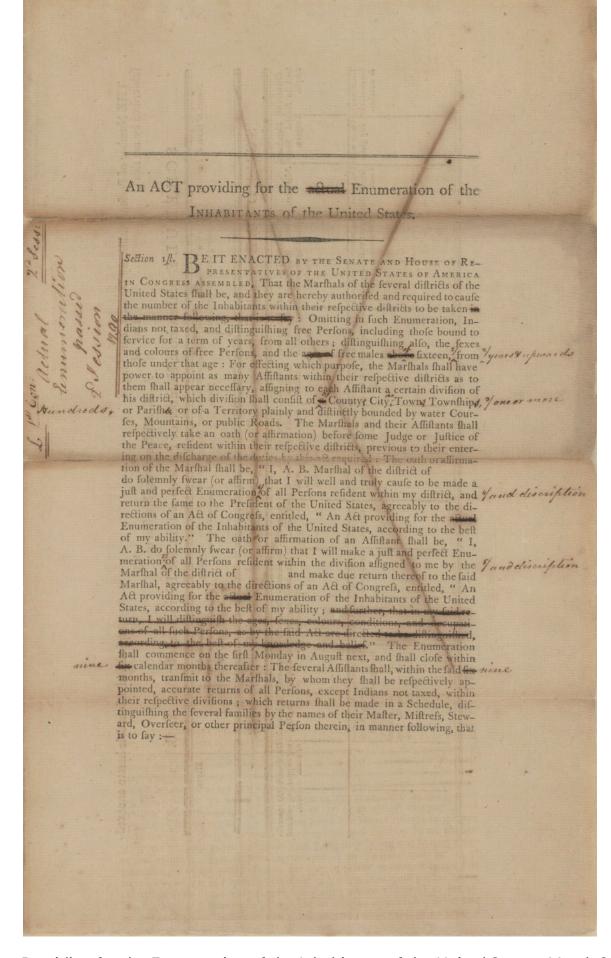
Congress Counts: History of the U.S. Census

March 1, 2015 by hilaryparkinson, posted in Uncategorized

Today's post comes from Samantha Payne, intern in the <u>Center for Legislative Archives</u> in Washington, DC.

The Constitution requires that Congress conduct a census every 10 years to determine the representation of each state in the House of Representatives. When the authors of the Constitution allocated seats in the House for the First Congress, they had no census data to guide them. As a result, the sizes of the first congressional districts varied dramatically. A Massachusetts congressman represented 96,550 people, while one from Georgia represented only 16,250.

To solve this problem, Congress had to determine *how* to conduct a census. The new nation was the first to institute a national, periodical census. The size of the United States made the task rather daunting. The Senate census committee worked for eight months before they decided to start from scratch in January of 1790.



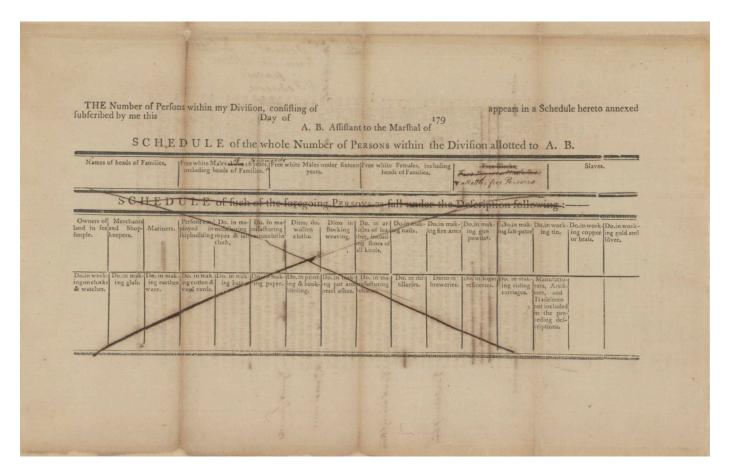
An Act Providing for the Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, March 2, 1790, Records of the U.S. Senate, National Archives

Regional interests dominated the debate over the census. Northern representatives pushed for a rapid enumeration, but southerners insisted on more time, so that censustakers could canvas their large, rural states. On February 4, 1790, Congressman Theodore Sedgwick implied that Georgia's population did not merit three representatives. A South Carolinian retorted that Sedgwick "would not be content until there were 24 members" representing Massachusetts.

