes of local history, which your library may have in its collections, or can be found on archive.org.
- Historical newspapers – many are freely available from the Library of Congress in [Chronicling America](#).
- The United States Geological Survey (USGS) [Historical Topographic Map Collection](#) includes maps from 1884 to 2006, which can be accessed and downloaded via the [TopoView](#) tool.

