

1790–1850 U. S. FEDERAL CENSUS RESEARCH

By Carolyn H. Brown

As you begin your research, one of the first public documents you will use for people born before 1940 is the United States Federal Census. The federal census has been taken every 10 years since 1790. Because of federal laws a census can not be open to public record for 72 years. The last census made public was the 1940 census, which was available to the public in 2012. For most of us, we will be researching the censuses online at such sites as <www.ancestry.com> or <www.FamilySearch.org>. However, a copy of all Federal Census Records are available for public research free of charge from any National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) office. You should locate your family on every possible census.

It is very important to use these records throughout your research on each family. From 1790 to 1840 only the head of the household is recorded, with the other individuals living at the residence listed by age group. These records don't necessarily prove that someone was the son/daughter/spouse or other relation of the head of the household, but they can help identify the number of children, and if the grandparents or older persons are in the home. From 1850 to 1940 these records identify household units by name where the family is living in one residence. If your relatives claim that an ancestor was from a foreign country and the census records list a state in the US, check it out carefully starting with the state listed. Don't forget to check the state censuses, where available.

CENSUS INDEXES

Not all names will appear in the index, and names were often recorded wrong. If you do not find the person you are looking for, search all possible spellings. One Smittkamp family shows up in a census record as Smith, because the census taker did not take the effort to find out how the name was spelled. You should be aware of some of the instructions that the census takers were given:

- Anybody could answer the census questions—a child, neighbor, or boarder.
- Whatever the family said the census taker recorded, even if it didn't make sense or sound right.
- They were to list the family as it was on the date the census was supposed to be taken, even if it wasn't taken that day. If a person had died since that date, they still were supposed to include him or her. If a person had been born since the date, they were supposed to leave him or her out.
- The official date of the census was:

1790–1820	first Monday in August
1830–1900	June 1st
1910	April 15 th
1920	January 1 st
1930–1940	April 1 st

When looking for an individual, check for the use of the middle name as the first name, as well as all forms of nicknames or initials.

When researching census records it is very helpful to have a map of the state/county for the period being researched. State and county lines often changed. You may be looking in the wrong location.

FINDING THE FATHER OF YOUNG MEN

When you find a young man as the head of the household, look for older men in the same and earlier censuses who may be related. Include these families in your analysis process. Young men with family usually did not travel alone. They more often came with their parents or siblings.

1790 US FEDERAL CENSUS

The 1790 US Federal Census lists each head of household and the individuals living at that residence at the time by age group. This census is not much good for research other than to prove that the head of the household was living in a given area at the time, and helps narrow the estimated a birth year.

1800/1810 US FEDERAL CENSUSES

The 1800 and 1810 US Federal Censuses list each head of household, and the individuals living at that residence at the time by age group. These censuses are not much good for research other than to prove that the head of the household was living in a given area at the time, and narrow the estimated date of birth. They give a more detailed breakdown of the other people in the household, and provide a little more information than the 1790 census.

1820 US FEDERAL CENSUS

The 1820 US Federal Census lists each head of household, and the individuals living at that residence at the time by age group. This census provides very limited information other than to prove that the head of the household was living in a given area at the time. It also helps narrow the estimated birth year. A column was added for naturalization information. This will tell you number of persons who were immigrants and not naturalized. If they were not naturalized, you can then start to research the naturalization records for the next 10 years and the ships passengers for the previous 10 years. Usually people were naturalized within 5–10 years of entry to the country.

1830/1840 US FEDERAL CENSUSES

Like the 1790–1820 US Federal Censuses, the 1830 and 1840 US Federal Censuses only listed the head of the household. These also list the other individuals in more detail, and show naturalization data. The 1840 census will also tells if there were pensioners in the household. If data is recorded in this column, check the Revolutionary War and War of 1812 Pension Records for pension documents.

1850 US FEDERAL CENSUS

The 1850 census is one of the most useful censuses you will work with. Starting with this census, each person in the household was listed. This can help you identify a complete family unit, placing the children with the parents at the earliest date for the census. The 1850 census indicates the state or country where each person was born, their age at the time of the census, and if they were married in the census year. Other information that gives a view of the family is their education and value of the property they owned. The paper indices for this census, in general, only list families where there are children age 10 years and younger. When using the paper indices you might need to research the entire county in question—page by page. Online databases index everyone in the census.

USING THE 1790–1840 US FEDERAL CENSUSES

Working with the early censuses can be a challenge. The more censuses you can find your family in, the more accurate individual information you can glean. These censuses can provide enough information to help you research in other records. It helps to a build census worksheet based on the individuals within the family. This worksheet can be created using the TABLE option of your wordprocessor or a spreadsheet.

