



West Virginia Archives & History News



VOLUME I, NO. 4

JUNE, 2000

FEDERAL CENSUS RECORDS

From the Editor

One of the mainstays of genealogy research is the United States Census; consequently, it is one of the most frequently used resources in the West Virginia Archives and History Library. We hope the June issue of our newsletter will help you in making more effective and knowledgeable use of the valuable information that can be gleaned from over 100 years of census data. We have all available West Virginia census returns on National Archives microfilm for your use, as well as statewide Soundexes for 1880-1920, and many index books for the state and for selected counties and years. Several books have been published that provide tips on using and understanding census data (See **Book Review** this issue.)

Meanwhile, if you visit the Archives Library you will notice that half of the chairs in the Library Search Room are missing. We are having them re-upholstered in a lovely striped fabric which should brighten up the Library considerably. We hope to have the project completed before our usual rush of summer visitors, but we will pull out our desk chairs if necessary on a busy day! Please come see us soon.

We welcome your questions and comments. Please direct any correspondence concerning the newsletter to Susan Scouras, Archives and History. Please direct any correspondence concerning our Web site to Joe Geiger, Archives and History.

UNITED STATES CENSUS

When using the census to research family history, the genealogist must keep in mind the contemporary factors affecting each census as explanation for variations in names and spellings and for “missing” entries. The level of education and degree of dedication of the census taker often determined the quality and legibility of the information recorded. Consider the following comments written by the census taker at the end of the 1820 Hall County, Georgia, schedules:

“The difficulties were very considerable that attended taking the census, in the first place, the inhabitants are very dispersed, in the second place the country being but lately settled, there are but few roads, in the third place great part of the Country are very Mountainous, and in the fourth place it was, except in the oldest settled parts, difficult to get nourishment for either myself or horse, and often when got, had to pay very high, in the 5th place had often to travel a considerable distance through fields to get to the dwelling cabins, often, and generally, drenched in dew, particularly in August and September; and often had to walk many miles where it was so steep that I could not ride, or even set on my horse.” (Dollarhide, The Census Book, page 5.)

Sounds very much like West Virginia in the 19th century, doesn't it? Add to those hardships the fact that some people did not *want* to be found

or had good reason not to identify themselves correctly, and the researcher will understand why not all of his relatives are listed, or are not listed with the expected name, race, age, etc.

Spelling and handwriting differences are two factors to be considered when reading the census. Spelling was not the more concrete habit we are accustomed to today. Phonetic spelling was accepted among the general public, which meant that the choice of alphabet used to represent certain sounds would vary among people with different accents or interpretations of sounds. Also, far fewer people than in the 20th century, particularly women and non-whites, were able to read and write well, if at all, during the times of the first dozen censuses. The census taker asked questions and wrote down the answers as he heard them, or as he was used to spelling them. (As Jaime Lynch says, you can “hear” their voices when “Minerva” is recorded as “Meenarvy.”) Even if the census taker had asked for a spelling, the individual often did not spell his own name the same way every time.

The use of more elaborate cursive **handwriting styles** than we have learned ourselves can also contribute to misinterpretation. The different methods of penmanship used, especially for capital letters, can make a record hard to understand. A letter that may be seen as either a “W” or an “M” can be figured out if followed by “oses” or “illiam,” but not if standing alone as an initial. Comparing words or individual letters that are identifiable elsewhere on the page or in the same document often solves the problem. There are a number of reference sources available to aid in interpreting 18th and 19th century handwriting. In the Archives we use The Handwriting of American Records for a Period of 300 Years, by E. Kay Kirkham.

Lack of original copies of census returns for comparison complicates interpretation and accuracy even further. In earlier censuses, the returns may have been rewritten by the census taker himself or copied by a court clerk. Clues that indicate the document is a copy and not an original are names listed in alphabetical order in a 1790-1820 census return, or the handwriting appearing

to be the same page after page, even when the name of the census taker or the enumeration district changes. The 1850-1870 censuses on the National Archives microfilm in use today may even be *copies of copies*, since the original returns were supposed to be kept by the county, with a copy going to the state’s secretary of state, who in turn made another copy. Either the county copy or the secretary of state’s copy of the copy was forwarded on to Washington. All 1880 census records on microfilm are copied from the originals which were kept at the county courthouses. No copies were required to be kept at the state level for that census.

