

The 1890 US Census

The 1890 census changed considerably from the previous year. Most importantly, it was filled out by the head of household **in their own hand - with their own interpretation of the answers**. The primary purpose of the census was to gain demographic information to apportion political districts. But to do that, they needed more information.

Here's what was added:

1. The address of the individual
2. If a person was a soldier, sailor, or a marine during the Civil War
3. If they were Union or Confederate
4. If they were a widow of a veteran
5. If a mother, the number of children she had and how many were living
6. If foreign born, the individual was asked how many years they had been in the United States and if they were naturalized or in the process of being naturalized
7. What language they speak
8. Number of months employed
9. If the home is rented or owned (and mortgaged)
10. Individuals in Army forts, US vessels, Navy Yards, & prisons.

And it was unique for another reason. **It was the first census that didn't have copies retained at the state level.**

Of the decennial population census schedules, perhaps none might have been more critical to studies of immigration, industrialization, westward migration, and characteristics of the general population than the Eleventh Census of the United States, taken in June 1890. ¹

What happened?

The records burned! ... Fires have destroyed many records ... Over 99 percent of the 1890 Census records were destroyed in a 1921 fire!!!!²

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1996/spring/1890-census-1.html>

² The Lawton Daily Constitution

**Census Data of 120 Years
Ruined by Fire and Water**
Irreplaceable Records Stored in Basement of
Commerce Building Destroyed—Two
Firemen Overcome by Fumes.

The 1890 census is gone. Long gone.

**Almost all of the records were lost in a fire in 1921
- findmypast.com**

Let's take a look at what really happened

The population schedules were damaged in a fire in the basement of the Commerce Building in Washington, D.C. in 1921. Although we assume that most records were destroyed, **actual damage may have been closer to 15–25%**.³

There's more to the story, which we'll talk about in the lecture.

What was destroyed?

Despite repeated ongoing requests by the secretary of commerce and others for an archives building where all census schedules could be safely stored, by January 10, 1921, the schedules could be found piled in an orderly manner on closely placed pine shelves in an unlocked file room in the basement of the Commerce Building.

At about five o'clock on that afternoon, building fireman James Foster noticed smoke coming through openings around pipes that ran from the boiler room into the file room. Foster saw no fire but immediately reported the smoke to the desk watchman, who called the fire department. Minutes later, on the fifth floor, a watchman noticed smoke in the men's bathroom, took the elevator to the basement, was forced back by the dense smoke, and went to the watchman's desk. By then, the fire department had arrived, the house alarm was pulled (reportedly at 5:30), and a dozen employees still working on upper floors evacuated. A total of three alarms and a general local call were turned in.⁴

After some setbacks from the intense smoke, firemen gained access to the basement. While a crowd of ten thousand watched, they poured twenty streams of water into the building and flooded the cellar through holes cut into the concrete floor.⁵ The fire did not go above the basement, seemingly thanks to a fireproofed floor. By 9:45 p.m. the fire was extinguished, but firemen poured water into the burned area past 10:30 p.m. Disaster planning and recovery were almost unknown in 1921. With the blaze extinguished, despite the obvious damage and

³ <https://www.acgsi.org/genweb/census/1890-census-in-allen-county-indiana.html>

⁴ General Correspondence 68636/3, Office of the Secretary, RG 40, NA; *Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 1921; *Washington Herald*, Jan. 11, 1921.

⁵ https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2021/january_2021.html

need for immediate salvage efforts, the chief clerk opened windows to let out the smoke, and except for watchmen on patrol, everyone went home.⁶

The morning after was an archivist's nightmare, with ankle-deep water covering records in many areas. Although the basement vault was considered fireproof and watertight, water seeped through a broken wired-glass panel in the door and under the floor, damaging some earlier and later census schedules on the lower tiers. The 1890 census, however, was stacked outside the vault and was, according to one source, "first in the path of the firemen."⁷

Speculation and rumors about the cause of the blaze ran rampant. Some newspapers claimed, and many suspected, it was caused by a cigarette or a lighted match. Employees were keenly questioned about their smoking habits. Others believed the fire started among shavings in the carpenter shop or was the result of spontaneous combustion. (*Note the fireproof concrete floor mentioned above.*) At least one woman from Ohio felt certain the fire was part of a conspiracy to defraud her family of their rightful estate by destroying every vestige of evidence proving heirship.⁸ Most seemed to agree that the fire could not have been burning long and had made quick and intense headway; shavings and debris in the carpenter shop, wooden shelving, and the paper records would have made for a fierce blaze.