CENSUS FAMILY SEARCH FORM

The CENSUS FAMILY RESEARCH form in particular will help you identify which records you have researched and what you found. It will help you organize the data you have gathered, and help prove or disprove the information you are seeking. Keep one of these forms for each family unit when doing census research. You can create them in your wordprocessor or spreadsheet.

When researching in census records, you may wish to record the people living near your research family, especially if the persons have the same last name or a last name you recognize. Many times family members lived close to each other. This is very true if a large acreage was divided between family members.

SURNAME: _____		CENSUS FAMILY RESEARCH FORM														
Full Name	Birth Date	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940

USING THE CENSUS BIRTH YEAR REFERENCE CHART

This chart helps you identify the possible birth date spans for each individual counted in the early censuses. (See page 4.)

1. Find the census year.
2. Find the person's sex and age as shown on the census records.
3. Reference corresponding birth year spread.
4. Record the information.

Make a list of each individual and their corresponding related born date information. From the information recorded, establish the earliest and latest possible dates the person could have been born. If an individual does not appear with the family in later years, they could have moved or died. Looking at the data in the worksheet, could there have been two wives recorded? Though the individuals all look like children of the couple, they may have been children of multiple wives, the wife of a son living at home, some other relationship to the family, or someone visiting and possibly not a relative.

You should be able to determine the time-span when a person (elder) died. Look for probate and deed records for that time period and ten years later.

There is enough information within these records to determine something about the parents of the older individuals. This will give you a starting point to search probate records.

If the family continues into the 1850 census or later, you can start to identify the people in the earlier censuses.

ONLINE CENSUS RECORDS AVAILABILITY

You can find census records online at:

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| Ancestry | www.ancestry.com |
| FamilySearch | www.familysearch.org |
| Fold3 | www.fold3.com |

You can also access them on microfilm at:

- National Archives & Records Administration.
- Family History Libraries and local Family History Centers.

Old genealogists never die, they just lose their census.

CENSUS BIRTH YEAR REFERENCE CHART

CENSUS YEAR	SEX	AGE ON CENSUS	BIRTH YR.
1790 - 2 Aug	Males	16 & Over	Before 1774
		Under 16	1774 - 1790
	Females	All ages	Before 1790
1800 - 4 Aug	Males & Females	Under 10	1790 - 1800
		10 - 16	1784 - 1790
		16 - 26	1774 - 1784
		26 - 45	1755 - 1774
		45 & Over	Before 1755
1810 - 6 Aug	Males & Females	Under 10	1800 - 1810
		10 - 16	1794 - 1800
		16 - 26	1784 - 1794
		26 - 45	1765-1784
		45 & Over	Before 1765
1820 - 7 Aug	Males & Females	Under 10	1810 - 1820
		10 - 16	1804 - 1810
	Males only	16 - 18	1802 - 1804
		18 - 26	1794 - 1802
	Females only	16 - 26	1794 - 1804
	Males & Females	26 - 45	1775 - 1794
		45 & Over	Before 1775

CENSUS YEAR	SEX	AGE ON CENSUS	BIRTH YR.
1830 - 1 Jun	Males & Females	Under 5	1825 - 1830
		5 - 10	1820 - 1825
		10 - 15	1815 - 1820
		15 - 20	1810 - 1815
		20 - 30	1800 - 1810
		30 - 40	1790 - 1800
		40 - 50	1780 - 1790
		50 - 60	1770 - 1780
		60 - 70	1760 - 1770
		70 - 80	1750 - 1760
		80 - 90	1740 - 1750
		90 - 100	1730 - 1740
		100 & Over	Before 1730
1840 - 1 Jun	Males & Females	Under 5	1835 - 1840
		5 - 10	1830 - 1835
		10 - 15	1825 - 1830
		15 - 20	1820 - 1825
		20 - 30	1810 - 1820
		30 - 40	1800 - 1810
		40 - 50	1790 - 1800
		50 - 60	1780 - 1790
		60 - 70	1770 - 1780
		70 - 80	1760 - 1770
		80 - 90	1750 - 1760
		90 - 100	1740 - 1750
		100 & Over	Before 1740

How to use the Census Birth Year Reference Chart

- 1) Find the census year.
- 2) Find the person's sex & age as shown in the census record.
- 3) Reference corresponding birth year spread.

FHR 12-01

Happy hunting!

