

EASY RESEARCH - CENSUS RECORDS

April 10, 2017

The census records are one of my favorite sources, but because the census taker is the person entering the information for each household, mistakes happen; therefore it is considered a Secondary Source.

I've found different spellings of names, different countries of birth from census to census (My Irish clan born in the north part of Ireland has several different names for its country of birth). it can be listed as either Ireland, North of Ireland, Northern Ireland, or ?Scotland?), different birth years (usually women ☺), children with incorrect surnames (children from a previous marriage listed with current step-father's surname), and probably other things I can't think of right now, but it's generally a great source for finding your whole family on one document.

Prior to 1850 they only entered the head of the household, but that doesn't mean the prior years are useless.

There is a lot of specific information in all the census years that cannot be found elsewhere without a lot of research and good luck.

The attached information gives you some ideas of what to look for where. Hope it helps.

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US Census - Background

The US Federal Census is taken because it was mandated by our Constitution.

George Washington signed the papers making this act a law in 1790. The Constitution directs that there will be "an enumeration of inhabitants", and nothing more. However, the Census has evolved and now we can learn much more than just the number of people who live in our country.

In 1790, the U.S. population was 3,231,533. This did not include slaves or the untaxed Indians. One of the main goals of the census was to provide information on men eligible for the military. We had only recently gained our independence from England and the men of the day knew it was important to assemble a viable military, if the need arose.

The federal census is taken every 10 years, in the year ending with zero. To date, the federal Census has been taken 21 times. Individual states, however, often took their own Census in some of the years between the federal enumeration. These can be a valuable source, especially if you are looking for someone who died between censuses. The state census (taken mainly for the purpose of taxation) can provide valuable data.

Much of the 1790 Census was destroyed by the British during the War of 1812.

Some states were totally destroyed, others only partially. Whenever possible, tax lists from that era are used as an alternate source for names. The 1890 Census was also destroyed.

The law states that the census shall remain private for 72 years. This is to encourage truthful answers and accurate information. Not much of a negative consequence could happen after 72 years. Most of those listed would be gone. Because of the 72 year law, the latest Census available to the public is the one taken in 1940.

The process of microfilming and printing takes time, considering the huge volume of documents.

Due to the 72 year restriction, no one can look at the individual data for that period of time. Thus, the compiling and microfilming only begins after 72 years. It usually takes at least two additional years to get the work finished and ready for distribution to the public.

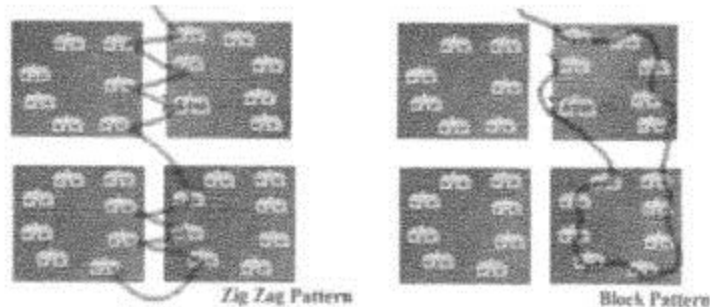
Source: 1995-2007 by Robert Ragan

Census Takers

Who were they? Everyday people like you and me. Some were young, some old. In the earlier censuses, they were usually men on horseback, carrying their clipboards with blank census sheets ready to be filled with information. They may have been school teachers on summer break or farmers trying to supplement their income. They came from all walks of life. They all knew how to read and write and they usually lived in the area they enumerated.

The government paid them to go door to door with the goal of getting a head count of all people living in the United States. Then, as today, some were excellent workers, producing accurate, legible records. They took pains to get all pertinent information and record it on their papers. Others, however, were mainly interested in payday and did less than an admirable job.

