

Making the Most of the US Federal Census

Class 2: Using the Early Censuses 1790-1840

Lindsay Fulton, lindsay.fulton@nehgs.org

Questions asked on the 1790-1840 Censuses:

CENSUS QUESTIONS	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840
Name of county, city, ward, town, township, parish, precinct, hundred, or district	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Name of head of household	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. of free white males (under 16, 16 and older)	✓					
No. of free white females (no age)	✓					
No. of free white males/females (age ranges: under 10, 10-15, 16-25)		✓	✓	✓		
No. of free white males (between 16-18 years old)				✓		
No. of free white males/females (age ranges: 26-44, 45 and older)		✓	✓	✓		
No. of free white males/females (age ranges: under 5, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49)					✓	✓
No. of free white males/females (age ranges: 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, 80-89, 90-99, 100 and older)					✓	✓
No. of free white persons who are deaf/dumb (age ranges: under 14, 14-24, 25 and older)					✓	✓
No. of free white persons who are blind (no age)					✓	✓
No. of free white persons who are insane/idiots, for public charge (no age)						✓
No. of free white persons who are insane/idiots, for private charge (no age)						✓
No. of slaves (no age, no gender)	✓	✓	✓			
No. of slave males/females (age ranges: under 14, 14-25, 26-44, 45 and older)				✓		
No. of slave males/females (age ranges: under 10 years, 10-23, 24-35, 36-54, 55-99, 100 and older)					✓	✓
No. of other free persons (no age, no gender)	✓	✓	✓			
No. of colored free males/females (age ranges: under 14, 14-25, 26-44, 45 and older)				✓		
No. of colored free males/females (age ranges: under 10, 10-23, 24-35, 36-54, 55-99, 100 and older)					✓	✓
No. of slaves/free colored persons who are deaf/dumb (age ranges: under 14, 14-24, 25 and older)					✓	
No. of slaves/free colored persons who are blind (no age)					✓	
No. of colored persons who are deaf/dumb (no age)						✓
No. of colored persons who are blind (no age)						✓
No. of colored persons who are insane/idiots, for public charge (no age)						✓
No. of colored persons who are insane/idiots, for private charge (no age)						✓
Foreigners not naturalized				✓	✓	
No. of persons engaged in agriculture/commerce/manufactures				✓		✓
No. of persons engaged in mining/ocean navigation/canal-lake-river navigation						✓
No. of persons employed as learned professional engineer						✓
Universities/colleges						✓
No. of students						✓
Academies/grammar schools						✓
No. of scholars						✓
Primary/common schools						✓
No. of scholars at public charge						✓
No. of white persons over 20 years in each family who cannot read/write						✓

What to look for on the 1790-1840 Census:

Because the U.S. Federal Census from 1790 to 1840 includes only the name of the head of household, researchers often dismiss these records when searching for their early ancestors. However, if used properly, these census records can provide clues about your ancestors and lead to other helpful record collections:

- **Match with baptismal/birth records-** The most obvious way to use the 1790-1840 censuses is to cross-reference a specific census enumeration with baptismal/birth records for the period in question. Simply make a graph of the children born to a couple and match up the gender/ages with the census enumeration. This can be especially helpful if they had multiple children. However, if your ancestor's residence is unknown or baptismal/birth records for the children do not exist, this technique may be less effective.
- **Foreigners not naturalized-** In 1820 and 1830, the U.S. Census indicated the number of immigrants who were not yet naturalized. While the column does not indicate the age or gender of the immigrants, you can use this information to locate possible naturalization records. For example, if the 1820 census indicated that 2 members of a household were not naturalized, and in 1830 only 1 member, you can assume that one of those individuals may have been naturalized between 1820 and 1830. To locate a possible naturalization record, you should examine court records on the county level.
- **Military aged men-** In 1820, census enumerators were asked to specify those males living in the household that were of the ages of 16 and under 18 years old. Therefore, any males born between 8 August 1802 and 7 August 1804 would be included in this column. These men would also be included in the column, males between the ages of 16-25 years. Because this census provides such a specific birth range, it can be used to distinguish between families, when more than one head of household is living in a town with the same name.
- **Revolutionary War pensioners-** In 1840, the census enumerators took the names and ages of those pensioners who were receiving a pension. These names on the second page of the census enumeration and were recorded in addition to head of household information.
- **Children born between 1 June 1820 and 7 August 1820:** Because the 1820 census enumeration began on 7 August 1820 and the 1830 census on 1 June 1830, the enumerations were taken 9 years, 9 months and 25 days apart, rather than a full 10 years. As a result, those children who were born between 2 June 1820 and 7 August 1820 would have been listed in the "under 5 years" category in 1820 and "under 10 years" in 1830.
- **Free colored and enslaved populations-** The 1820 census is the first census enumeration that identifies slaves and colored populations by gender and age range. Beforehand, these populations were counted without any other identifiable means.



Tips:

- If the census taker had hard to read handwriting, look at other entries to discern specific letters (both capital and lowercase letters). How did he commonly connect two letters? Did he make a double “ss” look like “ff”?
- When searching for an ancestor with a commonly misspelled surname, you may want to conduct the search using the first name only. Narrow the search to a particular town or city, and chose a specific census year. Then search for the first name only.
- Duplicate entries- Vermont became a state in 1791
- Watch out for boundary changes- border changes could have taken place canvassing appointed by districts, which were created using existing local boundaries. “The town, township, military district, ward, and precinct often constituted one or more enumeration districts.” As a result, enumerators were often unsure whether a family resided in their district or another.

Published U.S. Federal Census Resources:

The Census Book: Facts, Schedules & Worksheets for the U.S. Federal Censuses by William Dollarhide (Orting, Wash.: Family Roots Publishing Co., 2019)

Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Census, 1790-1920 by William Dollarhide and William Thorndale (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1987)

A Census of Pensioners for Revolutionary or Military Service by the U.S. Census Bureau (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1989)

Portable Genealogist: *Using the Federal Census: 1790-1840* by Lindsay Fulton (NEHGS, 2015)

Portable Genealogist: *Using the Federal Census 1850-1950* by Lindsay Fulton (NEHGS, 2015, 2022)

Published Geographical Resources:

Redbook: American State County and Town Sources, 3rd edition edited by Alice Eichholz (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2004)

Genealogist Handbook for New England Research, 6th edition edited by Rhonda R. McClure (Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2022)

New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer (New York, New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2014)

Web Resources:

www.AmericanAncestors.org; www.ancestry.com; www.FamilySearch.org (and others) provide searchable transcriptions and/or digital images of the U.S. Federal Census from 1790 to 1950

www.census.gov/history/index.html- Maintained by the U.S. Census Bureau – Invaluable resource for U.S. Federal Census instructions 1790-2020, agency history, index to questions for the 1790-2020 U.S. Federal Census, population maps, and more

www.stevemorse.org/- While this resource has little for the 1790-1840 U.S. Census, it is a wonderful resource for later Censuses, including a database for enumeration districts, streets, and enumeration district maps

www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page- Helpful tool for genealogists looking for a general overview of a record or resource with links. These pages often provide suggestions for other research avenues and possible problems with a record set