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1790-1850 US FEDERAL CENSUS WORKSHEET

BASED ON A SAMPLE FAMILY OF CHARLES AND ELIZABETH BROWN:

CENSUS SEX/NAME	1790 AUGUST	1800 AUGUST	1810 AUGUST	1820 AUGUST	1830 JUNE	1840 JUNE	1850 JUNE	COMMENTS
M CHARLES BROWN		26-45	OVER 45	OVER 45	60-70			BORN BETWEEN AUG 1760 - AUG 1765 DIED BET 1830 - 1840 PROBABLY BORN ENGLAND
M		10-16						BORN BETWEEN AUG 1784 - AUG 1790 MOVED OR DIED
M		10-16	16-26					BORN BETWEEN AUG 1784 - AUG 1790 MOVED OR DIED
M		UNDER 10						BORN BETWEEN AUG 1790 - AUG 1800 MOVED OR DIED
M		UNDER 10	10-16					BORN BETWEEN AUG 1794 - AUG 1800 MOVED OR DIED
M			UNDER 10	10-16				BORN BETWEEN AUG 1804 - AUG 1810 MOVED OR DIED
M JOHN BROWN - 1850			UNDER 10	10-16	20-30	30-40	45	JOHN BROWN - 1850 BORN 1805 - VIRGINIA
F ELIZABETH BROWN -1840		26-45	26-45	OVER 45	50-60	60-70	76	LIZZIE BROWN - 1850 BORN 1774 - ENGLAND
F		UNDER 10	10-16					BORN BETWEEN AUG 1794 - AUG 1800
F SUSAN BROWN - 1850			UNDER 10	10-16	20-30	30-40	42	SUSAN BROWN -1850 BORN 1808 - VIRGINIA
SLAVES		2	2	2	2	1		
FOREIGN NOT NAT.				2				

ANALYZING THE DATA

FATHER--Charles Brown born between Jun 1760 & Aug 1765

1800 – 26-45 born between Aug 1755–Aug 1774

1810 – 45+ born before Aug 1765

1820 – 45+ born before Aug 1775

1830 – 60–70 born Jun 1760–Jun 1770; probably in England

Mother--Elizabeth (Lizzie) Brown born between 1765 & 1775. Actually born in 1774

1800 – 26-45 born between Aug 1755–Aug 1774

1810 – 26-45 born between Aug 1765–Aug 1784

1820 – 45+ born before Aug 1775

1830 – 50–60 born between Jun 1770–Jun1780
1840 – 60–70 born between Jun 1770–Jun1780 Elizabeth Brown (head)
1850 – age 76 born 1774 in England Lizzie Brown

Male – born between Aug 1784–Aug 1790
1800 – 10–16 born between Aug 1784–Aug 1790 (moved or died)

Male – born between Aug 1784–Aug 1790
1800 – 10–16 born between Aug 1784–Aug 1790
1810 – 16–26 born between Aug 1784–Aug 1794 (moved or died)

Male – born between Aug 1790–Aug 1800
1800 – 0–9 born between Aug 1790–Aug 1800 (moved or died)

Male – born between Aug 1794–Aug 1800
1800 – 0–9 born between Aug 1790–Aug 1800
1810 – 10–6 born between Aug 1794–Aug 1800 (moved or died)

Male – born between Aug 1800–Aug 1810
1810 – 0–9 born between Aug 1800–Aug 1810
1820 – 10–16 born between Aug 1804–Aug 1810 (moved or died)

Male – John Brown born between 1804 & 1810. Actually born in 1805.
1810 – 0–10 born between Aug 1800–Aug 1810
1820 – 10–16 born between Aug 1804–Aug 1810
1830 – 20–30 born between Jun 1800–Jun 1810
1840 – 30–40 born between Jun 1800–Jun 1810
1850 – age 45 born 1805, Virginia John Brown

Female – born between Aug 1794– Aug 1800
1800 – 0–0 born between Aug 1790–Aug 1800
1810 – 10–6 born between Aug 1794–Aug 1800 (moved or died)

Female – Susan Brown born between 1804 & 1810. Actually born in 1808.
1810 – 0–10 born between Aug 1800–Aug 1810
1820 – 10–16 born between Aug 1804–Aug 1810
1830 – 20–30 born between Jun 1800–Jun 1810
1840 – 30–40 born between Jun 1800–Jun 1810
1850 – age 42 born in 1808 in Virginia Susan Brown

In this example family there is certain information that would be helpful in furthering your research.

1. Did the husband have two wives? Look for an obituary of a woman named Brown, and her will or other documents between 1800–1810 in the US.
2. The husband probably came from the same country Elizabeth did. If you can determine the shire in England, look for birth and marriage records for Charles and his first wife, and Charles and Elizabeth. Also death of first wife.
3. Look for Charles and Elizabeth Brown in ships passenger lists before 1800.
4. Look for Brown land records after 1800.
5. Look for marriage, land records, and obituary for anyone by the last name Brown in that county.
6. Look for any court records during the life of Charles & Elizabeth Brown.
7. Look for a marriage record for John and Susan Brown. Was Susan his sister or wife?
8. Study tax records for the county of interest for any Browns. They may show transfer of land to wife or children, but the change was never recorded as a deed.

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