

Introduction

Growth of the U.S. Federal Census

Blame it on Thomas Jefferson and the American Statistical Association

The main users of the U.S. Federal Censuses are the millions of amateur genealogists in the U.S. They are the beneficiaries of a national census strategy that took on more than the Founding Fathers had asked for in 1787. The Constitution never used the word *census*, but asked for an *enumeration* of the population every ten years. The method of conducting the enumeration was left to the Congress “*in such manner as they shall by law direct.*”

Beginning in 1790 there was more than just a counting of the population – the first census asked five questions: the name of a head of household, the number of males under 16, males over 16; females of any age, and the number of slaves. The number of questions increased in each census thereafter, and by 1840, a total of 66 questions were asked.

We should probably thank Thomas Jefferson, the first U.S. Secretary of State under President George Washington. Jefferson was in charge of the first census of 1790. He wrote copious instructions that were followed to the letter, and in fact, some of his rules for the 1790 census were used in every census thereafter, e.g., the age categories for males and females added to the name of the head of a household; and the use of a “census day” to enumerate households were first outlined by Thomas Jefferson.

We should also thank an organization formed in 1839 called the American Statistical Association. From its very beginning, members of this organization began lobbying Congress to add more vital statistical information in the decennial census schedules. There was no national standard for the collection of vital statistics in the U.S., yet the country was

experiencing continual epidemics of various diseases that seemed to be localized in certain parts of the country. Gathering statistics about the number of deaths, causes of death, and so on, was a growing concern expressed eloquently by members of the American Statistical Association.

As a result, the law enacted for the preparation of the 1850, 1860 & 1870 censuses (9 Stat. 428, 23 May 1850) included a new concept in which much more information was gathered. An all new Census Office under the newly formed Department of the Interior was created just prior to each census year, and for the 1850-1870 censuses, the Population Schedules now listed the names of every member of a household, giving their name, age, and birthplace. In addition, in 1850, the new Census Office began a program of statistics gathering unheard of in the first six censuses, e.g., for all three census years, 1850-1870, special schedules were added for Products of Industry, Agriculture, Social Statistics, and in direct response to the American Statistical Association’s lobbying, a *Mortality Schedule*, in which every person who had died during the previous 12 months was named, along with the cause of that person’s death. Slave Schedules were also added for the 1850 and 1860 censuses.

By 1880, the Census Office had become nearly a full-time operation – the staff stayed for nearly eight years in compiling the 1880 reports. That is because the reports were extensive, complex, and numerous, e.g., for the Manufacturing schedules alone, ten (10) special schedules were added to collect statistics on such Products of Industry as Boots & Shoes; Flour & Grist Mills, Lumber & Sawmills, and Agricultural Implements.