



## Making Those Early Census Records Talk

J. Mark Lowe, FUGA  
marklowe@kytnresearch.com  
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The United States Constitution required a count of the population every ten years for the purpose of determining the number of representatives to Congress and to direct taxes back to the people. Initially, the responsibility for taking the census was given to U.S. Marshals in each jurisdiction. The initial enumeration contained the head of the family, the number of free white males over 16 years of age, the number of free white males under 16, free white females, all other free persons, and slaves. The law required that each household or family be visited, recorded and that the completed list be posted in two of the most public places in the area. These population schedules are especially helpful to genealogists because of the availability, genealogical value, and data consistency.

As a rule, between 1790 and 1890 the census takers, or enumerators, gathered increasingly detailed personal information. The 1790-1840 schedules, where available, furnish the names of the free heads of family and not other family members. These schedules enumerated the family head and simply totaled the number of other family members, without name, by free or slave status. Also, the sex and age categories that the schedules first used only for free whites from 1790 through 1810 eventually applied to other persons, and the age categories increased after 1790.

The first census of manufacturers was taken in 1810. It was very incomplete, and the schedules were lost except for those bound with the population schedules. The second, taken in 1820, included the owner's name, the establishment location, the number of employees, quantity and type of machinery, capital, articles of manufacture, yearly production, and remarks about the business. The 1840 census included a notation regarding pensioners for Revolutionary or military service. Persons who were either family heads or members were included, and the pensioner's age was specified.

If you use an index to find your families, be sure to check every spelling variant and sound variant in the index. Surnames are often missed because of a different initial letter or first vowel, or maybe they are hidden by an h as the second letter, which throws the surname into an unexpected place in the index. Sometimes, the problem is the computer's sorting of names due to spacing. For example, McGee, Magee, Maghee, McGhee, and Mc Gee will be different surnames indexed, just as Smith, John (no space after the comma) will be listed after Smith, William (as a separate surname). Don't forget that a name may be misread by the indexer. A uncommon name like Manica was interpreted as Marion, and consider misspelled surnames, i.e. SIMTH, SMIHT, MSITH.

Using a prepared census form will help you record all of the data contained in the census record. Be sure to include neighbors even if you do not know if they are connected to your family. You may want to transcribe data on a single year census form and a multi-census form with only one family. Both are valuable and could assist you in your research.

Copy the data exactly as it appears in the record. If the given name is abbreviated, copy the abbreviated form. Do not expand it. If the entry is crossed through or changed, copy the entry, the cross-through line, and the changes. Note carefully the last entry on each page. Family units may be split between two pages without a repeat of the surname. If you choose to spell out the name when abbreviated, enter your spelling or other notes in brackets.

Sometimes even if the data is correctly entered, the format is misleading. For example, a head of household recorded in 1820, 1830, or 1840 may not be the oldest person in the house. It may be a grandparent, a younger brother, or a man with both parents still living at home. Persons given in any age grouping could be servants, visitors, or boarders not related to the family, but the census does not say who they are.

Utilize a Census/Birthyear Comparison Form. The comparison form will help you find discrepancies in the census reports, and help you formulate some research plans for your families.

Three possible changes can happen singly or in any combination: generations change, people move, and jurisdictions and place-names change. A new William Magee in a county could be a young man just come of age, a newcomer recently arrived, or a long-settled resident shifted into the county or town by a boundary change.

What do you do when a person is listed in nearby counties in three successive censuses and yet no deeds or other records suggest moves? Perhaps the county lines changed, and the person did not move at all. Example: Dempsey Parker was enumerated in Sumner County, Tennessee in 1820 and 1830, Smith in 1840, and Macon in 1850. In the first case, he did move, but Macon County was formed from part of Smith County.

As you look at the Comparison Form, you may see that individuals have disappeared from the date of an earlier census to a later one. Let's look at some possible ways to find them:

A daughter or son could have married. Check marriages after the latest census in which she appears. If they were under age, there just might be a consent form. Otherwise you should look at the surety bond and witnesses.

Use your census data to help you check your tax records. If you can find a taxpayer named William Magee (presumably for the sake of argument that you are looking for), is there another Magee living on land next to them? Or is there a Magee on the census record living "next door".

When the Head of the household died - did he leave a will? If so children's names and spouses might be included. If he died intestate (without a will), check the inventory and estate settlement books. Who was appointed administrator, who received the land, what about the sale and settlement of property?

When did your ancestor arrive in this county? Who came with them? When did they disappear? Good research techniques will help us evaluate the situations and plot a course of action to find more answers.

For more information, please refer to these resources.

Greenwood, Val D., *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 3rd ed. Baltimore: GPC, 2000.

Hinckley, Kathleen W., *Your Guide to the Federal Census for Genealogists, Researchers and Family Historians*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2002.

National Archives Trust Fund Board. *Federal Population Census 1790-1890: A Catalog of Microfilm Copies of the Schedules*. Washington, DC, 1979.

Szucs, Loretta D and Sandra Luebking. *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, 2nd ed., Salt Lake City: Ancestry, Inc., 1997.

[[https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php?title=The\\_Source:\\_A\\_Guidebook\\_to\\_American\\_Genealogy](https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php?title=The_Source:_A_Guidebook_to_American_Genealogy)]  
Early Federal Census Worksheet - \$ <https://goldenchannelpublishing.com/product/early-federal-census-worksheet/>

Birthyear to -> from	18 00	18 10	18 20	18 30	18 40	Notes / Names © 2006 by J. Mark Lowe, 505 Josephine St., Springfield, TN 37172 All Rights Reserved
1840						
1835					0	
1830					2	William (born c. 1834); Joseph (born c. 1832)
1825				1	1	Benn T. (born c. 1828)
1820				0	1	(This individual did not appear until 1840 census)
1815				0	0	
1810				0	0	
1804						
1802			*	1	1	William S. Greer (born c. 1800)
1800			*			
1794				0	0	
1790						
1784				0	0	
1780						
1774						
1770				0	0	
1765						
1760				0	0	
1755						
1750				0	0	
1740				0	0	
1730				0	0	
bef 1730				0		

\* An individual age 16-18 would be reported twice in this census year. Use top box for them.

William S. Greer

1830 Census

1 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

1840 Census

0 2 1 1 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

1850 Census

Greer, William S.	50	m
Rachel	42	f
Benn T.	22	m
Joseph	18	m
William	16	m
Sarah E.	14	f
Rachel L.	12	f
Mary C.	4	f