Welcome!

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is pleased to present this educational series of lectures on how to do family research.

As one of the nation’s premier genealogy institutions, it is our mission to inform the public about National Archives’ holdings that relate to family history and to make those records available to you.
About the Lecture Series

These lectures will demonstrate how to use records from the 1950 Census and other federal resources for genealogical research. Our presenters include experts from the National Archives and Records Administration and the U.S. Census Bureau. Sessions are intended for beginners to experienced family historians – all are welcome!
Join the conversation!

Participate with the presenters and other family historians during a session’s premiere.

Live Chat on YouTube
Log in and type your questions and comments.

Join us at @USNatArchives on Twitter
After the broadcast, the video presentation and handout will remain available.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Title</th>
<th>Presenter</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2</td>
<td>1 p.m.</td>
<td>Overview of What's on the 1950 Census</td>
<td>Claire Kluskens - Genealogy/Census Subject Matter Expert and digital projects archivist</td>
<td>National Archives in Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 16</td>
<td>1 p.m.</td>
<td>Mapping the 1950 Census: Census Enumeration District Maps at the National Archives</td>
<td>Brandi Oswald - Supervisory archivist, Cartographic Branch</td>
<td>National Archives at College Park, MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30</td>
<td>1 p.m.</td>
<td>The 1950 Census Website: Design, Development, and Features to Expect</td>
<td>Michael L. Knight - Web Branch Chief, Office of Innovation (Digital Engagement Division)</td>
<td>National Archives at College Park, MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 27</td>
<td>1 p.m.</td>
<td>The Story of the 1950 Census P8 Indian Reservation Schedule</td>
<td>Cody White - Native American-Related Records Subject Matter Expert and archivist</td>
<td>National Archives at Denver, CO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11</td>
<td>1 p.m.</td>
<td>From Parchments to Printouts: History of the Census from 1790 to 1950</td>
<td>Sharon Tosi Lacey - Chief Historian</td>
<td>U.S. Census Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 18</td>
<td>1 p.m.</td>
<td>History of Census Records and the National Archives</td>
<td>Jessie Kratz - Historian of the National Archives</td>
<td>National Archives in Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 25</td>
<td>1 p.m.</td>
<td>Historic Census Bureau Sources for Filipino, Guamanian and Chamorro, American Samoan, and Native Hawaiian Research</td>
<td>Christopher Martin – Historian</td>
<td>U.S. Census Bureau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
History of Census Records and the National Archives

Join our Historian, **Jessie Kratz**, as she presents the history of census records in relation to the history of the National Archives. She will discuss census records before they came to the National Archives, their transfer upon the creation of the National Archives, and the history of their availability and use.
Presenter Biography

**Jessie Kratz** is the Historian of the National Archives. She speaks regularly at academic and history conferences, gives lectures, and writes articles on the history and importance of the National Archives. She is the editor of the National Archives blog Pieces of History and runs the agency’s Oral History Program. Before becoming Historian in 2013, Jessie worked for 13 years at the Center for Legislative Archives.
History of Census Records & the National Archives

JESSIE KRATZ • AGENCY HISTORIAN
Before the creation of the National Archives in 1934, individual federal departments kept their own records. While some federal departments were good stewards of their records, others stored records in areas that exposed them to theft, neglect, vermin, water, and fire damage.
On March 1, 1790, Congress passed an act that provided for the taking of the first federal population census. It designated August 2, 1790, as the official Census Day.

Under the general direction of Thomas Jefferson, the Secretary of State, marshals of the U.S. judicial districts administered the first census in 1790.

An Act Providing for the Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, March 1, 1790. (General Records of the United States Government, National Archives)
The original census records were maintained by the federal departments that had jurisdiction over censuses throughout history—first the Department of State, then the Department of Interior, and later the Census Bureau within the Department of Commerce.

