

10 Census Tips

STRAIGHT FROM ANCESTRY.COM MEMBERS!

Looking for answers in census records? Try the following tips, 10 of our favorites, straight from Ancestry.com members.

1

Look on the Page Before and the Page After

One of my favorite census tips, particularly when I'm having trouble finding a family member's parent, is to look at the actual census images, then use the arrow keys to scroll a few pages before and after the person's record.

My family members were mostly rural farmers during the 1800s and early 1900s, and they tended to stay close to kin and home, even when they did move out. On numerous occasions I've found relatives living with older neighbors who had the same last name — and that neighbor inevitably turns out

to be a parent, grandparent or uncle. Going through page by page, you may find the in-laws or siblings nearby, too.

This tactic has been especially helpful with ancestors who are heading up their own households by the time of the 1850 census. From 1790 through 1840, the U.S. census only listed the names of heads of household, so you may not be able to locate a head of household in 1850 as a child growing up 10 or 20 years before. But by looking back or forward a few pages in the 1850 census, you may find other relatives — including the parents of the head of household — living in the same town.

— Terence Davis, P.G.

1940 United States Federal Census for Lawrence Douglas

Nebraska > Adams > Hastings > 1-10 > Page 1 of 48

Nebraska Adams Hastings City and County

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE-BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

SIXTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES 1940

POPULATION SCHEDULE

Blanche Oliver

2

Focus on Unusual Names

If I'm having a hard time finding someone with a common name, I'll look at their children to see if any of them have unusual names. If so, I'll search for that name instead and see if the person I'm following is in the same household, too.

— Dan Olson

Frenchia

James

Cleophas

Mary

3 First Names Only

My paternal grandparents emigrated from Hungary early in the 20th century and were married in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1904. I was able to obtain a copy of their marriage license at the county courthouse, and I had no problem locating them in both the 1910 and 1930 U.S. Census records on Ancestry.com.

But searching for Janos and Erzsébet Kocsis or for their Americanized names, John and Elizabeth, proved fruitless in the 1920 census. I knew they were living in Johnstown but I didn't know their address.

Searching just the 1920 U.S. Federal Census, I first selected "Show advanced" on the search form. Then I entered just the first name, left the last name blank, and included a birth year, marking the latter as "exact." I included Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in the "Lived In" box. I also added the first names of the other people in the household. But no last names.

And there they were, the entire family. But they didn't live quite where I expected – they were a few miles away in an area that would soon be annexed by Johnstown. They hadn't shown up previously because the census enumerator had recorded the name as "Ketica" instead of "Kocsis."

I later confirmed that this was my grandparents' family when I located my grandfather's World War I draft registration, which included a street address that matched exactly the address for the Ketica family on the 1920 census.

— Jerry Kocis

[Clear Form](#) [Show Advanced](#)

Search

☐ Match all terms exactly

Name

First & Middle Name(s) Last Name

[Use default settings](#) [Use default settings](#)

Event

Birth Year +/- Location

☒ Exact Only [Use default settings](#)

Lived In [Use default settings](#)

4 Wildcards

I used my favorite census search trick when I was trying to find my husband's great-grandparents with the surname Carter in 1870. Instead of getting hung up on the exact spelling of their last name, I tried a wildcard, where you replace one or more letters of a name with an asterisk. I chose "Car*" and included a birthplace of Ireland, since the wife was born there. I left off first names.

That's how I found William Carlen & Honora Carlen with children who matched the family I was searching for. Looking at the image, I saw that the census taker did not cross the T, so the indexer interpreted it as an L instead and also misread the ending R to be an N.

— Carroll Carter

Search

☐ Match all terms exactly

Name

First & Middle Name(s) Last Name

[Use default settings](#) [Use default settings](#)

Event

Birth Year +/- Location

☐ Exact Only [Use default settings](#)



5 Record the Details

I am currently going back to old census records I've found and jotting down all of the information for each person in my Ancestry.com family tree. I am taking all the little details — reading, writing, own, rent, amount of rent or home value, address, etc. — and I keep them as a log for each person in my direct lineage. Writing down all of these details familiarizes me with all of the information and helps me keep everything in one place so I can refer back to it again.