Most of the county originals have been lost or destroyed over the years. **The few originals that have survived highlight the inaccuracies of the copies.** A genealogist who compared the National Archives microfilmed copies to county originals found in Minnesota and Wisconsin wrote:

“I have personally found many discrepancies between the Federal and State copies themselves, and vast differences between them and the originals (i.e., the county copies)! Whole names have either been changed or omitted. Ages have been copied wrong. Whereas, in the originals, the surnames of each family are generally written over and over again, in the copies the word “ditto” or its abbreviation “do” appears instead. When written over and over, a surname has much less chance of being written incorrectly!” (Dollarhide, The Census Book, page 11.)

From 1900 through 1940, few or no originals exist for comparison to the microfilmed copies. In order to conserve storage space, in 1940 the Census office began microfilming the Federal copies of the 1900 through 1940 returns and burning them as the filming was completed. This is especially unfortunate, since some of the microfilming was not done well. We can only hope that improved digital enhancement technology will eventually provide more legible copies of those poorly filmed.

The mystery of the disappearing records can be explained. All kinds of stories exist as to what happened to some census records, such as the 1790

and 1800 Virginia censuses. Before 1830, the Federal Census original record sheets were kept by the U.S. District Court clerks. Only statistical summaries were sent to the President. In 1830 the clerks, who had been mandated to preserve the old originals, were ordered to send those records to Washington. Some records were never received by the Census office. **Virginia's 1790 and 1800 returns (which included present day West Virginia and Kentucky) are considered lost.** Whether the papers were lost in transit, the clerks had not kept them as directed, or the clerks simply did not comply with the new order is not known. Researchers will encounter material described as a **"reconstructed census"** that consists of names compiled from tax lists and other contemporary sources. Please be aware that these lists are *not* drawn from a true Federal census record.

The 1890 Census was destroyed as a consequence of a 1921 fire in Washington, D.C. The few surviving fragments were saved and copied onto three rolls of microfilm, listing less than .0001% of the nation's population. The portion of the 1890 Union Veterans Census containing West Virginia was saved also, and is available on microfilm. Ironically, 1890 is the only year in which no copies were made of the Census. Each family was recorded on a separate sheet, making it too expensive in the eyes of Congress to authorize payment for extra copies as had been done in the past. Only one Georgia county and one Louisiana county that chose to make and keep copies of their county returns at their own expense have an 1890 census.

The Census Soundex, an index which lists surnames coded by the way they sound when pronounced, is an important tool for locating an individual or a family in the 1880-1920 censuses. For the many surnames which have varied in spelling over the years, the Soundex eliminates a lot of extra search time and guess work by grouping together similarly pronounced surnames, no matter how they are spelled.

The need for an index to the Federal Census arose after many people who wanted to apply for Social Security retirement benefits found that they had no official birth record to prove age. The

Census Bureau was asked to provide a census record for those retirees, necessitating some way of finding individuals quickly. The Bureau decided to index *only heads of households with children ten years or younger* in the **1880** census, because applicants who were 55-65 years old at that time in 1935 would have been ten years old or younger in 1880. For Bureau purposes, indexing the full census was not needed. The **1900** and **1920** censuses were fully indexed as secondary verification of age, since the 1890 census was lost to fire. In the 1960's, an index to the **1910** census was compiled for only 21 states. Luckily for us, West Virginia was one of the states chosen. For the **1930** census, due to be released in 2002, seven West Virginia counties will be included in the Soundex.

We assume the criteria for choosing states/counties to be indexed include the size of the population and the quality of birth records available. As we all know, birth records in several areas of West Virginia have proven to be inadequate or inconsistent over the years. Presumably the advent of better recordkeeping by 1940 will mean that we will not see a Soundex prepared by the Bureau of the Census in the future.

In spite of the many hazards and handicaps involved in using Census data, most knowledgeable researchers will be able to gather information on an individual family as a unit that is unavailable elsewhere. Census data correctly recorded and interpreted provides a time capsule glimpse into the makeup and status of their lives in that year. The 1930 Census will tell you if the household had a radio!

[An important reference for this article was The Census Book, by William Dollarhide. *See review.*]

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BOOK REVIEW

The Census Book: A Genealogist's Guide to Federal Census Facts, Schedules and Indexes, by William Dollarhide, published by Heritage Quest, 2000.

