

The release of a US census is akin to the coming of a great genealogical comet: A new one comes only once every 10 years. Family historians anxiously await its arrival. When it finally appears, it can be exhilarating.

As of 1 April 2022, one such comet has come: the 1950 census. Blazing across computer screens everywhere is a brilliant stream of genealogical data. And in its wake, you'll find names, ages, places, family relationships, occupations and more for over 150 million people.

As the census shoots into your genealogical orbit, you'll want to be ready. You won't need a telescope or a star chart—just internet access and a little knowledge of your US relatives in 1950.

THE WORLD OF 1950

Much like the tail of a comet carries clues to the cosmos' origins, the 1950 census reveals a unique time period (just not quite as long ago).

The world of 1950 looked dramatically different than it did during the prior census. In 1940, effects of the Great Depression lingered. Then World War II pushed millions of men and women into military service, new jobs, or even into the workforce for the first time.

After the conflict ended, veterans returned to civilian jobs in a robust economy. Corporations and white-collar jobs expanded. New technologies and materials led to new products and lifestyles for a growing middle class. Demand for new houses and automobiles skyrocketed. Suburbs bloomed, and families grew in the "Baby Boom."

Prosperity didn't knock on every door, though. Blue-collar occupations declined. Prejudicial policies limited work and housing options for nonwhite workers and their families. After the war, many women who wanted to remain in the workforce lost their jobs or were forced into more menial work. Big agricultural companies supplanted many of the family farms that managed to survive the Depression. Such was the changing scene when the 1950 census captured a snapshot of your family's life.

RECORDING THE CENSUS

Between 1940 and 1950, the nation grew by 19 million people, or 14.5% (double the growth rate of the 1930s). Those living in non-US overseas territories were newly enumerated, such as

members of the armed forces, ship crews and US government employees and their families.

To prepare for such an enormous enumeration, about 140,000 workers completed rigorous training. They received maps of their districts and pages of detailed instructions.

Data collection started on 1 April 1950, and was 90% complete within a month. To accurately count people who didn't stay put, census takers visited YMCAs, hotels, trailer camps and other transient accommodations on specific nights. Extra paperwork, such as infant cards and individual census report forms, help ensured everyone was documented.

After the enumeration, newspapers published "missed person" forms that anyone who wasn't enumerated could send in. District offices reported preliminary population counts so miscounts could be caught and corrected. Thousands of households were resampled, surveyed or reinterviewed as a quality measure. All this effort led to a more accurate, complete census than ever.

1950 CENSUS QUESTIONS: COLUMN BY COLUMN

Let's take a look at what was asked in the census. As you'll see, some questions were only asked of randomly selected respondents, and a person's response to one question may determine if they were asked another.

See the worksheet on pages 18 and 19 for extraction forms that allow you to record key details from the population schedule; find a digital version at www.familytreemagazine.com/freebie/1950-census-worksheet.





AT A GLANCE: The 1950 Census Form

1 This section notes the state, county, incorporated place or township, and ED number, along with any institutional or transient housing details.

2 The housing questionnaire on the reverse side of this form was never microfilmed and was eventually destroyed.

3 Look here for the date this sheet began to be completed, and by whom. Some data (such as age and work activity the week prior) is linked to the date of enumeration rather than the official census date.

4 This row distinguishes what was asked of just the head of household, as opposed to all persons or those only age 14 and up.

5 People enumerated in certain rows also answered sample questions at the bottom of the page.

6 If you can't read what's written in the "Leave Blank" columns, look up the meaning of the codes at www.stevemorse.org/census/codes.html.

7 One sampled person on each page answered extra questions, which appear on the row on the lower right side.

1950

1 STATE _____

2 COUNTY _____

3 INCORPORATED PLACE OR TOWNSHIP _____

4 U. S. D. NUMBER _____

CONFIDENTIAL

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

FORM P1
1950 CENSUS OF POPULATION AND HOUSING

FOR HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD

FOR ALL PERSONS

4

6

5

HOUSEHOLD CONTINUED ON NEXT SHEET

THE QUESTIONS BELOW ARE FOR PERSONS LISTED ON SAMPLE LINE

FOR ALL AGES

21 22 23 24a 24b D 25 E 26 27 28 29 30 31 32

7

30

Top: Field supervisors visit the Census Bureau headquarters in Maryland

Below: A blank 1950 population questionnaire



HOUSEHOLD INFORMATION

The population schedule requested detailed information about every person who lived in a household. The first several questions were answered only by the head of household, typically the father or husband, unless the family recognized someone different in that role:

1. Street name
2. House number (and apartment number, if applicable)
3. Count of dwelling in the order visited
4. Whether the house was on a farm or ranch
5. Whether property was on piece of land that was three acres or larger if not a farm or ranch
6. Agricultural schedule number (cross-reference for those who answered yes to questions 4 or 5)

DETAILS ABOUT INDIVIDUALS

The next several columns were answered by everyone who normally slept in that household, with a few exceptions. Members were to be listed in a specific order: first, the head of household; then his wife, unmarried children in order of age, married children and their families, and other relatives; then other persons.

7. Name, with last name first
8. Relationship to head of household (e.g., wife, son, patient, tenant)
9. Race: *W* for white, *Neg* for Black/Negro, *Ind* for American Indian, *Jap* for Japanese, *Chi* for Chinese, *Fil* for Filipino; other responses were to be spelled out
10. Sex, male (*M*) or female (*F*)
11. Age at last birthday as of censustaker's visit; birth month for children less than 1 year old
12. Marital status: *Mar* for married, *Wd* for widowed, *D* for divorced, *Sep* for separated, and *Nev* for never married
13. Birthplace (state/territory, foreign country, etc.)

U.S. Census Bureau Form C-911-A—April, 1910—Population Schedule

DATE SHEET STARTED _____ SHEET NUMBER _____

3. HOUSEHOLD NUMBER _____

2. HOUSE NUMBER _____

1. STREET NAME _____

FOR PERSONS 14 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER

1. Life schedule (C, F, or I) as in Verbal Instructions 17, 6, and 10 or Schedule Instructions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100

What kind of work was he doing?	What kind of business or industry was he working in?	Class of worker
For example: This hotel on corner Country store Fruit Dry goods	For example: Manufactory Store Farm	The FARMER (F) The DOMESTIC (D) The OWNED (O) The HIREN (H) The MANAGER (M)

21b. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21c. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21d. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21e. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21f. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21g. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21h. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21i. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21j. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21k. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21l. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21m. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21n. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21o. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21p. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21q. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21r. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21s. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21t. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21u. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21v. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21w. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21x. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21y. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

21z. Last year, how much money did he receive from interest, dividends, annuities, pensions, or other income (aside from earnings)?

22. What kind of work did this person do in his last job?

23. What kind of business or industry did he work in?

24. Class of worker (F, O, O, or NP, as in Item 20)

25. If Mar—How many years since this person was married? If Wd—How many years since this person was widowed? If Div—How many years since this person was divorced? If Sep—How many years since this person was separated?—years, or Less than 1 year

26. How many children has she ever borne, not counting stillbirths?—children, or None

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES

14. Naturalization status if foreign-born: *Yes* if naturalization finalized or *No* if it hadn't; *AP* for someone born abroad to American parents

EMPLOYMENT QUESTIONS

Those age 14 and older responded to additional queries about their employment, with the line-up of questions depending on their response to question 15:

15. Work activity for the week prior: *Wk* for paid or unpaid work, *H* for keeping their own house, *U* for unable to work, *Inmate* for residents of institutions, *Ot* for other (including students and the temporarily disabled)

16. If any other work if answered question 15 with *H* or *Ot*; a *Yes* meant they worked at least one hour of qualifying work the week before

17. If looking for work if answered question 16 with *No*

18. If has a job or own business if answered question 17 with *No*; a *Yes* would imply the

person had a job but didn't work "last week" because of illness, vacation, labor disputes, etc.

19. Number of hours worked the previous week

20a. Job title or description for current position

20b. Kind of business or industry in which currently or recently employed

20c. Class of worker: *P* for private employers, *G* for government workers, *O* for self-employed, *NP* for working without pay for a household farm or business

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS

Every fifth person on the population schedule answered additional "sample" questions at the bottom of the page about their past year's residence, parents' origin, and education. Respondents were selected by line number, though *which* numbers indicating sample responses varied by form. The questions themselves were the same:

21. If living in the same house one year ago

22. If No to question 21, if living on a farm one year ago

23. If No to question 21, if living in the same county one year ago

24. If No to question 23, what county (a) or state/foreign country (b) living one year ago

25. Birthplace(s) of father and mother

26. Highest grade/level of school

27. Whether finished highest grade level

28. If attended school since February 1

Sample respondents over the age of 14 were also asked about weeks worked and income:

29. How many weeks spent looking for work, if any (indicated by question 17)

30. How many weeks worked outside of home in last year

31. Income in last year from (a) wages or salary, i.e., income from an employer; (b) own

A worker monitors an electronic statistical machine, used to tabulate 1950 census results

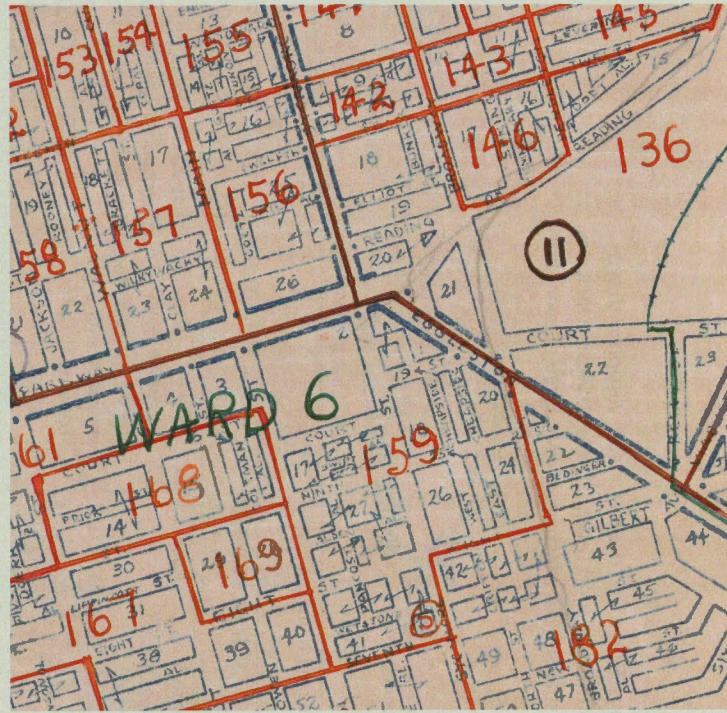


QUICK LOOK: Enumeration Districts

Enumeration districts (EDs) are the geographical units created to administer censuses, and knowing which included your ancestor's home is crucial for browsing census images. According to the National Archives, the country was divided into some 180,000 EDs for the 1950 census, and census images are organized by state and ED number.

ED maps indicate how an area was carved up. (They're useful as records in their own right, too!) Boundaries between EDs were typically visible features (rivers, roads, etc.) or political boundary lines (county borders, state lines, etc.). Officials assigned EDs such that one enumerator could canvass all the residences in that ED in one census period. As a result, more populated areas (read: places with more residences) had more EDs than less populated areas.

Note that ED numbers are not unique and were repeated from state to state, so it's critical to know which state you're referencing. For example, Ohio's ED 1-14 covers some of the city of Lima, while California's ED 1-14 is part of the city of Hayward in San Francisco Bay. The first number indicates county and was assigned alphabetically by county name.



A 1950 enumeration district map for Hamilton County, Ohio. Courtesy the National Archives

business or practice; (c) non-earning sources such as investments and pensions

32. Income in last year for whole household if respondent is the head of household

33. Military service if respondent is male, with separate columns for World War II (a), World War I (b) and "any other time" (c)

On each page, one of those sample respondents was asked additional questions if age 14 or older. Question 34 assessed whether those who worked outside the home in the past year (question 30) also responded to questions 20a

tip

Though only one in five people answered them, questions 21 through 33 asked for information (parents' birthplace, residence in past year, etc.) that may apply to more than just the respondent. If your direct-line ancestor wasn't part of the sample that answered these questions, don't forget to check for relatives who may have.

through 20c about type of work. If they didn't, they were asked to fill in that information about their most recent job in 35a through 35c.

Otherwise, respondents skipped to the remaining questions:

36. If married more than once, if married at all

37. Years since most recent marital status change

38. Number of children borne, not counting stillbirths, if respondent is female and has been married

LOST RESPONSES

A detailed housing survey appeared on the reverse side of every population schedule. Unfortunately, it wasn't microfilmed, and eventually the original census forms were destroyed. These and the agricultural schedules exist now only as compiled statistics. Infant cards and individual census report forms (also part of the wider 1950 census) are no longer available, either.



EXPLORING THE CENSUS

Anxious to find your relatives on the population schedule? Then it's time to talk about how you'll navigate to their entries.