— Sara S. Kessinger

1920 census
Herring family
233 Willbury Street, Wilmington, NC
Owned home

Robert Herring – head of household, 49; b. OH, father b. OH, read and write; moulder, foundry
Mary Herring – spouse, 48; b. NC, father b. NC, mother b. AL; no occupation listed
Jerry Herring – son, 16; b. NC, father b. OH, mother b. NC; single; able to read and write; no occupation listed
Lisa Herring – daughter, 13; b. NC, father b. OH, mother b. NC; school; able to read and write; no occupation listed
May Vines – mother-in-law, 72; b. AL, father b. AL, mother b. AL; able to read and write; no occupation listed

1930 census
Herring family
233 Willbury Street, Wilmington, NC
Owned home
Owned radio

Robert Herring – head of household, 59; b. OH, father b. OH, married; able to read and write; moulder, foundry; at work;
Mary Herring – spouse, 58; b. NC, father b. NC, mother b. AL; able to read and write; housekeeper, private home
Donald Liston – boarder, 22; b. NC, father b. NC, mother b. NC; able to read and write; carpenter, factory; at work; not yet

6 Reverse Surname and First Name

I was having a difficult time finding my brother-in-law's uncles in 1870. Accidentally, I typed their surname into the first name box then hit "search." There they were! The census taker had inverted the names, last for first, in the whole county.

— Kathy Abbey

7 Look for a Neighboring Homeowner

If you find your ancestor on a census but then can't locate him/her on a later census, find the nearest homeowner from the census (not renter) who lived on the same street. Homeowners are much less likely to move away so you can look for that person again in a later census and then check to see if your ancestor is still living nearby.

— Mary E. Tarasovich

Home owned (O) or rented (R)	Value of home, if owned, or monthly rental, if rented	Does this household live on a street (Yes or No)	of residence on April 1 of this household. BE SURE TO INCLUDE: 1. Persons temporarily absent. Write "Ab" after names of such persons. 2. Children under 1 year of age if child has not been given a first name. Enter X after name of person
4	5	6	7
O	2000	Yes	Least son Hicks, George
R	Pay Japs	Yes	Leckmitch

8 Compare Handwriting

One of the biggest problems with censuses is deciphering the census taker's handwriting, which can be a problem for an indexer, too. I solve this by looking at census records for the area to see how the census taker wrote his or her letters. Then I search for the name based on what I learned. For example, I may replace N with R or try a different vowel, like an A where there should be an O. In my family, Klaas was indexed as Blaas.

— Nancy Blackwell

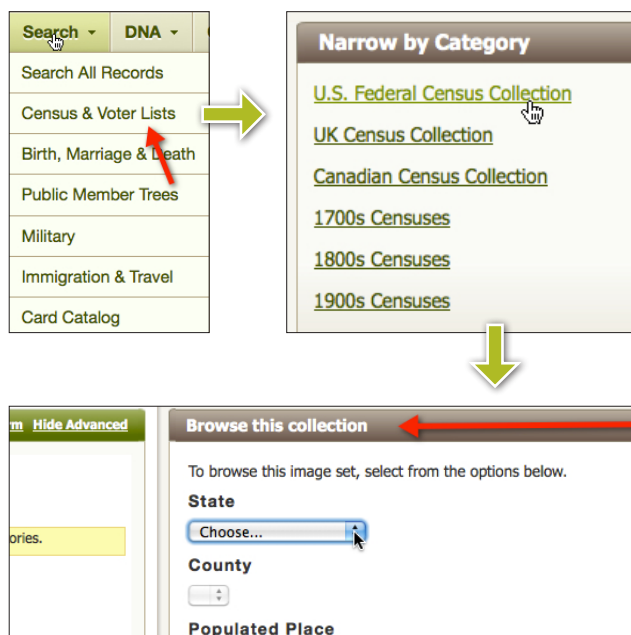
James H.	Son	M	22	16	S	Yes
Engelbert, John E.	Head	M	4	57	M	Yes
Mary E.	Wife	F	21	46	M	Yes
Thomas	Son	M	21	24	S	No
Walter	Son	M	11	21	S	No
Robert	Son	M	11	16	S	No
Paulich, August	Son	M	21	56	S	No
Barco, John J.	Head	M	21	62	M	No
Anna A.	Wife	F	21	58	M	No
Meier, Carl E.	Son	M	21	75	M	No
Flora	Daughter	F	21	32	M	No

9 Just Browse

When I'm not getting results searching for relatives in a known area, I have found nothing beats going right to the census year I'm researching, using the "browse" features in the right corner and reading through the handwritten pages of the census. I am finding that original names were misspelled, and transcribers have read the names wrong due to old writing styles.

I have found two great grandmothers with their parents by doing this. Both of their first names were misspelled, and neither of them were listed with the common name our family had called them.

— Wanda Higgins



10 Think Differently

Think outside the box — what might you have done in a particular set of circumstances? My grandmother had eight children but only two by my grandfather, who died when my dad was just a few years old. I wondered who the father was of the other six.

My grandmother's married surname was Higgs and in later censuses she was living in Sussex with Henry Higgs from Durley in Hampshire. I searched lots of records but this person did not exist; however, a man named Henry Chalk lived nearby? Could this be the father?

More research and I learned that, yes, this was the right Henry. My grandmother never took his name, though — he took hers instead.

— Jo Berryman