We have been very impressed with the tremendous amount of helpful information clearly explained by Dollarhide in a well-organized format. He provides a good overview of the Census, covering both why and how statistics were gathered. Many commonly asked questions about the differences in the Census from one decade to the next are answered, and interesting insights into Census history are provided that facilitate use of the data. A valuable asset of Dollarhide's work is the inclusion of a CD-ROM copy of the entire volume which allows the user to print out copies of 13 maps, 17 tables and 29 census abstraction forms. Both novice and expert genealogists will find helpful and interesting material to aid their research. The Archives Library copy will be shelved in the Ready Reference area behind the Reference Desk. Copies of forms, etc., can be printed from the CD-ROM on request for patrons' personal use only.

NEW TITLES

TITLE: AUTHOR, PUBLICATION DATE.

Library Catalog: Daughters of the American Revolution: Centennial Supplement: Acquisitions: 1985-1991: NSDAR, 1992.
1999 Statistical Handbook: West Virginia Research League: The League, 2000.
Come, Full Circle: and Other Stories: Margaret Gadd Fowlkes, 1998.
The Shawnee: Kohkumthena's Grandchildren: Dark Rain Thom, 1994.
The Cherokees and Their Chiefs: In the Wake of Empire: Stanley W. Hoig, 1998.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

PLEASE CHECK OUR WEB SITE (<http://www.wvculture.org/history>) FOR GENEALOGICAL and HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEETING ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND FOR MORE COMPLETE INFORMATION ON ACTIVITIES LISTED BELOW:

NOW EXTENDED UNTIL THE END OF JULY: A SLAVE SHIP SPEAKS: THE WRECK OF THE HENRIETTA MARIE. State Museum, Cultural Center.

WEST VIRGINIA 2000 CELEBRATION, JUNE 17. State Capitol Grounds.

WEST VIRGINIA DAY*, JUNE 20. Archives Library will be open regular hours.

WEST VIRGINIA DAY CELEBRATION, JUNE 20. Independence Hall, Wheeling.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY WEST VIRGINIA! GENEALOGY WORKSHOP, JUNE 20. Sponsored by Mining Your History Foundation. Cultural Center.

INDEPENDENCE DAY, JULY 4. Archives Library will be closed.

2ND ANNUAL COL. GEORGE S. PATTON CIVIL WAR WEEKEND, AUG. 12-13. Craik-Patton House, Charleston.

LABOR DAY, SEPT. 4. Archives Library will be closed.

BERKELEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL HISTORIC HOUSE TOUR, SEPT. 9-10.

**Only the Archives Library will be staffed--all other Archives offices will be closed.* The State Museum will be open any time the Archives Library is open. The West Virginia Library Commission Library in the Cultural Center is closed weekends and all holidays.

ARCHIVES LIBRARY HOURS ARE 9:00 A.M. TO 5:00 P.M. MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY, AND 1:00 P.M. TO 5:00 P.M. ON SATURDAYS. HOLIDAY HOURS ARE AS POSTED.

WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATIVE NEWS

By **FREDRICK H. ARMSTRONG**, Director of Archives and History, Division of Culture and History.

The West Virginia legislature in the 2000 session enacted three bills which have the potential to affect many Archives and History Library patrons and researchers. As each has been signed into law by the governor, they hold the potential for making more information and more records available for family history research. The specific bills are Senate Bill 90, Senate Bill 460, and Senate Bill 592. Each, as passed into law becomes effective July 1, 2000, but without funding during fiscal year 2000-01.

The legislature did continue the **Project Access** fund, set at \$500,000 for the current fiscal year and added an additional \$300,000 for next year. The legislative intent for Project Access funds states that these funds are to be expended to reformat specific county birth, death and marriage records to an electronic form to be made accessible on the Internet. Archives and History has been working with other state agencies in the development of the contract required for this project.

Senate Bill 90, generally referred to as the **Cemetery Bill** during the session, changes the West Virginia *Code* so as to provide researchers access to graves located on privately owned lands. The new article, 13A in Section 37 of the *Code*, states that those "conducting genealogy research" shall have the right of ingress and egress to a cemetery or grave on private land upon giving the owner of record or occupant of the property or both "reasonable notice." The researchers are responsible for conducting themselves so as not to damage the private land or grave and are liable for any damage caused. The legislation does not permit access by motor vehicles unless a road or adequate right-of-way exists and the owner has given written permission to use it. The law further

provides injunctive relief for a researcher denied access by instituting a proceeding in the circuit court of the county in which the cemetery is located. The legislation as written appears to provide the access some family members and researchers have been denied in the past, without unreasonable threat or compromise to private property rights of owners and occupants of lands on which a private grave or cemetery resides.