In the end, even experts from the Bureau of Standards brought in to investigate the blaze could not determine the cause.⁹

When officials finally tallied the damage, they found about a quarter of the [1890 census](#) records are totally and utterly destroyed. Another 40% to 50% had some smoke and water damage, with ink running and pages sticking together. The remaining volumes, as much as **approximately 37% of the collection, is completely unharmed.**

However, anxious census officials had to wait several days for insurance inspectors to do their jobs before they could access the scene of the fire. It is the end of January before the damaged items are removed to another location.¹⁰¹¹

Over the next few months, rumors spread that salvage attempts would not be made and that Census Director Sam Rogers had recommended that Congress authorize destruction of the 1890 census. Prominent historians, attorneys, and genealogical organizations wrote to new

⁶ *Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 1921; *Washington Star*, Jan. 11, 1921;

⁷ *Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 1921; *Washington Star*, Jan. 11, 1921; *Washington Herald*, Jan. 11, 1921; J. W. Alexander, Secretary of Commerce, to Harry Wardman, Jan. 22, 1921, General Correspondence 68636/3, Office of the Secretary, RG 40, NA; *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 1921, quoted in O'Mahony, "Lost But Not Forgotten," p. 335.

⁸ Mrs. J. C. Drysdale noted that there had been fires in the three most critical sources of her heirship evidence: in the Census Bureau, in the Capitol at Virginia, and at the Old City Hall in Columbus, OH. "Another fact that makes these three fires appear as the work of an incendiary is the fact that they were almost simultaneous, just enough time between for one man to travel from Va. to Washington, and from there to Columbus, and then to Cleveland to get his reward." Mrs. J. C. Drysdale to T. G. Fitzgerald, Mar. 31, 1921, General Correspondence 68636/3, Office of the Secretary, RG 40, NA

⁹ *Washington Star*, Jan. 24, 1921

¹⁰ <https://raogk.org/census-records/1890-fire/>

¹¹ Robert L. Dorman, The Creation and Destruction of the 1890 Federal Census. *The American Archivist* Vol. 71, No. 2 (Fall - Winter, 2008), pp. 350-383

Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, the Librarian of Congress, and other government officials in protest. The National Genealogical Society (NGS)¹² and Daughters of the American Revolution formally [petitioned](#) Hoover and Congress, and the editor of the *NGS Quarterly* warned that a nationwide movement would begin among state societies and the press if Congress seriously considered destruction. The content of replies to the groups was invariably the same; denial of any planned destruction and calls for Congress to provide for an archives building.¹³

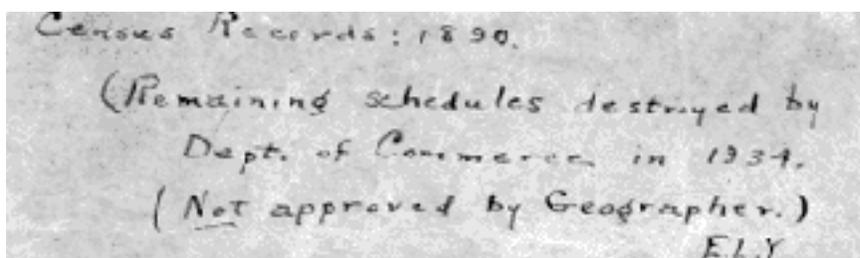
A "report given by G.M. Brumbaugh, editor of the *NGS Quarterly* ... estimated there were 41,000 enumeration district records surviving from the census. (they) suggested that a **significant amount of the 1890 census remained unscathed or was damaged but salvageable.**"¹⁴

Were the remaining 1890 census records intentionally destroyed?

