

# Rhode Island Local and State Censuses

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While the use of federal population schedules is common practice to most genealogists, state and local census materials are often neglected. This is probably due to the fact that many researchers aren't aware of the wealth of census documents that exist on the state or city level.

## State Census

Rhode Island state censuses were taken at ten-year intervals between 1865 and 1935, although the 1895 returns are missing. The Rhode Island State Archives (337 Westminster St., Providence, RI 02903) has microfilm copies of all the state material mentioned here. If you need additional information about their holdings, contact archivist Ken Carlson at (401) 222-2353. The Rhode Island Historical Society has microfilms of the 1865, 1875, and 1885 censuses.

State censuses, like those on the federal level, were taken at ten-year intervals. The first Rhode Island state census was taken in 1865 and the last in 1935. The census of 1895 is missing. Some of these censuses contain only basic information (name, birthplace, occupation, etc) and others are more detailed. I have listed the characteristics of each of the Rhode Island state censuses below.

### 1865:

An every name index makes this census easy to use. It includes: "name of every person, (man, woman or child), whose usual place of abode was in the family on the first day of June, 1865," including those absent due to service in the Army or Navy. Also listed is the person's age, occupation, birthplace (name of Rhode Island town or if elsewhere just the state), and whether he or she was a naturalized voter. No relationship is mentioned for the members of a household. If you are trying to verify military service, this is the census to consult. One of the columns identifies the branch of the service the individual served in (Army or Navy) or the branch in which they were currently enlisted.

### 1875:

Several years ago, a dedicated genealogist named Al Eastwood indexed this census. While Eastwood is no longer with us, his legacy lives on in the card index he created, which currently resides at the Rhode Island State Archives. The basic information appears in this census such as name, age, and occupation. This time the relationship between the members of a household was recorded.

### 1885:

Patience is needed to use this census. It is arranged loosely by town, males and females are separated, and nothing is indexed. All the males who share the first letter of a surname are grouped together, followed by all the females according to town. Each family is designated a number so it is possible to recreate households by that number. The number of individuals living in the household is beside the family number. While the family number helps you recreate the household, it can be difficult to find a member of the household that had a different surname without scanning the whole roll. Al Eastwood indexed Bristol County, but died before completing the rest. The index is at the Rhode Island State Archives. This census contains the same categories as the 1875 census, but includes more data on voter status — real estate, personal, or registered.

**1895:** missing

### 1905:

The enumerators used cards instead of books to record the data for the most informative of the Rhode Island state censuses. Females were asked a few additional questions pertaining to children.

Male cards contain: name, residence (street and number), town, county, voting district, ward, relation to head of family, color or race, age, date of birth (sometimes including month, day, and year), place of birth, native or foreign born, conjugal condition, year of immigration to the U.S., number of years in U.S., number of years resident in Rhode Island, number of months resident during census year in town (or city) in which now living, place of birth of father, place of birth of mother, naturalization, voter (real estate, personal, or registered), able to read/write, occupation

(thirteen years old and up), months unemployed during year, whether a Union soldier, sailor, or marine during the Civil or Spanish American wars (state which war), if they receive a pension, and religion (Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Jew). If Protestant, identify denomination.

Female cards differ by asking if the individual was a mother, and if so, how many children and how many were still living; and whether she was the widow of a Union soldier, sailor, or Marine during the Civil or Spanish American War, and if she received a pension.

#### **1915:**

Arranged by town, but there is no index. There are finding aids at the Rhode Island State Archives to assist researchers with using this census. It contains name, address, relationship to head of family, personal description (sex, color or race, age at last birthday), nativity (of person and parents), citizenship, and occupation.

#### **1925:**

Only the basic data was recorded for this census — name, birthplace, occupation, citizenship, and the relationship between members of the household. While there is no index, the Rhode Island State Archives has a finding aid available.

#### **1935:**

All information for this census was recorded on punch cards and arranged by town. Sometimes the specific birth date and place is mentioned. Rather than just listing occupation, the enumerators also wrote down the name of the employer. See my earlier article on finding employment records for assistance in locating additional information based on that clue. The name of the school was recorded for students. If you want to know if your ancestor ever had the measles, this is just one of the many small facts recorded in this census.

Unfortunately, Rhode Island didn't continue with state censuses after 1935. Legislation was introduced to the General Assembly in 1945 to produce a census, but it was never done.

### **Locality Specific Census**

There are three known local enumerations for Providence —1791, 1825, and 1845 (only half of the second ward). All are available on microfilm at the Rhode Island Historical Society. For additional information on the types of material in that repository consult their newly redesigned [website](#), which contains a list of manuscript finding aids as well as research help for genealogists.

#### **1791:**

Taken in the year following the first federal census, this local return was lost until Charles B. Allen found it in his father's papers and gave it to the *Providence Journal* in 1868. It was later given to the Rhode Island Historical Society. According to the Society it "seems to be arranged in order of visitation, and is divided into north, south, and west parts of town. It lists the names of Heads of Families, and counts for each household of Number of Dwelling Houses, Free White Males over and under 16, Free White Females, All Other Free Persons, and Slaves."

#### **1825:**

Census taker Noah Smith, Jr. counted the heads of families by breaking the enumeration down into columns: white males and white females under 18, 18 to 45, 45 to 75, and over 75 as well as "coloured males" and "coloured females" under 18, 18 to 50, and over 50. There is also information on the Friends Boarding School, Brown University, the Alms House, and the jail.

#### **1845:**

Only a section of the east side of the city was recorded in 1845. Once again it is just heads of families with counts for each category. Under male and female there is more specific data than earlier censuses: under 5, 5 to 10, 10 to 15, 15 to 20, 20 to 30, 30 to 40, 40 to 50, 50 to 60, 70 to 80, 80 to 90, 90 to 100 and over 100. The small age ranges means that genealogists can use this information to add to what is known about their family. Persons of color were counted under different categories: under 10, 24 to 36, 36 to 55, 55 to 100, and over 100. There is no category for the age range 10 to 23. According to the Rhode Island Historical Society, this census also counted the insane and students. In several instances, notes were added about certain household's ethnicity or location. A list of all individuals aged over 70

appears in the volume.

The following three censuses are only available in the Manuscript Department at the Rhode Island Historical Society.

**Persons Liable for Military Duty, 1873**

There are nineteen notebooks that list men eligible for military service, their ages, and their addresses.

**Military Census of Providence, 1881**

This list of men between the ages 18 and 45 is arranged by the first letter of the surname in each ward.

**Military Census of Providence, 1882**

Contains the same data as the Military Census of 1881.

Anyone looking for information on relatives living in Rhode Island or its capital city of Providence should visit the Rhode Island State Archives to examine the state census records or the Rhode Island Historical Society for the Providence census. The additional material found in these records could add individuals to your family tree, confirm your ancestor moved in the years between censuses, or provide evidence of citizenship or military service.