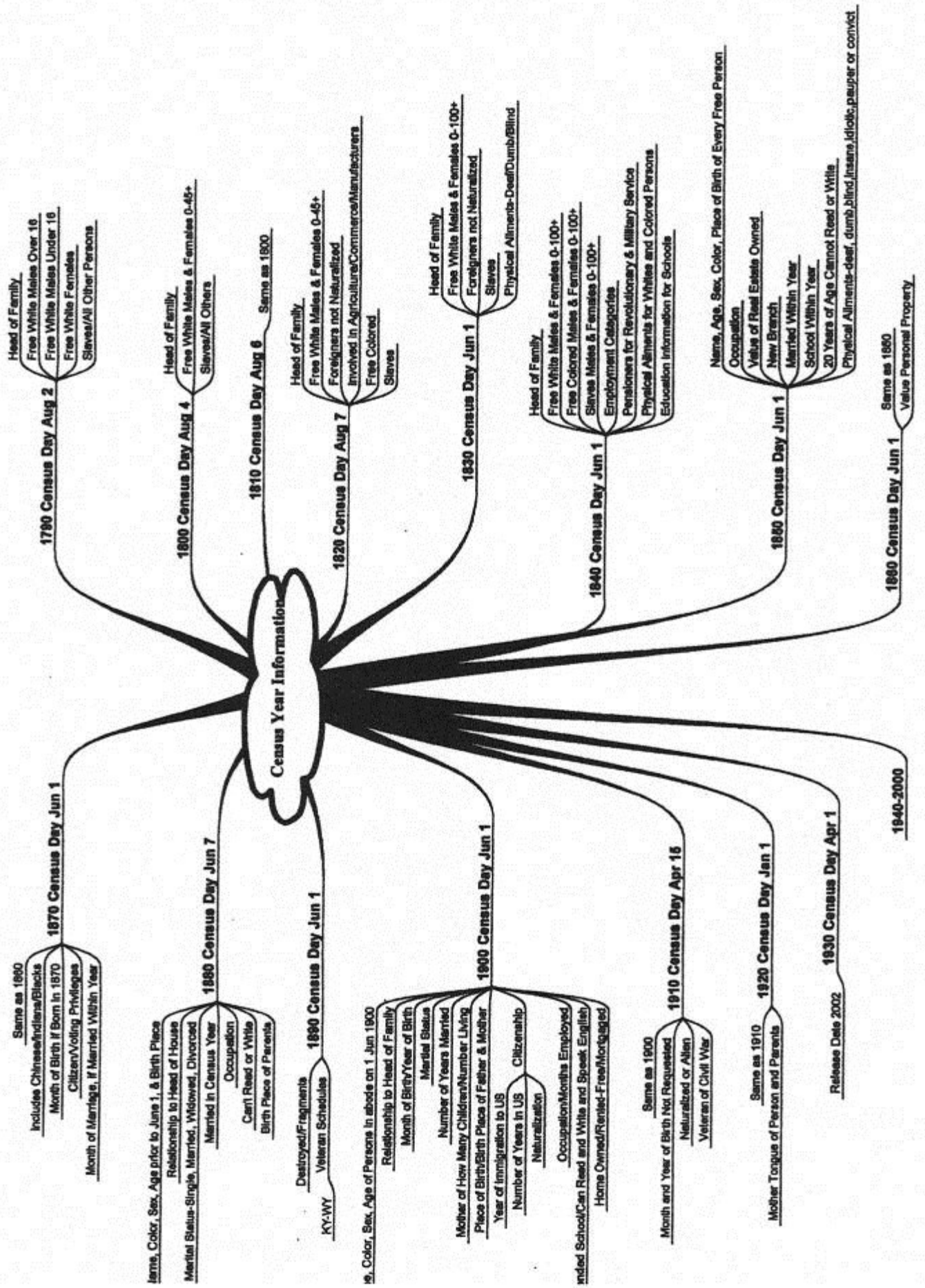
The census taker could walk many different paths to cover his territory. There was no instruction on the direction he should take, only that he must cover the entire territory assigned to him. People who live on adjoining property might be listed several pages apart, depending on the route taken by the enumerator. In farm land and early times, the paths of the census takers often meandered in strange patterns.

