

The Rhode Island Federal Census

By Maureen A. Taylor

This is the first article in a series on census records for Rhode Island. Many researchers use the population schedules, but are unaware of other types of census materials that exist, such as special schedules (agricultural, manufacturing, mortality, and veterans), state censuses, and city and town census reports. This column focuses on the federal census material that exists for Rhode Island (both population and special schedules). There is a tremendous amount of information in census records if you know what's available and how to use them.

Background

Federal censuses began in 1790 and have been taken every ten years since then. Since the United States government only releases census schedules seventy-two years after they were created, this means that census material from 1790 through 1930 is currently available. The next release (1940) won't be released until 2012. To better understand the federal census, researchers should consult Loretto Szucs' advice in the chapter "Research in Census Records" from *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, Revised Edition (Salt Lake City, Ancestry, 1997, pp103-46) and Kathleen W. Hinckley's *Your Guide to the Federal Census* (Betterway, 2002).

Before you start using the federal census there are things that you need to know about what information was enumerated and when. Hinckley neatly outlines the basic tools of using the census for genealogical research in her book with charts and well-organized chapters. Researchers should be aware of the following basic "facts" of using the federal census as presented in Hinckley's book:

- 1790–1840: Only lists the head of household and then the number of people in each household.
- 1850–1930: Name of each individual in the household was enumerated.
- 1880: This was the first census to list the street name and house number.
- 1790–1840: Divided family members by sex and age ranges.
- 1830: Included a category for individuals over 100 years of age.
- 1900: Reported the month and year of birth for each person.
- 1850–1930: Lists the place of birth of each person enumerated.
- 1880: Birthplace of individual's parents is noted.
- 1850–1890: Enumerators asked if couples were married within the past year.
- 1880–1930: Marital status recorded.
- 1930: Age at first marriage was reported.
- 1890–1910: Number of children born and number still living.
- 1880: Household relationships recorded (This can help you find other relatives living in the same dwelling.)
- 1820: First census to ask about citizenship.
- 1900–1930: Indicated the person's naturalization status.
- 1850: First census to report the occupation of males in the household (female occupations weren't counted until 1870).

Every researcher should keep in mind the following tip from Hinckley — "there are always exceptions." Census enumerators often recorded additional information that they found interesting. By the same token, they sometimes neglected to record information that should be in the census.

Where to Find the Census

For most enumerations in the nineteenth century there were multiple schedules treating a variety of economic and social matters, but many have been destroyed. Surviving originals are widely scattered. The Rhode Island State Archives (RISA), the Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RIHS) and the [National Archives](#) have a mix of originals, duplicate copies, and microfilm. The National Archives has microfilms of the population census for Rhode Island. [Ancestry.com](#) and [Genealogy.com](#) have digitized versions of the census available online to subscribers of their databases.

[The Rhode Island State Archives](#)

337 Westminster St., Providence, RI 02903

(401) 222-2353

[Rhode Island Historical Society Library](#)

121 Hope St., Providence, RI 02906

(401) 331-8575

What Exists: Population Schedules

1790–1880; 1900–1930

The population schedule is what most people think of as “the census.” The good news is that all years have been microfilmed by the National Archives and widely distributed. The NEHGS Library has microfilms for all New England states from 1790 to 1880 and 1900 to 1930. The census of 1890 for Rhode Island, with the exception of the veterans’ schedules, was destroyed in a fire.

The 1790 census is available in printed form as well in Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Rhode Island* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908)

Indexes

Surviving Rhode Island population schedules are indexed, with the exception of 1910 and 1930. Most indexes from 1790 to 1870 have been commercially produced and advertised extensively. For the 1880, 1900, and 1920 Rhode Island returns, phonetic indexes (called Soundex) were federally prepared and have been widely disseminated on microfilm by the National Archives.

The unindexed census presents special challenges for researchers, especially when trying to locate an individual in an urban setting. There are tools that make that process easier. For instance, city directories cite street addresses and the Census Bureau’s separately filmed *Descriptions of Census Enumeration Districts, 1830–1890 and 1910–1950* (National Archives micropublication T1224) helps identify the correct enumeration district. The corresponding census enumeration district maps at the National Archives and those created by the Rhode Island Historical Society for 1910 also help. Manuscript maps held by the National Archives include six Rhode Island cities: Central Falls, Cranston, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket. Once a street address is known in these cities, an order for the corresponding map can be addressed to

Cartographic and Architectural Branch (NNSC)

National Archives at College Park

8601 Adelphi Road,

College Park, MD 20740-6001.

A helpful discussion of these tools and examples of how to use them appears in the spring 1993 issue of *Prologue*, the quarterly of the National Archives, which is available in the government documents section of many libraries.

Special Schedules

The following schedules can be found at either the Rhode Island State Archives (RISA) or the National Archives.

Agricultural Schedules 1850–80 (RISA)

These enumerate farms with an annual produce of at least \$100 (1850–60) or \$500 (1870–80) giving names of owner (or tenant), acreage, and both type and quantity of livestock and agricultural production. Rhode Island’s agricultural manufacturing and mortality schedules are not among those microfilmed by the National Archives.

Manufacturing Schedules: 1810, 1820 (National Archives); 1850–60, 1880 (RISA) Qualifications for inclusion varied across time. Only two pages of the 1810 Rhode Island schedule survive. These pages represent Kent County and have not been microfilmed (NARA houses them with materials from Record Group 29, Bureau of the Census). For

1850 to 1870, the schedules include fishing, mercantile, and mining operations that grossed at least \$500 per year. The 1880 schedule focused on general industry.

Mortality Schedules: 1850–1880 (RISA)

Theoretically, the mortality schedules in these census years list all individuals who died within twelve months prior to the office census date (June 1), giving such personal data as name, age, birthplace, race, and cause of death. In reality, the returns are far from complete but still invaluable.

Veterans' Schedules: 1890 (National Archives).

Union veterans and their widows appear on a special schedule that includes name; veteran's rank, company, and regiment or vessel; dates of enlistment and discharge; length of service; post office address; and disabilities. These are the only known surviving schedules for Rhode Island in 1890. There is an index to this census schedule.

Remember to keep good records of the census pages you locate. Print out a copy of the page so that you can refer to it again in the future or use a special pre-printed form for transcribing information. In the rush to find your next ancestor in the census, you might overlook a vital clue offered by a census document. Transcribing full information and making copies enables you to consult the pages for additional material when you reach a research roadblock.

So now that you are aware of the wide range of censuses available to track down those Rhode Island ancestors, you can use them to expand what you know about those individuals. You are sure to find data that you didn't know, such as occupations, number of marriages, and previously unknown children.