*Census volumes from Rhode Island, close-up, 1940. (National Archives Identifier: 74228254)*
On January 21, 1921, the Department of Commerce building caught fire. Nearly the entire 1890 population census was either destroyed by fire or damaged by water, smoke, and fire.

*Damage to census records in the Commerce Department Building fire, 1921. (National Archives Identifier: 18519812)*
After the fire, the Census Bureau took steps to increase the safety of its records and began an extensive microfilming program to produce copies of their original records.

Washington Evening Star article on microfilm efforts at the Census Bureau, April 17, 1938. (Records of the National Archives)
Creation of the National Archives

In the late 19th century, J. Franklin Jameson, Waldo G. Leland, and the American Historical Association began a campaign for the creation of a national archives where the federal government’s records could be concentrated, properly cared for, and preserved.
In 1926 Congress passed the Public Buildings Act, which provided for the construction of several federal government buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue—what’s known as Federal Triangle.

One of these buildings was to be the National Archives.

The Public Buildings Act, 1926. (Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, National Archives)
Ground was broken for the new National Archives Building on September 5, 1931.

On February 20, 1933, President Herbert Hoover attended the cornerstone-laying ceremony of the National Archives Building. In his remarks, he dedicated the building to the people of the United States.

*President Herbert Hoover attending the National Archives Building’s cornerstone-laying ceremony, February 20, 1933. (National Archives Identifier: 12168464)*
Although construction of the National Archives Building was well underway, no federal agency existed to occupy it.

This changed on June 19, 1934, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed legislation creating the National Archives as an independent agency to oversee federal record keeping.

*The National Archives Act, June 19, 1934. (National Archives Identifier: 299840)*
Franklin D. Roosevelt selected Robert D. W. Conner to be the First Archivist of the United States in 1934. The U.S. Senate confirmed Connor the following year.

Portrait of Robert D. W. Connor. (National Archives Identifier: 12167705)
A staff of 80 moved into the nearly completed building in the fall of 1935. But it was empty—there were no records.

The National Archives Building, September 10, 1935. (National Archives Identifier: 26326891)
The new agency’s first task was locating permanently valuable records stored with federal agencies. National Archives staff led the efforts in the Washington metro area, and Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers led the effort for the rest of the country.

*Works Progress Administration report on the condition of records storage rooms, 1936. (Records of the Works Progress Administration, National Archives)*
For the Commerce Department, which included the Census Bureau, Deputy Examiner Arthur Leavitt was assigned to complete a preliminary survey of census records.

Arthur Leavitt’s Identification Card, 1941. (National Archives Identifier: 12091292)
Leavitt surveyed a myriad of Census Bureau files, and on June 26–27, 1935, he surveyed the population schedules housed on the sixth floor of the recently constructed Department of Commerce Building in Washington, DC.

Arthur Leavitt’s Preliminary Survey for population schedules at the Census Bureau, page 1, June 26-27, 1935. (Records of the National Archives)
While the records were kept in fairly good storage conditions, in his report on census population schedules, Leavitt noted some hazards and recommended the records be transferred to the National Archives as soon as possible.

Arthur Leavitt’s daily report for June 26, 1935, on census records. (Records of the National Archives)
After Leavitt was promoted, Deputy Examiner Herman Kahn took over the survey of Census Bureau records.

The Census Bureau was hesitant to transfer its records to the National Archives primarily due to confidentiality concerns.

Herman Kahn, undated. (National Archives Identifier: 74229601)
Despite its hesitancy, the Bureau of the Census agreed to send records to the National Archives. In 1942 the Census Bureau transferred the 1790–1870 census population schedules to the National Archives.

Press release announcing the transfer of census population schedules to the National Archives, April 7, 1942. (Records of the National Archives)
Upon receiving the records, the National Archives displayed a selection of the census population schedules in its exhibition hall in Washington, DC.

Among the items exhibited was the 1790 Census listing for Thomas Jefferson and other officials in Philadelphia while the city served as the nation’s capital.