On February 16, 1889, Congress had passed an "Act to authorize and provide for the disposition of useless papers in the Executive Department".

The remnants of the 1890 census were among the last records disposed of under this act.¹⁵

The fate of the 1890 schedules between 1922 and 1932 is a bit murky. However, in December 1932, in accordance with federal records procedures at the time, the Chief Clerk of the Bureau of Census sent the Librarian of Congress a list of papers no longer necessary for current business and scheduled for destruction. He asked the Librarian to report back to him any documents that should be retained for their historical interest. Item 22 on the list for Bureau of the Census read "Schedules, Population . . . 1890, Original." **The Librarian identified no records as permanent, the list was sent forward, and Congress authorized destruction on February 21, 1933.**¹⁶



**Records finally destroyed
1934
NOT approved by
geographer.**

¹² An article in the *NGS Quarterly* estimated the number of remnants at "41,00 enumeration district records (volumes) surviving," *NGS Quarterly* 9, no 4 (January 1921): 53-54.

¹³ Resolution, Apr. 22, 1921, signed by Emma L. Strider, Register General of the Daughters of the American Revolution, et al., folder "Census of 1890," box 9, Alphabetical Subject File, entry 160, RG 29, NA.

¹⁴ Dr. G.M. Brumbaugh, "Save the Population Census of 1890" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, Vol IX (January 1921) : 53-54, <https://babel.hathitrust.org>, accessed December 2020.

¹⁵ Dorman, Robert L. "The Creation and Destruction of the 1890 Federal Census." *The American Archivist* 71, no. 2 (2008): 350-83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294522>.

¹⁶ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1996/spring/1890-census-1.html>

What else was destroyed?

Luckily, a fireproof vault in the basement survived the fire and firefighters' assault on the flames. Although water breached the vault door, most of the 1830, 1840, 1880, 1900, and 1910 Census records contained inside remained undamaged. Of the 8,919 volumes in the vault that sustained damage, **7,957 were from the 1910 Census.**^{17, 18}

In March 1896, before final publication of all general statistics volumes, the original 1890 special schedules for mortality, crime, pauperism and benevolence, special classes (*e.g.*, deaf, dumb, blind, insane), and portions of the transportation and insurance schedules were badly damaged by fire and **destroyed by Department of the Interior order.**¹⁹

What survived?

In 1942 the National Archives accessioned a damaged bundle of surviving Illinois schedules as part of a shipment of records found during a Census Bureau move. At the time, they were believed to be the only surviving fragments. In 1953, however, the Archives accessioned an additional set of fragments. These sets of extant fragments are from Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas, and the District of Columbia.²⁰ **Only 6,100 names survived.**

These fragments are available on [Family Search](#) and [Ancestry](#).

Alabama Perryville Beat No.11 (Perry County) and Severe Beat No.8 (Perry County)	612 pages NO damage
District of Columbia District 0 ²¹	491 pages NO damage
Georgia Columbus (Muscogee County)	10 pages obliterated
Illinois Mound Township (McDonough County)	316 pages fire damaged
Minnesota Rockford (Wright County)	One page torn and sooty
New Jersey Jersey City (Hudson County)	5 pages, intact & sooty
New York Brookhaven Township (Suffolk County) and Eastchester (Westchester County)	1 page each, intact & sooty
North Carolina South Point and River Bend Townships (Gaston County), Township No. 2 (Cleveland County)	142 pages total, intact & sooty
Ohio Cincinnati (Hamilton County) and Wayne Township	7 pages obliterated

¹⁷ https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2021/january_2021.html

¹⁸ Rogers reported the following "number of bound volumes and of portfolios of census schedules which were damaged by water in the vault in the basement of the Commerce Building during the fire of January 10": census volumes from the 1830 census (6 states, 53 volumes), 1840 census (7 states, 65 volumes), 1880 census (20 states, 211 volumes), 1900 census (17 states and the Indian Territory, 633 volumes), and 1910 census (48 states and the District of Columbia, 7,957 volumes). Sam L. Rogers to the Secretary of Commerce, Jan. 11, 1921, General Correspondence 68636/3, Office of the Secretary, RG 40, NA; *Washington Herald*, Jan. 11, 1921.