SEARCHING CENSUS INDEXES

When the 1940 census first launched, it wasn't name searchable; images were browse-only. That meant genealogists had to a) guess where their relatives lived; b) identify the appropriate census enumeration district (ED); and then c) browse the ED until they found their families.

Until the end of 2020, that's what was anticipated for 1950, too. Then the National Archives announced that a new, dedicated website for the 1950 census <www.archives.gov/research/census/1950> would have a name search tool powered by artificial intelligence. The tool creates a searchable name database by automatically "reading" and transcribing handwritten names.

Of course, as everyone starts searching the census, they'll find transcription mistakes and areas that weren't legible to the computer. The National Archives is encouraging users to submit corrections and updates to its database, and will provide a way for doing so. Over time, this community collaboration will improve the name search function.

At time of writing, it's not clear how powerful the National Archives' name-search tool will be. Will it, for example, recognize "Betsy" as an equivalent to "Elizabeth"? Can you look for one first name under multiple surnames? Regardless, you'll likely need to try several spelling variations for names and places.

Of course, the 1950 census will also become available on major genealogy websites. During the 1940 census release, each site had its own methodology for creating an index, and completed it at different times. Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/c/1950-census> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com/census/us/1950census> each announced they'd have the 1950 record set, with indexes to follow. Users of the free FamilySe-



Sunny Morton coauthored this article on how to use the census to find even more records <www.familytreemagazine.com/records/census/ancestors-clues-census-records>.

arch <www.familysearch.org/1950census> will be encouraged to help index the census at that site.

BROWSING IMAGES

If you're striking out using these early, mostly AI-generated indexes (or the indexes don't yet include your ancestor), you might have to "manually" locate your ancestor's entry. Unlike in the days of yore, though, you won't have to pore over reel after reel of microfilm. You can find your ancestor's census page online in just three steps:

1. Determine where your family lived in 1950, to the best of your ability. You might start with their address in the 1940 census, or you can try city directories from that time period as well as WWII draft registration cards. For more ideas, turn to my 1940s research guide in the March/April 2022 issue of *Family Tree Magazine* <www.familytreemagazine.com/research/1940s-family-research>.

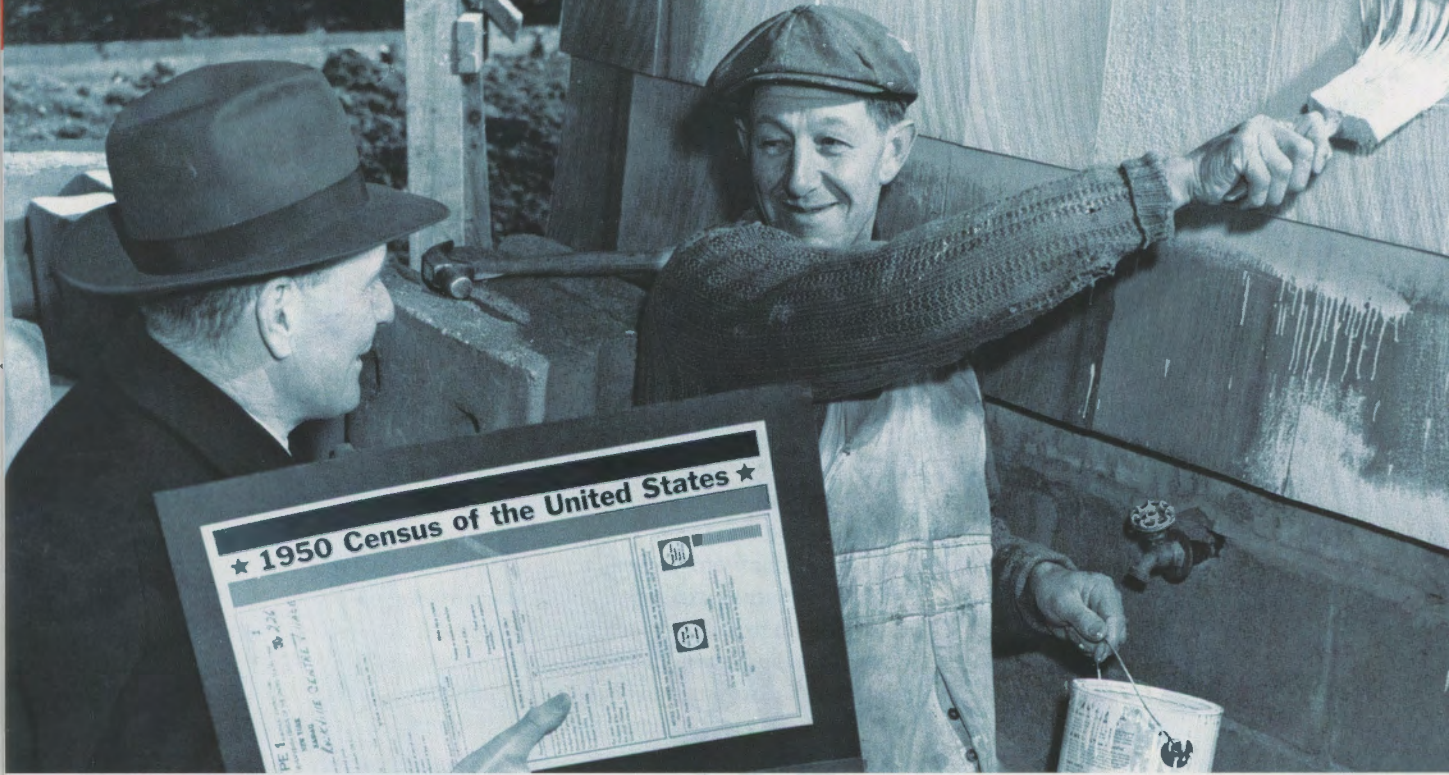
2. Find the enumeration district number. Steve Morse has a free Unified Census ED Finder tool <www.stevemorse.org/census/unified.html> that allows you to select a state, county, and city, then enter a house number and street name. The tool generates a few different options for EDs for that location; read descriptions to determine the correct one, and consult contemporary maps as needed. The tool has settings for several US censuses, but 1950 is the default as of writing.

