

Using the US Censuses, 1870 - 1790

Prepared by: Questing Heirs Genealogical Society of Long Beach, Inc., 2003.

Census records are available on microfilm at many large libraries, including:

- Los Angeles Family History Center
- All National Archives Branches
- Los Angeles Public Library

At least one index is available for every state in each census year 1790 - 1870. Best collections of indexes are at Huntington Beach Central Library, Los Angeles Family History Center, Los Angeles Public Library, and National Archives branches.

- Indexes generally list ONLY head of household and, for 1850 - 1870, anyone who does not have the same surname as the head of the household. In most cases, wives and children are not indexed!
- "Mortality Schedules", listing everyone who died in the year prior to the census, may still exist. They can be extremely valuable, but they are sometimes hard to find. Some have been indexed separately.
- For 1790 - 1840, only heads of household are listed by name (everyone else gets a tick mark in their age group) with one exception: Revolutionary War pensioners were listed by name in a separate column on the 1840 census. An index to the pensioners listed in the 1840 census has been published.

Use Thorndale and Dollarhide's "Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses, 1790 - 1920," available at all of the libraries mentioned above, to keep track of state and county boundary changes, as well as notes about the few census schedules that have been lost, territorial censuses, etc. This book is on the very short list of books that every serious American genealogist should own.

Get a set of blank forms for reference. You need the forms to understand the meaning of each column in the census schedule, which is different for every year .

Always examine the actual census schedules, don't be satisfied with information from indexes or even transcribed census records. There are too many inaccuracies! A few indexes have turned out to be incomplete.

Each census schedule can have up to 3 different sets of page numbers. The one used in the published indexes is usually the one that is stamped (as opposed to hand-written) in the upper right corner of the page, but not necessarily! Be flexible and figure it out! Hint: when in doubt, take a name from the census schedule in question, then look it up in the published index, so you can see which set of page numbers they are using!

Age categories vary from year to year, study carefully! For 1820 - 1830, a boy between 16 and 18 years of age SHOULD be counted twice, once in the 16 - 18 category, and again in the 16 - 26 category! (This was an effort to get an idea of how many young men might be available for military service.)

Various states conducted their own censuses. Some of the state censuses have survived and are available on microfilm through the various state archives and the Family History Library .The state censuses are often far more detailed than the federal censuses. They are extremely valuable and usually worth the trouble to find them!

Compare successive census readings carefully to be sure you understand who was who in your family. Censuses may reveal the existence of other family members, or they may help you narrow your search.

Census records are not infallible. Spellings are often wrong, sometimes ages and names are in error. Indexes sometimes misspell names that are perfectly clear on the original records. In spite of these problems, most people can be found with relatively little work. Census records OFTEN reveal additional family members, including unexpected in-laws, grandparents, previously unknown spouses, future spouses listed as boarders, etc. Even if you already have your family tree, ALWAYS look for them on each census taken during their lifetimes. Take a look at their neighbors, too, since related families often lived close together. The grandparents you are searching for may be listed next door!

When all else fails, there is nothing to stop you from scanning census records for entire counties, page by page. That's how many of us found our ancestry in the days before indexes were available!