The other two laws passed during the 2000 session provide a framework or process for the improved management, access and preservation of county and/or political subdivision records. The definition of a political subdivision includes all units of county and municipal government. **Senate Bill 460 calls on Archives and History, through its Commission, to develop and submit rules for a program of matching grants to political subdivisions to protect and preserve documents and records.** These rules will be drafted during June and then submitted to the Archives and History Commission for consideration and approval, then filed with the Secretary of State for the required thirty-day opportunity for public comment prior to filing with Legislative Rule-Making Committee by September 1. For the public comment period the draft rules will be posted on the Internet with statewide press announcements soliciting review and comments. The Legislative Rule-Making Committee will study the rules as submitted during the fall and then submit them as a bill during the 2001 legislative session. This will provide an opportunity to make it known that a legislative appropriation will be needed to implement the matching grants program according to the rules as passed.

Senate Bill 592 also has a direct impact on public records. This law established a **County Records Management and Preservation Board** of nine members, three ex-officio and six appointed by the governor from lists provided by professional organizations. It also established a fee of one dollar (\$1.00) for each filing with the county clerk of one

p.5 to ten pages and an additional dollar for

each increment of ten pages. This fee, less ten cents, is placed in a special account established by the State Treasurer of which up to fifty percent may be used for grants to counties for records management, access and preservation purposes. Archives and History provides staff to the County Records Management and Preservation Board in its work to develop a system of records management and preservation for county governments, including the establishment of a program of grants to county governments to make county records management and preservation uniform throughout the state. These programs and rules are to be completed by July 2001 and submitted to the legislature for consideration in the 2002 session. This board is authorized during the second year to conduct a study of state record needs with the State Records Administrator and executive agencies and make recommendations to the legislature on establishing rules for a uniform records management and preservation system for state agencies.

Senate Bills 460 and 592 call for considerable work in behalf of county records and offer the greatest opportunities ever for improved management, access and preservation of these public records. The legislature has continued the study of public records, at least county records, conducted under special joint Finance Subcommittee B last year, and under special joint Judiciary Subcommittee A this year. This will keep the many public records needs and issues before the legislature, and various clerks, archivists, county officials, and vendors will be addressing this subcommittee during the monthly interims. *Family historians, users of the public record, and all interested parties need to monitor these meetings and this study and become involved.* Many of these records are fragile and their continued existence, even as transcribed information in an alternative format, may be in doubt. The question may well be decided by no action, or by resolution based on funds available, an answer most family historians would definitely find unpalatable.

ARCHIVES AND HISTORY STAFF

Fredrick Armstrong: Director
Debra Basham: Archivist (photographs, special collections)
Greg Carroll: Historian (Civil War, Native American history)
Dick Fauss: Archivist (microfilm and moving images)
Elaine Gates: Part-time Library Assistant (microfilming and microfilm repairs)
Joe Geiger: Historian (Web page, publications)
Ed Hicks: Photographer (archival photography, darkroom)
Mary Johnson: Historian (John Brown)
Jaime Lynch: Library Assistant (Records of the 1700's and early 1800's, Pennsylvania)
Cathy Miller: Library Assistant (WV State documents, periodicals)
Sharon Newhouse: Secretary to the Director.
Harold Newman: Library Assistant (microfilming, Revolutionary War)
Pat Pleska: Part-time Library Assistant (Clipping File)
Susan Scouras: Librarian (cataloging, Kentucky, library collection, newsletter editor)
Bobby Taylor: Library Manager
Nancy Waggoner: Office Assistant
 Contract employees working on special projects:
Constance Baston and Allen Fowler.

***WE NEED VOLUNTEERS!!
 PLEASE CALL US FOR MORE
 INFORMATION.***

AFRIGENEAS WEST VIRGINIA WEB PAGE

The Web site AfriGeneas is seeking a host for its West Virginia Page. We would be glad to assist anyone willing to undertake this responsibility. If you are interested in hosting this Web page, go to www.afrigeneas.com/community/states and click on West Virginia.