3. Navigate to that ED's census images, then page back and forth. Follow instructions for the site you're using for how to browse record images; these should be organized by state, then county, then ED. At some point, EDs in Morse's tool will link directly to the relevant images on the National Archives' site. Once you find your relatives, update the transcription in your ancestor's index entry to make the page easier to find via search.

You can read a step-by-step of browsing census records at <www.familytreemagazine.com/records/census/browse-census-records>.

CHARTING YOUR ANCES-STARS

When searching the 1950 census for the "stars" on your family tree, be sure to bookmark the census enumerator instruction manual <www.census.gov/history/pdf/1950instructions.pdf>.



An enumerator interviews a man as part of the 1950 census

This document defines and clarifies how each question should have been answered.

Even if you think you understand your relatives' entries, you might pick up some important nuances by studying the manual. Small but important rules include:

- People with common-law marriages were considered married.
- In a sign of the racially divisive times, members of each household were assumed to be of the same race unless indicated otherwise. Persons who had both white and nonwhite parents (still illegal in many states and socially taboo in much of the country) were to be listed alongside the race of their nonwhite parent. In addition, "mixtures of nonwhite races" were to be categorized by the race of the father.
- "Ireland" and "Northern Ireland" were to be treated as separate birthplaces.
- Respondents were supposed to report gross pay, rather than net ("take-home") pay. Enumerators were instructed to help respondents calculate gross pay if all they knew was take-home.
- Enumerator instructions give no guidance on whether to count the children of women who weren't married. The form explicitly states that select females who were married were to be asked about the number of children they'd borne.

You can also use guides to help you understand the codes in the lettered columns marked

Learn about all 17 publicly available US censuses with our decade-by-decade guides <www.familytreemagazine.com/census-records>.

"Leave Blank." Labeled A through H between the numbered columns, these sections were filled after the census was taken to clarify entries in other columns. For example, column C included three codes for eligible respondents: occupation, industry and code. Steve Morse has a page for deciphering these and the other columns' codes <www.stevemorse.org/census/codes.html>.

A final tip: You may be so anxious to make discoveries in the 1950 census that you rush through it. But, unlike those comets in the sky, *the census isn't going anywhere*. If anything, over time, the data will only shine more brightly as it becomes more searchable and familiar.

For ongoing tips, follow the "1950 US Census for Genealogists" Facebook group <www.facebook.com/groups/634847774579022> and the *Family Tree Magazine* page <www.familytreemagazine.com/1950-census> and social media feeds (see page 4). Most importantly, keep exploring the 1950 census yourself. ●

Sunny Jane Morton is a Contributing Editor for *Family Tree Magazine* whose calendar is cleared for April 1 to look for her grandparents and other relatives in the 1950 census.