Congress also struggled to decide the extent and purpose of the census. James Madison hoped the census would count the number Americans working in the "various arts and professions," ranging from brewers to farmers to arms manufacturers. He felt data on Americans' occupations was "necessary" for Congress to make "proper provision" for agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing. Representatives from across the country attacked Madison's idea as too expensive and difficult, and one congressman even denounced it as unconstitutional. The Senate eventually removed Madison's proposal from the bill.

The bill had other limitations as well. "Indians not taxed" were not counted. Senator Samuel Livermore opposed using the word "female" in the bill, and begged his colleagues to consider how a census-taker could "be so indelicate as to ask a young lady how old she was?" The

final version of the bill substituted the neutral "person."



An Act Providing for the Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, March 2, 1790, Records of the U.S. Senate, National Archives

On March 1, 1790, the President signed the Enumeration Act into law. The act required that the marshals, who were in charge of taking the census in each district, determine the number of free white men, women, heads of families, all other free persons, and slaves. It also mandated that the census-takers distinguish free white males over the age of 16, in order to assess the industrial and military strength of the country.

The results of the 1790 census determined the allocation of seats in the Third Congress, yet disappointed many

Americans. Marshals found that 3,929,214 million people lived in the United States, a much lower number than predicted. Thomas Jefferson suspected that many Americans, hoping for lower taxes, had understated the size of their families. Later enumerations established the substantial accuracy of the first census.

Every 10 years, the House reapportioned its seats based on a new census—until 1920. This census revealed that a majority of Americans lived in urban areas. While the House generally added seats after each census, this time it would need nearly 50 new members to prevent rural states from losing seats.

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House with amendments and recommends that the bill do pass.

UNPRECEDENTED SITUATION

Before entering into a detailed discussion of this bill it would be well for the membership of the House to understand the unprecedented situation which confronts the Congress and the country. A reapportionment bill has been enacted every 10 years since 1790, as provided for by the Constitution of the United States. In every instance since 1790 reapportionment bills were enacted within two years after the taking of the census, as shown in the following table:

Census Paris (1976)	Date of apportionment act	reapportionment act si fair and equency de represe	Date of apportionment act
1790	1789 Apr. 14, 1792 Jan. 14, 1802 Dec. 21, 1811 Mar. 7, 1822 May 22, 1832 June 25, 1842	1850	May 23, 1850 May 23, 1860 Feb. 2, 1872 Feb. 25, 1882 Feb. 7, 1891 Jan. 16, 1901 Aug. 8, 1911

Efforts were made in the Sixty-sixth and Sixty-seventh Congresses to enact reapportionment legislation, but without success. The long honored tradition, therefore, has been broken for the first time and

A Report on the Apportionment of Representatives, January 5, 1929, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, National Archives

For the first and only time, Congress failed to reapportion the House. In 1921, rural congressmen backed a bill to increase the size of the House from 435 to 483 members. When this failed, they blocked each bill that would cause their states to lose seats.

The debate over reapportionment carried on for almost 10 years. In 1928, one Missouri representative insisted that "the House would properly grow within fifty years to more than 1,000 members." A congressman from Detroit blamed his colleagues blocking reapportionment for "trying to save

their own political hides."

The dispute was finally resolved when Congress passed the Permanent Apportionment Act on June 11, 1929. This act required that the Secretary of Commerce reapportion the House after each census. By transferring this power to the executive branch, Congress established an automatic process for reapportionment. The act also capped the number of representatives at 435, where it remains today.

The Center for Legislative Archives is marking the 225th anniversary of the First Congress by sharing documents on Tumblr and Twitter; use #Congress225 to see all the postings.