African American research

Austrian military records
Parker and Gesterling suicides
Death and taxes
Substitutes for the 1890 census

By Christopher A. Nordmann, PhD, CG

Census records are one of the most widely used resources by family historians. For those tracing ethnic groups, such as African Americans, census records of all types are usually one of the first sources outside of the home that genealogists consult. You find your ancestor in the 1930 census, the most recent federal population schedule available to the public, and work your way backwards every ten years until you get to 1890, and to your dismay, discover that most of it was either burned or damaged by water in a fire in the Commerce Building in 1921. What parts survived, and what alternatives are available to locate your ancestors around 1890?

An index to extant schedules of the 1890 census for areas in Alabama, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, and Texas is available as National Archives (NARA) Microfilm Publication M496. And a small fragment for Delaware (NARA Microfilm Publication M1919) that contains a list of about 454 African American farmers has also survived. The 1890 census contains a separate schedule for each family. Information on this enumeration is similar to that found in the 1880 record, showing, for example, names, relationship to the head of the family, age, places of birth, marital status, and occupation. For instance, Brisco James, a farmer, and his family resided in Perry County, Alabama. He and his parents were born in Maryland, and two sons and two daughters were born in Alabama. His wife was not shown.

The 1890 special census of Union veterans and widows of the Union veterans of the Civil War may help some researchers find their ancestors in between the 1880 and 1900 federal enumerations. Information in the record may include name, rank, company, length of service, and dates of enlistment and discharge. Schedules are available only for about half of Kentucky and all states after that alphabetically.

In addition to these federal census records, family historians should not overlook state and territorial enumerations as they search for ancestors in the late nineteenth century. Some states that have these records are Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, and New Jersey. The 1885 Kansas record includes a population schedule with military data as well as an agricultural schedule. Wesley Townsend, a thirty-six-year-old “black” man from Alabama, resided in the city of Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1895. Sanford Craig, who appears as S. G. Craig, and his family lived in Nicodemus Township, Kansas, in 1895, but relationships are not shown.
Some cities took their own enumerations. Officials in Ballard, Washington, ordered that a census be taken to determine if the town could change its classification to that of a third-class city. The enumerator listed a person's name and age, such as Nicholas Beck and his family. Looking for someone in New York City? The Municipal Census of New York City, also known as the “Police Census,” was recorded by that city's policemen and is an every name listing of people residing in New York County. A partial index to these records, available at Ancestry.com, provides the name, sex, and age of the person as well as the original book and page numbers and a Family History Library film number. John Adler, for instance, was 14 and appears in book 958 on page 3.4

Researchers tracing Native American ancestry may want to consult “Indian Census Rolls, 1885–1940,” which are also available at Ancestry.com. These records appear as National Archives Microfilm Publication M595. Agents were required to submit these rolls annually. Information may include the English and/or Indian name of the individual, age or date of birth, sex, and relationship to the head of the family. It should be noted that “there is not a census for every reservation or group of Indians for every year. Only persons who maintained a formal affiliation with a tribe under federal supervision are listed on these census rolls.” Researchers of Cherokee ancestors can also check the Wallace Roll of Cherokee Freedmen, 1890–1993, also online at Ancestry. More than 3,800 Cherokee appear on this roll, which shows age, sex, and residence.5

Two other types of census records deserve to be mentioned—church and school. Of course, typical church records, including birth, marriage, and death registers, should not be overlooked when researching your ancestors. Check to see if your ancestor's church took a census of its members. St. Joachim's Parish in Old Mines, Missouri, is just one such church. The Rev. E. T. Gallaher, parish priest, wrote the entries himself and included names of parents as well as their children and ages. St. Peter's Catholic Church in Belleville, Illinois, is another example of a church keeping track of its members. These records serve as great replacements for the federal census of 1890.6 Some schools kept lists of their students, such as those in Fluvanna County, Virginia.7

City or county directories are other valuable sources. These books contain the names of individuals, institutions, churches, organizations, and cemeteries and are an excellent way to trace people from one year to the next. As with all other types of records, researchers should check variant spellings of surnames. Be sure to read directories for several years after the last located entry, as in some cases individuals may not appear in every possible directory, and you could miss finding an ancestor who appeared only once or twice. In addition to names, other information may include a person's race, occupation, or employer's name. After locating your ancestor, see what other family members with the same surname resided at the same address. Other records may help determine their relationship. For instance, several members of the African American Craig family resided at the same address in the city of Leavenworth in the early 1890s, including George, Jefferson, Jemima, Lizzie, and Peter. Some Detroit, Michigan, directories list name, age, and date of death for individuals who died in the city.8