¹⁹ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1996/spring/1890-census-1.html>

²⁰ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1996/spring/1890-census-1.html>

²¹ Interestingly, Perryville, Alabama, and Washington D.C census records survived intact with no apparent damage. It's possible that these records had been taken offsite before the fire.

(Clinton County)

South Dakota Jefferson Township (Union County)

1 page intact but sooty

Texas J.P. No. 6, Mountain Peak, Ovilla Precinct (Ellis County)

117 burnt at all edges

Precinct No. 5 (Hood County) No. 6 and J.P. No. 7 (Rusk County)

Trinity Town and Precinct No. 2 (Trinity County) Kaufman (Kaufman County)²²

Want to take a walking tour of some houses from the 1890 surviving fragments? Check out "[Walking the 1890 Census in Washington DC](#)" by Lisa Buckner of Roam Your Roots. She shows the information given on the census, a short biography of the families that lived there, and what the house looks like.

Ancestry has an easy way to search the remaining census fragments:

[1890 United States Federal Census Fragment - Ancestry](#)

[United States Census, 1890 – Family search](#)

Alaska Logbook of Frank Lowell, Special Agent, Alaska District No. 2, 1890 Census

<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/202288465>

Congress authorized the employment of special agents to take a census of Alaska. This item is the logbook of Frank Lowell, Special Agent for enumerating Alaska District No. 2 during the 1890 census. These "include some or all of the following information: name of each family member; age of each person if known; tribe and clan; marital status of head of household; number of children born to the mother and how many were still living; and occupation of head of household. It indicates if a family member could read or write or speak English. Chronic diseases suffered by the head of household or another specified family member are listed."²³

The Special Enumeration of Union Veterans and Widows - Schedule 2

Most of the schedules for states alphabetically from Alabama through Kansas were lost, but there are some in existence for California (Alcatraz), Connecticut (Fort Trumbull, Hartford County Hospital, and U.S. Naval Station), Delaware (Delaware State Hospital for the Insane), Florida (Fort Barrancas and St. Francis Barracks), Idaho (Boise Barracks and Fort Sherman), Illinois (Cook County and Henderson County), Indiana (Warrick County and White County), and Kansas (Barton County). About half of Kentucky is missing, but the rest of the states alphabetically through Wyoming survived.²⁴

Special census of Civil War Union veterans and widows of veterans. Although this schedule was to be used to enumerate Union veterans, Confederate veterans were listed as well in some areas.

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8667/>

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1877095>

²² https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Census_1890

²³ National Archives <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/202288465>

²⁴ <https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2018/04/13/that-dratted-census-fire/>

[New York, New York City, Police Census, 1890](#)

The collection consists of an index to the police census of New York City. This census was taken after the federal census because the city government felt that all of the inhabitants had not been enumerated. By taking this census, an additional 13% of residents were listed. Be aware that some of the books have been lost.

The Manhattan police census, conducted in October, counted 1,710,715 inhabitants—about 200,000 more than the federal count of 1,515,301.

Great news for those researching their family in New York City! [FamilySearch](#) has just released an index that includes 87% of the people recorded in the 1890 Police Census of New York City. This index covers the extant 894 of the original 1008 volumes (114 have been lost).

Before this release, the only online index was available on [Ancestry.com](#) - but it contained just 51,556 indexed records (just 3% of the recorded names). The release of this new index to 1,479,855 names in the census will be invaluable to many New York City researchers, especially as a substitute for the tragically destroyed 1890 Federal Census.²⁵

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2381996>

[Oklahoma, U.S., Territorial Census, 1890 and 1907](#) Schedule 3

In June 1890 a territorial census of Oklahoma was taken. It enumerated the following seven counties:

- Beaver
- Canadian
- Cleveland
- Kingfisher
- Logan
- Oklahoma
- Payne

[List of selected Delaware African-American](#) Schedule 4

alphabetical list of 454 African Americans, noting for each: surname, first name, 1890 Enumeration District (ED) number, 1890 ED description, and occupation

[Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States](#) Schedule 5

All religious bodies are embraced in the statistics of this volume. Every church or denomination having organizations with members or communicants was requested to furnish the information called for by the statistical inquires.