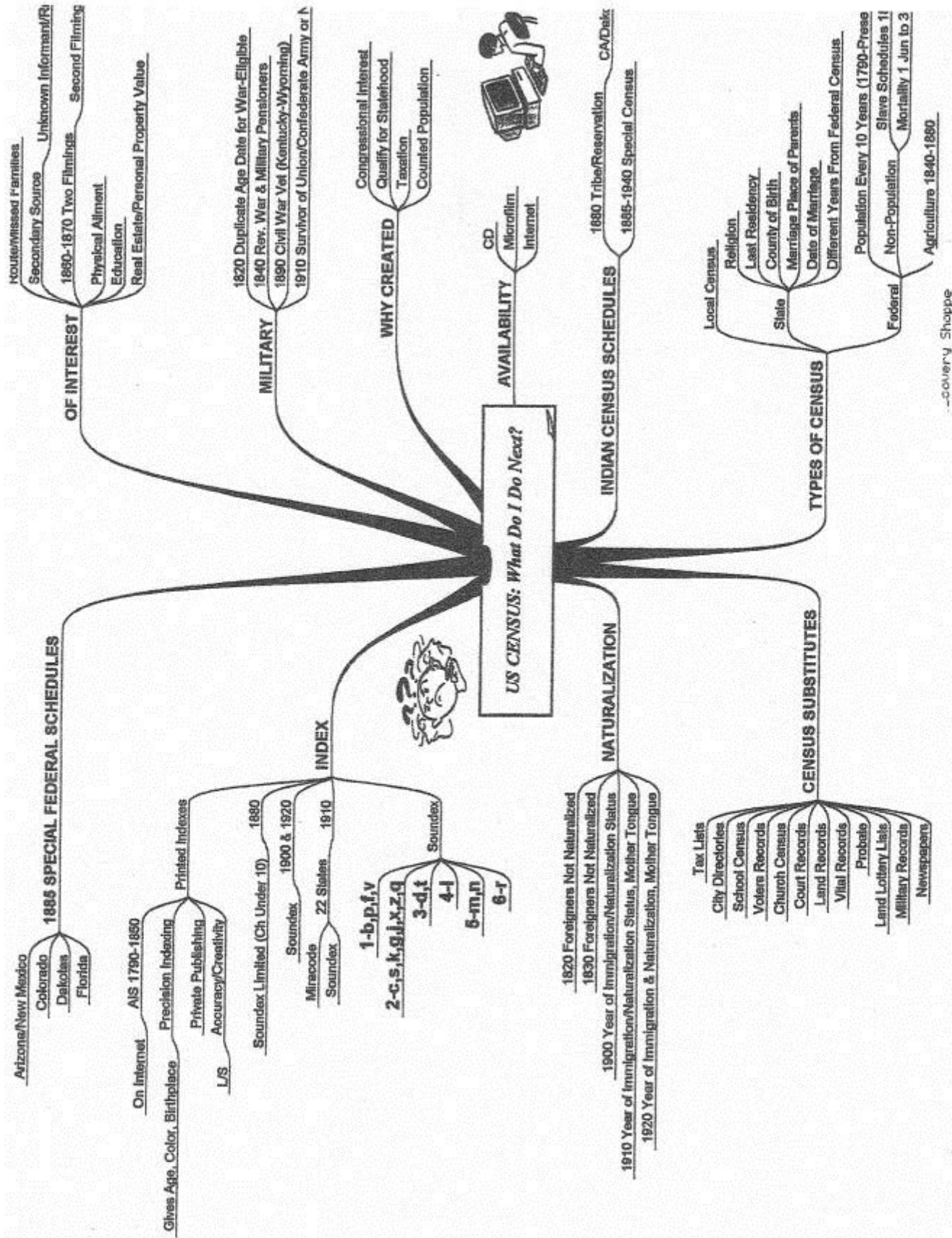


Possible paths of a census taker

Workers gathering records in cities usually followed some sort of pattern, but even so, people whose backyards were separated only by a picket fence might be found recorded many pages apart, depending on the route walked by the census taker.

When people weren't home or only children were present to answer the census questions, some workers filled in the blanks from their own knowledge or gave educated guesses. Usually, however, questions were answered by an adult of the household, making the information generally correct.





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