

SEARCHING CENSUS RECORDS

There are no absolute rules for searching the census, but these are a few tips I have developed while using Ancestry. While you can search all the censuses simultaneously, I find it easier to search them systematically, one at a time.

Verify what you already know (or think you know) by finding recent relatives, such as your parents and grandparents.

Start with the most recent census (1940) and work your way back.

Sometimes less is more. Just because you know all the details such as year of birth, age, parents' names, etc., doesn't mean you should include all the information in the search. The index matches on as many variables as possible. Not every fact got recorded accurately and if your information doesn't match, it won't be listed as a match. Sometimes it is worth it to get a lot of results and look at them individually than to get zero results.

Sometimes searching just by last name and scanning all the results gives interesting insight. Learn to think in terms of "rhymes with, sounds like". Try searching by just first names (this takes LOTS of patience).

Spelling varies. Keep in mind, census takers weren't always familiar with ethnic names. They wrote down what they heard, sometimes phonetically. If you aren't finding someone who you are reasonably certain should have been listed, get creative. Consider names such as "Alphonse" and "Alfonz".

Sometimes a legal name differed from what a person was called. A girl's name may have been Mary, but she was called by her middle name. A boy may have been named after his father, but called by a middle name. Frank could have been Frances. Aunt Jane might really be Jeanine.

Don't be surprised by surprises. Look at things in context. If most of the names in the family match, consider it carefully. Maybe that additional individual is a baby who passed away as an infant. Maybe extended family members lived in the household at the time of the census. Boarders often lived with a family and were listed as household members when they are not.

Handwriting can be tricky when transcribed. Census takers were human, and people transcribing the census were human. That is how Bernard becomes Bemossed and Agnes becomes Agnew (NOT a joke—an actual transcription mistake). Look at the original images for yourself if it is even close. I have skipped entries because a notation of race disagreed. When I finally looked at the original image I found the transcriber transposed two entries.

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Study one of the many books in the library about doing genealogy research. One devoted strictly to census records is:

Szucs, Loretto Dennis. *Finding Answers in U.S. Census Records*. Orem, Utah: Ancestry, 2002. **(929.1 SZU)**

Keep searching. If one family member doesn't turn up, try another. Some of the early censuses only listed the head of the family, but the more recent ones included all family members.

Look for the unusual. If you aren't finding a family, try searching for a sibling with a more unusual name. A first name such as Queen stands out. In a family of Daniel, William, John and Agatha, search for Agatha.

Sometimes extended families lived together. Sometimes single people lived with married siblings. Pay attention to first names and ages of people in the household, and relationship to the head of household.

Build on what you learn. As you find families listed, pay attention to where it indicates children are born. When working your way backwards, narrow your search to places the family must have been living as indicated by place of birth. (On the other hand, keep in mind that mistakes are made and just consider these as clues—not fact.)

Use wildcard searches. Use a question mark (?) to substitute for a single letter. Use an asterisk (*) to substitute for up to 5 letters. While using a wild card search at least 3 characters have to be letters. The wildcard character can be at the beginning, end, or in the middle of the string of characters.

As you get more confident and are trying to fill gaps, search across all the censuses simultaneously. Sometimes when you see all the close matches together you will see a pattern that you might overlook when searching individually.