1790 Census page showing Market Street in Philadelphia including Thomas Jefferson. (Records of the Census Bureau, National Archives)
In 1942, the National Archives received about 6,000 research requests on census records.

Sandra Irwin examines a volume of returns for the 1860 population census, 1968. (National Archives Identifier: 23855367)
The issue of public availability for future census records was unresolved when Congress passed the 1950 Federal Records Act. The legislation imposed a 50-year limit on restricting access to executive agency records unless the Archivist determined they should be closed for a longer period.

*Miss Blaisdell viewing census records in the Central Search Room. ca. 1942. (National Archives Identifier: 74228254)*
On October 10, 1952, Wayne Grover, Archivist of the United States, and Roy V. Peel, the Director of the Bureau of the Census, made an agreement to put in place a 72-year period of closure for population census records transferred to National Archives.
Per the agreement, after 72 years the National Archives could make census population schedules available to those with a legitimate research interest, defined by:

- the researcher’s reputation as a professional researcher or genealogist
- the researcher’s connection with an established institution of learning or research
- the researcher’s connection with the person or family in the records
- the time elapsed since the appearance of possibly detrimental information, considered in conjunction with the legitimacy of public or scholarly interest

*Peel-Grover agreement, October 10, 1952. (Records of the National Archives)*
In 1952 the National Archives made available the 1880 Census records, and in 1962 it made available what survived of the 1890 Census records.

1880 United States federal census page from the District of Columbia. (Records of the Census Bureau)
To assist researchers, the National Archives produced a number of finding aids and publications related to the available census population schedules.

*National Archives publications including census microfilm, 1961.*
*(National Archives Identifier: 12170061)*
With an increase in interest in genealogy records, including census population schedules, in 1971 the National Archives opened a new Microfilm Research Room on the 4th floor of the National Archives Building in Washington, DC.

Opening of the new Microfilm Research Room in Washington, DC, June 24, 1971. (National Archives Identifier: 23856415)
In 1972, just before the National Archives was to release the 1900 Census records, the Census Bureau took the position that the 72-year agreement was invalid because it conflicted with Title 13’s promise of confidentiality.

The 1900 Census records release was therefore delayed until the Department of Justice could decide whether the Federal Records Act took precedence over Title 13.

Microfilm Research Room in Washington, DC, packed full of researchers, 1972. (National Archives Identifier: 35810076)
On June 14, 1973, the Attorney General decided the records could be opened, and in late 1973 the National Archives opened the 1900 Census records to qualified researchers.

Researcher Tom Scott using a microfilm reader while studying the 1900 census for his dissertation, August 29, 1974. (National Archives Identifier: 35810522)
The popularity of the novel *Roots*, and the subsequent miniseries, increased interest in census records, resulting in an unprecedented demand for National Archives resources.

In 1977 the Microfilm Reading Room in National Archives Building in Washington, DC, had wait lines for the first time in its history, and the volume of reference letters increased exponentially, with a high of 7,000 letters in just one week.

*National Archives staff member Carolyn Alexander with piles of genealogy research requests, May 1977. (Records of the National Archives)*
Restrictions still applied, however, including research had to be conducted at a National Archives facility and reproductions were prohibited with few exceptions.

After a 90-year-old genealogist George Roberts, asked to use 1900 Census microfilm in his local library rather than at a Regional Archives branch, the National Archives proposed a rule lifting restrictions on the 1900 Census.

*Federal Register Notice proposing fully opening the 1900 Census, October 14, 1977.*
During the late 1970s, the Census Bureau and National Archives continued to disagree on access to census population schedules. The National Archives wanted to expand access; the Census Bureau wanted more restrictions.

