**Genealogical Resources (mostly online)**

**Updated 8/3/2023**

**Popular Family History Sites**

Familysearch (free)

GenI (free)

Ancestry ($)

GenWeb (free)

Find-A-Grave (free)

**U.S. and State Censuses**

The nation began compiling a decennial census (every ten years) in 1790 and has proceeded up to the current day. The most recently published detailed decennial census (a census that lists individuals) was 1950. To protect the privacy of individuals, the U.S. Census Bureau does not release detailed local census data for a given year until 72 years have passed. State and territorial censuses were also begun and conducted as federal censuses came into being, and their dates vary. The information the federal censuses recorded has changed markedly over time, evolving with each census. Censuses for territories and states were conducted more sporadically, and often in response to political needs.

Initially, the only individuals identified on early federal censuses (before 1850) was that of the free white male “head of family.” The presence and number of other family members in the household were noted simply by gender and age ranges. Over time, the number of age ranges multiplied and became more detailed. Other free and enslaved members of the household (not family) were simply totaled. Indentured servants were (correctly) considered to be free persons, since indentures were temporary legal contracts for labor, and not a characteristics of individuals. Enslaved persons were chattel—property, the equivalent of livestock. Indians not taxed were excluded. Localities were often listed only by territory or county or community.

In 1820, new categories of non-family members were added, including foreigners not yet naturalized, as well as categorizing enslaved persons and free people of color by gender and age. The 1820 census also began to categorize household members by employment (agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing). Up until 1830, census forms were generated locally, sometimes by hand. The 1830 census was the first that used printed federal forms.

The 1840 census significantly increased the number of categories for persons being counted as well as asking for data on military service, disability, employment (mining, agriculture, commerce, manufactures and trades, navigation of the ocean, navigation of canals, lakes and rivers, learned professions and engineers), and the nature of schooling completed or underway. It also requested more detailed information on the age range of enslaved persons and free persons of color.

In 1850, the census forms changed significantly, beginning the numbering (but not the addresses) of households visited, listing the names of all persons in the household, their age and sex, the profession of the male head of household (and sometimes others), the value of the real estate they owned, the place of birth for each household member, their marital status within the year, their educational status, anyone over 20 who was not literate, and their status with respect to disability or conviction. This basic format, with subsequent tweaks, was the beginning of modern census data.

Slave Schedules - Until 1860, enslaved persons were enumerated on separate census schedules, which recorded the name of the slave owner, the age, gender, and (relative) color of each enslaved person owned (but not their names), whether or not they were fugitives (escaped), how many (if any) had been manumitted (legally freed by their owners), any disability, and the number of slave houses provided for them.

The 1870 census following the end of the Civil War added even more categories of data. The community, county, and state were identified. Race was indicated as White (W), Black (B), Mulatto (M), Chinese (C), and Indian (I). The professions of women and sometimes children as well as men were noted. The values of personal estates were added to the value of real estate. More information (state, territory, or country) was requested with respect to any individual’s place of birth, including whether or not individuals or parents were foreign born. Literacy was extended to both reading and writing. “Constitutional relations” with respect to suffrage was requested—in other words, had an individual over 21 lost the right to vote by participating in “rebellion” during the Civil War, which had ended in 1865. This was also a question intended to ferret out whether some states were still denying the right to vote to adult black American males. The 1860 and 1870 federal census reflected the profound changes in the nation was undergoing, including who was to be considered a citizen, and the exponential growth and westward expansion of the nation.

The 1880 census added street and house numbers (actual street addresses), the relationship of each individual to the head of household (if not a family member, then a boarder or servant or the like), whether an individual was single, married, divorced, or widowed, any recent employment (number of months), categories of disability became more detailed, as well as more detailed information about the birthplace of parents.

The 1890 census was substantially destroyed by a 1921 fire in Washington, D.C., but some fragments remain, and in some cases, state censuses take up some of the slack. Surviving portions of the 1890 federal census can be accessed via this link:

<https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/availability_of_1890_census.html>

The 1910 census added information about citizenship, whether or not a person was an English-speaker, whether or not they owned their home or farm, and whether or not they were a survivor of the Civil War (an attempt to gather information for military pensions).

