

identifiable and traceable, among others of the same name and among shifting names and circumstances for the same person.

Track the identity characteristics of the research subject in a word-processing document, genealogy software, or hard copy files while collecting records. These identity characteristics were noted for a man in the 1850 census:<sup>6</sup>

- name: William Hawkins
- age: 23
- birth location: New York
- occupation: Cooper
- presumed wife: Margaret, age 19, born in New Jersey
- inferred child: Richard, age 10/12, born in New Jersey
- residence: Newark, New Jersey
- associates: Harriet S. Hudson, age 4, lived in the household; shared dwelling with Lorinda King and family

Multiple techniques can be used to help understand a person’s identity. The following three strategies move from simple to more complex.

Technique #1: Census comparison

Compare census records over an individual’s lifetime to see if they pertain to the same person, as shown in table 2.

John Wedge lived with his family in Cologne, Mason County, West Virginia, in 1900, 1910, and 1920. His birth year is consistently calculated to be about 1858. His wife is named “Rosa J.” in each census. John had at least ten children. Most children appeared in his household in multiple enumerations and aged approximately ten years between censuses. Identity characteristics such as birth year, spouse’s name, residence, and family composition, not just his name, suggest that these records apply to the same man.

Just as a census comparison can indicate one person over a lifetime, in other cases it can highlight a conflict. Table 3 compares four censuses for John or Jonathan Easterling in Barnwell District, South Carolina. In these pre-1850 census records, only the

CENSUS COMPARISON

Census Year:	1900 <sup>a</sup>		1910 <sup>b</sup>		1920 <sup>c</sup>	
State:	WV		WV		WV	
County:	Mason		Mason		Mason	
Town:	Cologne		Cologne		Cologne	
	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age
	John Wedge	42	John I. Wedge	52	John I. Wedge	62
	Rosa J. "	32	Rosa J. "	42	Rosa J. "	52
	Dorsel "	13	Dorsel "	23		
	Mearla "	12				
	Cecil "	10	Cecil "	20		
	Nannie "	8	Nonnie "	17		
	Syble "	5	Sybel "	15		
	John L. "	3	John "	13	John L. "	22
	Icycl "	9/12	Icyel "	10		
			Joseph "	8	Joseph I. "	17
			Zerna "	5	Zernie "	14
					Roscoe "	9

a. 1900 US census, Mason Co., WV, population schedule, Cologne, p. 80 (stamped), enumeration district (ED) 52, dwelling 242, family 245, John Wedge household.

b. 1910 US census, Mason Co., WV, pop. sch., Cologne, ED 102, sheet 1B, dwell. 8, fam. 8, John I. Wedge household.

c. 1920 US census, Mason Co., WV, pop. sch., Cologne, ED 80, sheet 2A, dwell. 21, fam. 21, John I. Wedge household.

Table 2. Census comparison for a single identity: John Wedge. Citations have been removed from the remaining tables.

head of household is listed. Therefore, the names of spouses and children cannot be used as identity characteristics. The age of the head of household is consistent across the four census records. However, his first name is “John” in 1810 and 1820, and “Jonathan” in 1830 and 1840. John could be a nickname for Jonathan, but that can’t be assumed. John was not an enslaver in 1810 and 1820, while Jonathan was in 1830 and 1840. The changes in name and economic status suggest that these records could apply to two different men. A census comparison that reveals conflicts could be a warning that multiple people with the same name have been accidentally merged.

Technique #2: Timeline

Another technique to sort identities is to create a timeline to see if the dates and places of events are

6. 1850 US census, Essex Co., New Jersey, population schedule, Newark North Ward, p. 39B (stamped), dwelling 407, family 610, William Hawkins household.