



National Archives and Records Administration

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African Americans and the Federal Census, 1790–1930

The Federal Government conducts a census every 10 years. The National Archives maintains a microfilm record of each available census of free and slave populations arranged by state, county, and enumeration division. The Federal Constitution stipulated that a slave counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of taxation and apportionment of the House of Representatives.

The Federal Population Schedules, 1790–1840

Only the heads of free households appear in these records. All others, including slaves, are noted statistically under the head of household or reported owner.

Free African Americans in 1790–1840 Censuses: enumerated with the remainder of the free population. Black (*B*) or Mulatto (*M*) indicates the race of the head of the household. Other members of the household were listed in age brackets by sex. Censuses for 1790 and 1810 list free nonwhites in a category titled “all other free persons”; there is no distinction made between free blacks and Native Americans not on reservations. The censuses for 1820–1840 listed people of color separately.

Slaves in the 1790–1840 Census: no notation of slave by name, age, sex, or origination appears. The census lists slaves statistically under the owner’s name.

The Federal Population Schedules, 1850–1860

Free African Americans in the 1850 and 1860 Censuses. Beginning in 1850, the census named all free members of households, white and nonwhite. The enumerator recorded the person’s name, age, sex, place of birth, and the color of each free person in a household (e.g., black, white, or mulatto).

Slaves in the 1850 and 1860 Censuses. For these two censuses, slaves were enumerated on a separate schedule. The census does not record slave names; census takers were instructed to substitute numbers in place of names on the slave schedules. The slave schedules are arranged by state, then by county, and then by owner. These schedules record the number of slaves owned and their color (black or mulatto); sex; age; whether “deaf, dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic”; the number of fugitives from the state; and the number manumitted. **There is no index for the slave schedules.**

The Federal Population Censuses, 1870–1930

As the first census after the Civil War, the 1870 census is the first to include African Americans by name along with the rest of the population, and is often the first official record of a surname for former slaves. This census lists the person’s age and place of birth. For 1880 and later, the census shows the relationships within the family of each household.

The Federal Mortality Schedules, 1850–1880

Mortality Schedules contain the names of persons who died in the 12 months preceding the date of the census. Unlike the Federal population schedules, **the Mortality Schedules for 1850 and 1860**

often include the names of slaves. These schedules include information such as the decedent's race, marital status, whether free or slave (1850 and 1860), age, and cause of death. The National Archives has a partial collection of Mortality Schedules on microfilm.

Search for the state and county in which the slave died. Review the image for reported slaves (column four). **Note:** slave age and place of birth were often estimated, leading to many inaccuracies.

Indexes

Ancestry. Ancestry.com has searchable online databases for each decennial census from 1790 to 1930. These databases are available to search for free at any NARA research facility.

Additional Sources

For more information, see the following reference reports/finding aids:

- National Archives Special List 34, *List of Free Black Heads of Families in the First Census of the United States, 1790*
- *Federal Nonpopulation Census Schedules, 1850–1880*

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