
OPERATION GRANNY FILES

Census Confidential: 1790–1950

What They Knew & When They Asked It

Reference Chart

Mission 06: Count Me In — Census Records

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

The U.S. Census evolved from a basic headcount to a full-blown interrogation. This guide lays out exactly what was asked each decade—so you can sleuth your way to the truth. Every census has different columns, different questions, and different gold buried in the margins.

Census Questions by Decade

Use this chart to know exactly what information is available for each census year before you start searching.

| Year | Who's Counted | Household Qs | Personal Details | Immigration | Occupation | Unique Questions |
|------|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|------------|---|
| 1790 | Heads of household | # free white M/F, slaves | None | None | None | Age groupings only |
| 1800 | Heads of household | # free white M/F by age | None | None | None | More detailed age brackets |
| 1810 | Heads of household | # free white M/F by age | None | None | None | Manufacturing data collected separately |
| 1820 | Heads of household | # persons by age/race | None | None | None | Counts of foreigners not naturalized |
| 1830 | Heads of household | # persons by age/sex | None | None | None | Deaf, dumb, and blind counted |
| 1840 | Heads of household | Age categories | None | None | None | Insane, idiotic, and war pensioners |
| 1850 | All individuals | Dwelling & family # | Name, age, sex, race | Place of birth | Occupation | 1st census to name everyone |
| 1860 | All individuals | Dwelling & family # | Same as 1850 | Place of birth | Occupation | Real estate/personal estate value |
| 1870 | All individuals | Dwelling & family # | Same as 1860 | Place of birth | Occupation | Parents foreign born |
| 1880 | All individuals | Relation to head | Marital status, birthplace | Parental birthplace | Occupation | Health/disabilities noted |
| 1890 | Mostly destroyed | — | — | — | — | Only fragments remain |

| | | | | | | |
|------|-----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1900 | All individuals | Home owned/rented | Birth month/year, marital | Year of immigration, citizenship | Occupation | # of children born/alive |
| 1910 | All individuals | Owned/mortgaged | Marital status, years married | Year of immigration, naturalization | Occupation | # children, military service |
| 1920 | All individuals | Owned/rented | Age, marital status | Year of immigration, naturalization | Occupation | Language spoken |
| 1930 | All individuals | Owned/rented, radio set | Age at first marriage | Year of immigration, language | Occupation & class | Veteran status, war served |
| 1940 | All individuals | Owned/rented, farm status | Highest grade, school | Residence in 1935 | Occupation, income 1939 | Supplemental 5% sample |
| 1950 | All individuals | Owned/rented | Age, marital, education | Country of birth | Occupation, weeks worked | Supplemental every 5th person |

BONUS INSIGHT

The 1900 and 1940 censuses are often cited as the richest for genealogists: 1900 gives birth month and number of children born/alive, while 1940 includes income and 1935 location—ideal for migration tracking.

GRANNY SAYS:

“Every census is a snapshot of a family at one moment in time. Line them up decade by decade, and you get a motion picture.”

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.