The 1920 census tried to break down information even further, adding questions about the nature of work, citizenship, languages spoken other than English, year of immigration, and other questions attempting to get a handle on the pulses of recent European immigration.

The 1930 census elaborated on the 1920 census a bit, adding a general question about veteran’s status.

In the 1940 census, employment questions reflected the lingering effects of the Great Depression and the extensive public sector employment still available. It added a request for the employment status for all persons over 14 years of age. It asked the number of months that individuals had worked the previous year, and the income for that year.

The 1950 census has only recently become available and can be accessed by simply Googling “1950 census,” which directs you to the government website and its search function.

If you know when your ancestor lived in a given town or county up until 1940, you can probably find them on the census through one of the family history sites (Familysearch and Ancestry are the easiest to use), or by Googling them.

**Military Records**

Predominantly (but not exclusively) for male ancestors, these include a wide range of documents indicating draft registration, enlistment, service, payment schedules, hospitalizations, pensions (including for survivors), veterans’ lists, and so forth. Local communities may have copies of their local militia lists, which continued well into the early 20th century. They can most easily be located through family history sites, but there are also written histories of different historical conflicts listing and describing the service of participants in different parts of the country. Google “History of [name of conflict] in [name of state or region].” You can also request a copy of your family member’s military record(s) from the National Archives:

<https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records>.

**Local Public Documents**

Historical city directories

Historical street lists (for towns)

Municipal tax records

Municipal militia lists

Voter lists

Ancient land grants

- These are sometimes accessible through family history sites (principally Ancestry), or hard copies going back into the 19th, 18th, or even the 17th century may be available at local library archives or local historical societies. These can be quite detailed, describing a person’s home address, work address, nature of employment, race (if other than white), marital status, etc.

**Local Town/County Histories**

Beginning in the mid-to-late 19th or early 20th centuries, many private historians, historical societies, or municipalities and counties compiled and published local community histories, sometimes more than one. They are still doing it. Such histories frequently include lists of participants in prior wars and other detailed information, including local genealogical information.

You can often find them by simply Googling “History of [Name of town or county, State],” or by Googling “History of [Town/County], archive.org.” Archive.org is an organization that scans and makes available numerous historical documents online, most of which can be word-searched to find a family name or individual.

**Maps**

Depending on where you are looking in the United States, you can find historical maps for a town or county by Googling “Town of [name], historical maps” or “[name of] County Atlas, date.” In many cases, you will be directed to maps held in the archives of the Library of Congress. Many state and local historical commissions also preserve and scan these maps for public use. In older parts of the country, there may be hand-surveyed maps from the 1700s or even earlier. In most parts of the country, counties starting having maps made in the mid- or late 19th century. Many of these maps have small black squares indicating principal residential, commercial, or public buildings and the name of its owner/occupant, when available. They usually do not show outbuildings.

Other maps include U.S. Geological Service (USGS) maps begun in the 19th century and periodically updated to the current day. USGS maps tend to focus on updating landscape features and are less reliable in terms of whether they display buildings are present or absent. Many states operate their own GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping for their entire state. Some of this mapping is done using LIDAR (laser measurements) and can be very accurate in terms of displaying the contours of the surface of the ground and features like cellar holes.

**Deed Research**

Most Registers of Deeds are operated at the county level, and many—but not all--have deed records (at least those during the 20th century) available online. Others may have the records available only through hard copies of deeds to be viewed in person. The software they use to access this information and, sometimes, to tie it to county-wide mapping varies, and can require some experimentation to learn. However, through these records, you can trace the ownership of properties through families and others back through the generations.

**Newspapers**

If you look up the name of the local newspaper(s) being published during your ancestor’s lifetime, you may be able to find a searchable scanned version of those papers’ editions online. Some states or state university history departments, or even local libraries have free websites that you can search. There are also for-profit newspaper archives (newspapers.com, etc.) that you can join for an annual fee. You can locate either by Googling “[name of state] newspapers, archives” or “[name of newspaper], archives.”

**Google**

It’s amazing what will turn up if you simply Google an ancestor’s name and a place and date, or the ancestor’s and their spouse’s names and their wedding year. You will also locate many private family histories and community genealogies that way.