Letter from Census Bureau Director Manuel Plotkin to Archivist of the United States James B. Rhoads expressing his disagreement over the National Archives’ decision to remove access restrictions on census records, January 11, 1978. (Records of the National Archives)
In October 1978 Congress settled the disagreements between the two agencies and codified the 1952 agreement between the Archivist and the Director of the Bureau of the Census to open census records after 72 years.

Public Law 95-416 codifying the 72-year rule, October 5, 1978. (Government Publishing Office)
Once the National Archives lifted access restrictions on census population schedules that were 72 years old, census openings at the National Archives became major events.
On April 15, 1982, the National Archives opened the 1910 Census to researchers at the National Archives in Washington, DC, and for sale through the Archives’ Publications Sales Branch.

Archivist of the United States Robert Warner’s mother-in-law found her six-year-old self listed in the census.

1910 United States federal census page showing Helen Bullock née Helen Estelle Rogers (line 73). (Records of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives, courtesy of Ancestry.com)
The National Archives opened the 1920 Census on March 2, 1992, at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC.

Archivist of the United States Don Wilson presented Director of the Bureau of the Census Barbara Bryant copies of census schedules documenting her family.

Archivist of the United States Don Wilson and Director of the Bureau of the Census Barbara Bryant, March 2, 1992. (Records of the National Archives)
Microfilm readers at the Regional Archives were booked months in advance. Some Regional Archives locations even opened at midnight the night of the release.

"Midnight Madness" 1920 Census opening at the National Archives Southwest Region in Fort Worth, March 2, 1992. (Photo Courtesy of Meg Hacker)
On April 1, 2002, the National Archives opened the 1930 Census in person at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, and at its Regional Archives facilities around the country.

National Archives staff Stacey Bredhoff and Michael Jackson pose in front of draft banner for the opening of the 1930 Census. (National Archives Identifier: 66776993)
For the first time ever, the National Archives created a special census website with information on how to view, rent, or buy the microfilm. The website also included numerous background materials on the census compiled by National Archives staff.

Screenshot of the 1930 Census website, 2002.
On April 2, 2012, in a ceremony in the William G. McGowan Theater, Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero declared the 1940 Census officially open. This was the first-ever online census release.
To promote the opening, National Archives held events all around the country and produced a series of short documentary videos on its YouTube channel.

National Archives video providing a “behind-the-scenes” view of staff preparations for the April 2, 2012, launch of the 1940 Census.
On April 1, 2022, the National Archives launched the 1950 Census online.

To view the 1950 Census, visit: archives.gov/1950census
Format of Census Population Schedules

- 1790–1870 and 1890 exist in bound volumes.
- For 1880, the National Archives has them on microfilm only—the National Archives gave away the original volumes in the 1950s.
- 1900–1970 exist only on microfilm.
- 1980 and 1990 are data files that were transferred on magnetic tape cartridges.
- 2000 and 2010 are image files (TIFFs and JPEGs).

Microfilm storage in the National Archives Building, ca. 1960. (National Archives Identifier: 12170029)
To view the 1950 Census, visit:
archives.gov/1950census

For more information on National Archives history, visit:
www.archives.gov/about/history

Read more in our Pieces of History blog:
prologue.blogs.archives.gov

THANK YOU!
Feedback

We value your opinion.

Please take a minute to complete a short evaluation. Your comments help us maintain the quality of our services and plan future programs.

Thank you!

Event Evaluation:

www.surveymonkey.com/r/KYREventEval
Email questions to jessie.kratz@nara.gov

Video recordings of lectures and downloadable handouts will remain online at www.archives.gov/calendar/genealogy-series/2022
Educational resources on how to access and do research using U.S. federal government records held at the National Archives and Records Administration.

**Know Your Records**

[www.archives.gov/calendar/know-your-records](http://www.archives.gov/calendar/know-your-records)

Videos and Handouts on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com)
Thank You
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Questions & Answers in Chat

Please stay if you have questions.

Although this concludes the video portion of the broadcast, we will continue to take your questions in chat for another 10 minutes.