

Breaking through Walls

Proven **methods and sources** to break down genealogical brick walls

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1
Chapter One: Getting the Most out of Census Records
Background 3
Census Records Prior to 1850 5
1850 Census Methodology 8
The Evolving Census: Years 1860–1900 11
Highlights of the 1910–1940 Censuses 15
The 1950 Census 17
Nonpopulation and Special Censuses 22
Chapter Two: Understanding Courthouse Records
Background 33
Deeds 36
Wills 40
Administrations, Bonds, and Inventories 42
Guardianship Records 46
Court Minute and Order Books 54
Chapter Three: Researching with Tax Records 63
Chapter Four: Exploring with Ships Passenger Lists 69
Chapter Five: Skills to Advance Your Research
Transcribing Documents 75
Abstracting Documents 78
Developing Research Plans 81
Chapter Six: Guides to Enhance Your Research
Creating Your Own Locality Guides 89
Using Timelines in Genealogy Research 92
Getting to Know the FamilySearch Research Wiki 95
Chapter Seven: Putting It All Together
Making a Simple Family History Book 101
Index 110



Introduction

This publication is derived from a series of articles appearing in the San Antonio Genealogical and Historical Society's newsletter. Authored by Leslie Watson Tomlinson, CG, the articles focus on proven methods and sources aimed at helping the genealogical researcher:

- develop strategies for breaking through brick walls and building reliable cases for proving family relationships,
- identify the sources most likely to answer specific research questions, and
- discover new records, archives, and collections to explore.



Chapter One

Getting the Most out of Census Records

Background

Taken every 10 years, the United States census is legally mandated by our constitution. Only after 72 years is one released to the public. These records are among the richest, most useful, and easily accessible sources for family history researchers. Census records capture our ancestors in a unique time and place and we can leverage them to locate nearby churches and cemeteries, for example, where they may have left records. Knowing the timeframe and places where your ancestor lived helps you locate vital records, deeds, and other legal documents.

TIP: *It is good practice to examine not only the page on which your target individual is enumerated, but at the very least, the page before and after.* Look for persons with the same surname who could be relatives. Getting familiar with the names and places mentioned in these records will enhance your contextual understanding of your ancestor. For example look at the birthplaces and occupations of the people living nearby to get a glimpse into their lives. Were they immigrant farmers seeking land or practicing a profession which

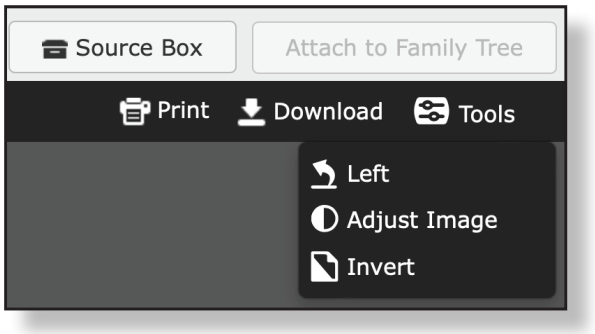
they brought to this country? Neighbors could be witnesses to wills or deeds, marry into your family, and/or migrate with them to another locale. Examine each question that is asked on a census because its answer may provide clues leading to other records. It is good practice to also look through the pages to see if any numbers were skipped which may indicate pages are missing. And look to see if any additional people were added in at the end of the district. Check the **Resources** at the end of the chapter for where to download blank census forms.

Census Records Limitations and Possible Workarounds

Issue	Solutions
Poor or indecipherable handwriting	Examine the surrounding census pages to familiarize yourself with how the enumerator formed letters. Use photo editing software to enhance the image for better readability. Get experience in reading old handwriting by taking a tutorial.
Language hurdles	Thick or unfamiliar accents may have been interpreted in unexpected ways by the census taker. Think of all possible spellings for your ancestor's surname and how it might have sounded to an unfamiliar ear.
Reliability of information	Informants were not recorded in most cases. Take each piece of information as a clue and then verify it with other sources.

Did you know?

TIP: *For easier readability, you can adjust images on the fly at FamilySearch.com.* Click on "Tools" on the menu bar at the top right of an image page. "Adjust Image" allows adjustment of the brightness and contrast. Experiment with the settings until you get a more readable image. Clicking "Invert" will reverse the black and white, which sometimes improves legibility.

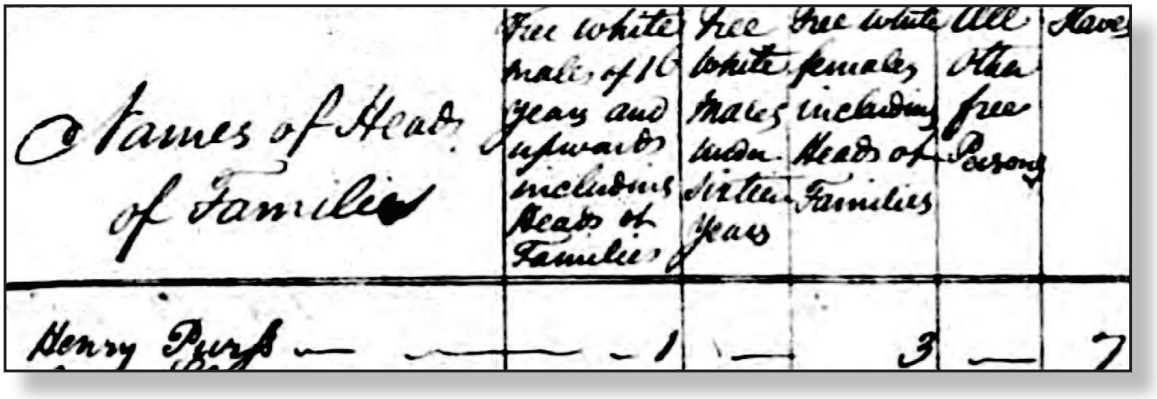


FamilySearch tools bar.

Census Records Prior to 1850

Before 1850, censuses only listed the names of heads of households and age ranges of the residents, but by following the families through the years you may be able to construct a likely family with estimated birth years. Each census is unique in what information was gathered. ***TIP:*** *Don't forget to read across the entire page or pages as some censuses run longer than one page.*

1790: In 1790, people were grouped into five categories: free white males 16 years and over, free white males under 16, free white females, other free persons, and slaves. Census headings appeared on the first page of a locality but were not always included in the following pages, so you will have to return to the first page to understand the categories. See the example of the Henry Purss household below.[1] Often the names were alphabetized so you won't know who lived near each other. Combined with other sources, such as tax records, you may be able to make further distinctions. Remember to look for variations in the spellings of the surname. Census takers were literate but not all residents were—many were recent immigrants and often names were recorded phonetically.



Names of Heads of Families	Free white males of 16 years and upwards including Heads of Families	Free white males under sixteen years	Free white females including Heads of Families	All other free Persons	Slaves
Henry Purss	1		3		7

1790 U.S. census, Henry Purss household, Craven County, North Carolina.

1800: In the 1800 census example on the next page from Anne Arundel County, Maryland, see the addition of more age ranges: free white males and females under 10, 10 to under 15, 16 to under 25, 25 to under 45, and over 45.[2] Slaves and free blacks were not divided into age groups.