[Cherokee Census of Intruders, 1893](#)

These were lists of non-Indians living on tribal lands. Information mostly limited to name and location.²⁶

²⁵ New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, Sept 27. 2016, <https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/blog/>

²⁶ https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Native_American_Census

Statistical Reports - Schedule 6

The government's main purpose in collecting all this data was to provide statistics to measure demographic, social, and industrial changes in the US population. These reports were prepared before the records were destroyed, and provide, if not a name-by-name accounting, at least an overview of local trends.

Here's what's available at the US Census Bureau:

- Volume 1: Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census
- Volume 2: Report on the Insane, Feeble-minded, Deaf and Dumb, and Blind in the United States.
- Volume 3: Report on Crime, Pauperism, and Benevolence in the United States
- Volume 4: Report on Vital and Social Statistics in the United States
- Volume 5: Reports on the statistics of agriculture in the United States, agriculture by irrigation in the western part of the United States, and statistics of fisheries in the United States.
- Volume 6: Report on Manufacturing Industries in the United States
- Volume 7: Report on Mineral Industries in the United States
- Volume 8: Report on the Population and Resources of Alaska
- Volume 9: Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States in the United States (pages 713 and 795-812 missing)
- Volume 10: Report on Indians Taxed and Indians Not Taxed in the United States (except Alaska).
- Volume 11: Report on Insurance Business in the United States
- Volume 12: Report on Real Estate Mortgages in the United States
- Volume 13: Report on Farms and Homes: Proprietorship and Indebtedness in the United States
- Volume 14: Report on Transportation Business in the United States
- Volume 15: Report on Wealth, Debt, and Taxation²⁷

See also "[Statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census](#)" for a large number of graphs and maps showing distributions of population categories. From the Library of Congress.

1890 census substitutes

City directories. Ancestry calls these "1890 Census Substitutes". Mostly city directories with a few state census and one church directory. You can use this search for other years as well. Just think of it as a one-stop city directory search.

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/1890census/>

A few other places

Texas, U.S., Muster Roll Index Cards, 1838-1900

²⁷ <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2059/>

Texas, County Tax Rolls 1846-1910

<https://search.findmypast.com/search-world-Records/texas-county-tax-rolls-1846-1910>

Tennessee, U.S., Enumeration of Male Voters, 1891

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2884/>

U.S., Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1059/>

State census collections: Use the Ancestry card catalog to find your state

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog/?title=state%20census>

Iowa, 1895

Kansas, 1895

Michigan, 1894

Minnesota, 1895

New Jersey, 1895

New York, 1892

Wisconsin, 1895

Ancestry: [One-click "census substitutes" by state](#)

Extracted information from sources such as not limited to: tax lists, legislative petitions, voter's lists, state and federal land records, military lists, special census records, mortality schedules, great register of California, state census records, etc.

The work-arounds:

Reproducing the lost 1890 information item by item

1. Listed the address of the individual
City directories, voter registration, land records, legal papers, newspapers
2. Listed if a person was a soldier, sailor, or a marine during the Civil War
NARA. Military records.
3. Listed whether they were Union or Confederate
Histories, pensions, Union Veteran's census of 1890
4. Listed whether they were a widow of a veteran
Pension records, deaths
5. Listed, if a mother, the number of children she had and how many were living
1900 census. If foreign born, the individual was asked how many years they had been in the United States and if they were naturalized or in the process of being naturalized
Ship/immigration records, naturalizations. 1900 census
7. Lists what language the individual speaks
1900 (can they read English?) Country of birth
10. Listed individuals in Army forts, US vessels, Navy Yards, & prisons.
Military, prison records, veteran's schedules
11. And the names, please
Passenger lists, bank records, vital records, business directories, church records,

Quiz: Where can you find surviving census records of 429,795
US citizens in 1890?

(I fudged this a little) But don't overlook the obvious.

Answer at the talk