

They Had Names: Identifying Children Represented by Tick Marks in Pre-1850 Censuses

A Legacy Family Tree Webinar Sponsored by the Board for Certification of Genealogists

15 June 2021

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Objective

Learn how to extract information represented by tick marks on pre-1850 censuses and correlate that information across decades and with evidence from other types of records to discover the identities represented by those tick marks.

Introduction

Don't ignore the tick marks in pre-1850 U.S. censuses because they lack individual names. These censuses contain valuable information that can be correlated across the decades and with other records to identify who the tick marks represent. Even when vital records are lacking or scarce, other records can provide evidence to correlate with the tick marks. Family associated with each other throughout their lives. They often lived and moved together. Land and later census records can infer relationships that can be tested against the individuals hypothesized from analyzing the early census records.

Genealogical Proof Standard

The foundation for determining identities of people who lived in the past is the genealogical proof standard. All five elements are necessary to establish proof of identity and relationship. The method presented in the lecture and syllabus will focus on analysis and correlation of evidence, but it relies on the rest of the GPS to reach soundly reasoned conclusions.

- Reasonably exhaustive research
- Complete and accurate source citations
- **Analysis and correlation of relevant evidence**
- Resolution of conflicting evidence
- Soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion

From: *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. revised, (Washington, D.C.: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2021).

The United States Census

Understanding the information gathered for each census is vital to interpreting the tick marks in early censuses. The census instructions can be found on the U.S. Census Bureau website (www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/census_instructions). The legislation authorizing each census, defining the age categories, and the date the enumeration was to begin is also on the U.S. Census Bureau website (<https://www.census.gov/history/www/reference/legislation/>).

Printable forms for each census can be helpful in determining which age categories are in which columns in the earlier censuses when enumerators drew up their own forms. The U.S. government did not provide pre-printed forms until 1830. These worksheets from the National Archives and Records Administration give the column headings for each census:

1790, census day August 2

<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/genealogy/charts-forms/1790-census.pdf>

1800, census day August 4

<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/genealogy/charts-forms/1800-census.pdf>

1810, census day August 6

<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/genealogy/charts-forms/1810-census.pdf>

1820, census day August 7

<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/genealogy/charts-forms/1820-census.pdf>

1830, census day June 1

<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/genealogy/charts-forms/1830-census.pdf>

1840, census day June 1

<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/genealogy/charts-forms/1840-census.pdf>

Other printable forms

FamilySearch Wiki has United States Census Forms with an overview of the headings for 1790-1860 and worksheets by year: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Census_Forms

Ancestry provides census forms: <https://www.ancestry.com/cs/census-forms>

Birth Year Ranges from Census Age Classes, a helpful chart to quickly define the year range for each age category: <http://dgmweb.net/Census/General/BirthYearRangesFromAgeClasses.html>

State Censuses

Many states conducted censuses in between the federal censuses. The FamilySearch wiki contains information on states with extant censuses:

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Census_State_Censuses

New York state census availability from the New York State Library:

<http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/genealogy/nyscens.htm>

Calculating an Inferred Birth Year Range

This table illustrates a method for correlating the age ranges in the 1800 through 1840 censuses of a man born in 1772.

Year	Age	1730	1740	1750	1760	1770	1780
1800	26-44			1751	—————		1774
1810	26-44				1761	————— 1784	
1820	45+	—————					1775
1830	50-59					1771	————— 1780
1840	60-69					1771	————— 1780

Inferring a birth year range is accomplished by determining the the years of overlap of the age categories from more than one census. For this illustration, the table is set up with columns by decade to avoid overcrowding using individual years. Any interval of years can be used in setting up this type of analysis table.

- A man born in 1772 was likely too young to be a head of household in 1790.
- In the 1800 census, his tick mark would be in the 26-44 age category. He would have been born in the range of 1751 to 1774. The beginning and end years in the appropriate decade column are joined with a line to cover the span.
- In 1810 he would be in the same age category. But the birth year range for the category advanced by ten years and covers 1761-1784.
- If his age was accurately reported in both 1800 and 1810, this man was born between 1761 and 1774-the overlap of those two ranges.
- The 1820 census does not narrow down his age range any further, since the man has advanced to the last and broadest age group. But it does reinforce the 1761 to 1774 range.
- By 1830 and 1840 the man’s age was reported in ten-year categories, allowing us to further define the beginning of the range to 1771.

Tracing the overlap down the 1770 column, the earliest year that is covered in all the census ranges is 1771. The latest year is 1774. We can infer that this head of household was born between 1771 and 1774, which is a significantly smaller range than reported in any one of the censuses. 1772 is contained in this range.

Analysis Tools

Presenting the tick mark data in a tabular form can make trends, gaps, and inconsistencies apparent. Analyzing tick marks across the 1800, 1810, 1820, 1830, and 1840 censuses can also lead to additional research questions. The information can be presented in a variety of ways from hand drawn timelines, tables, and preprinted forms to tables created in word processing software or spreadsheets. These analysis tools are flexible enough to contain working hypotheses, research notes, and questions for further research in addition to the gender, age, and geographic information contained in the censuses.

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Printable forms:

Census Comparison form by J. Mark Lowe, CG, at Kentucky - Tennessee Research Associates

http://www.kytnresearch.com/uploads/1/0/7/9/10790949/pre1850_form_2008rev.pdf

version for the enslaved:

http://www.kytnresearch.com/uploads/1/0/7/9/10790949/pre1850_slave_fpc_form.pdf

Tables and spreadsheets: Create a table in a document using word processing software or create a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel, Apple Numbers, or Google Sheets. Column headers should include the hypothesized person defined by gender, the census year (and place), the birth year range defined by the census age category, and the combined implication based on comparing more than one census. Each tick mark initially gets its own line, but multiple censuses can be entered in one row when a person can be identified from census to census, such as the head of household in this example. Analysis of the table or spreadsheet will reveal logical continuity of tick marks for children from census to census. The hypothesized individuals must be tested against evidence from additional research. Additional columns can be added for notes and citations.

Hypothesized Person	1800	1810	1820	Birth Year range	Combined Implication
male head of household	M 26-44	M 45+	M 45+		1755-1764
female	F 26-44			1755-1774	1755-1774
male		M 16-25		1784-1794	1784-1794
female	F U10			1790-1800	
female		F 16-25		1784-1794	
female	F U10			1790-1800	
female	F U10			1790-1800	
female		F U10		1800-1810	
female			F 16-25	1794-1804	
male		M U10		1800-1810	
male			M 16-18	1802-1804	
female		F U10		1800-1810	
female			F 10-15	1804-1810	
male			M U10	1810-1820	