Although not as inclusive as census records that may show all family members, voter rolls indicate that someone was in a certain place at a certain time. They also may contain birth, occupation, home address, immigration, and naturalization information. The list of voters for Chicago in 1892 gives name, address, place of birth, length of residence in the Chicago area, whether naturalized or not, date of naturalization papers, and
the name of the court where those records were filed. Race was not shown. Louis Law, a native of Denmark residing at 383 N. Ohio Street, had been in Cook County for ten years. The date of his naturalization papers was 24 October 1892. Voter registration lists for Arizona and California are called the Great Registers and are available in California from 1866 to 1910. One such list shows that John Bell, a plumber from England, was 45 years old. Naturalization details were also recorded. The San Francisco records are especially valuable because of the loss of other official records in the 1906 earthquake and fire.

If your ancestor owned real or other types of property, his or her name probably appears on a county tax roll. Like voting records, tax lists may place someone in a particular location at a particular time. (Of course, your ancestor could have lived and owned property in one county and still owned property in a different county.) As with city directories, tax lists can be used to trace people from one year to the next and are valuable substitutes in genealogical research for all parts of the country. Understanding tax laws, such as knowing who may be tithable, is important when analyzing these records.

When searching for published tax rolls for 1890, some titles may appear as “census substitutes” or “census reconstruction” records. (As with other types of documents, researchers should consult the originals whenever possible.) In addition to having tax records, these derivative sources may also include lists from other record types. For instance, the book 1890 Walker County, Texas Census Uniquely Reconstructed & Annotated not only includes the 1890 county tax list, but also a list of inmates in the state penitentiary as of 1 June 1890 and names of Union veterans and widows not found in either tax or penitentiary records. Similarly, 1890 Genealogical Census Reconstruction: Mississippi Edition contains names from a variety of sources, including World War I draft registration records that were used to show that the African American George Haywood was born in Pine Ridge, Mississippi, in 1889. The census reconstruction book for Missouri relied upon tax lists, death notices in local newspapers, and the 1890 veterans census. Another valuable census substitute is online at Ancestry.com and is simply called “1890 Census Substitute.” According to the Web site “more than twenty million records have been identified for inclusion in the collection and additions will be made regularly as they become available for posting. It will include
fragments of the original 1890 census that survived the fire, special veterans’ schedules, several Native American tribe censuses for years surrounding 1890, state censuses (1885 or 1895), city and county directories, alumni directories, and voter registration documents.12

If after checking some of these sources you still have not located your ancestor, why not search daily or weekly newspapers, including legal and African American newspapers? Some examples of the types of information that may be found in them are births, marriages, deaths, legal notices, tax lists, and deeds. One such account reported the death of James H. M. Jackson, an African American member of the Episcopal Church, who had served as an assistant postmaster in North Carolina. The obituary noted that “he was born in Liverpool, England, and was of half Spanish descent.” Guides to locating older newspapers are available.13

Numerous other sources may be used to trace your ancestors in the gap left by the absence of the 1890 census. Some hospital registers are available to the public. These may show information similar to some census data, including a patient’s name, age, race, place of birth, marital status, occupation, and place of residence. For instance, on 17 January 1893, Julia Porter, an African American twenty-four-year-old servant from Mississippi, was married and had been in the city of St. Louis for only one year prior to her admittance into a city hospital.14 Coroner and death records, some of which are online, are valuable genealogical resources. Other types of resources that might be helpful include, for instance, road overseer records, registers of prisoners, militia registers, medical license records, jury lists, various court records, and orphan asylum records. Thus, despite the destruction of most of the 1890 federal census, you can still trace your ancestors between the 1880 and 1900 federal census records.1

Notes


2. Brisco James household, 1890 U.S. census, Perry County, Alabama, population/family schedule, Bear 8, enumeration district 78, supervisor’s district 3, dwelling 313, family 313 (NARA Microfilm Publication M496).


7. School Census, 1890, and Registers, 1887–1903, Hennepin County, Virginia, FHL microfilm 1930089, item 4.


14. “Register of Patients, City Hospital # 1, Female Hospital, St. Louis, Mo., April 1, 1886—March 31, 1893,” entry 1638, City of St. Louis Archival Library, St. Louis City Hall, quoted in Chris Nordmann, “Basic Genealogical Research Methods and Their Application to African Americans,” in African American Genealogical Sourcebook, Paula K. Byers, ed. (New York: Gale Research, 1995), 35.

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