WHERE WERE YOUR ANCESTORS IN 1790?

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The first census act was passed 1 March 1790 "by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled." [All quotes from the introduction to *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States taken in the Year 1790*, produced by the Government Printing Office at the beginning of the twentieth century.] This introduction says:

"The schedules of 1790 form a unique inheritance for the Nation, since they represent for each of the states concerned a complete list of the heads of families in the United States at the time of the adoption of the Constitution. The framers were the statesmen and leaders of thought, but those whose names appear upon the schedules of the First Census were in general the plain citizens who by their conduct in war and peace made the Constitution possible and by their intelligence and self-restraint put it into successful operation."

Could these people, many of whom had known more than one conflict and change of government, have dreamed that over two centuries later their many-greats grandchildren would see a disputed presidential election settled without violence or bloodshed, solely because of the provisions of that enduring document?

Who were your ancestors in America in 1790? Where did they live? How old were they? My project to compile such a list for myself revealed several eye-opening discoveries about my research and the way I was treating my ancestors as people.

The 1790 census (which was supposed to be as of the first Monday in August, but was not completed until 1791 in some areas) provides us less information than any other. We have only the name of the head of household and counts for free white males 16 and over; free white males under 16, free white females, other free persons, and slaves. The canvassing, which covered residents in 17 present-day states, found 3,929,214 persons with almost 18% of them enslaved, in approximately 540,000 households (about seven persons per household).

Because the enumerator was paid $1 for every 150 persons enumerated (half that rate in cities) and because the enumeration would establish a state's representation in Congress, there was incentive on both sides for a complete enumeration.

Unfortunately, the census enumeration was only a partial help to me in answering my question. The schedules for Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Virginia were casualties of the British burning of the Capitol during the War of 1812. While these schedules contained about 30% of the total enumerations, they covered closer to half of my ancestral residences. Substitutes have been constructed, primarily from tax lists, but they lack the household figures.

I began by examining my ahnentafel (a pedigree-numbered list of my ancestors with only birth, marriage, and death information). I hit an immediate snag. While I had birth dates (often estimated) for every ancestor, death dates were frequently lacking. I couldn't tell from my list whether an ancestor born in the 1730s had survived until 1790.

Although my advice in earlier columns has been to put a bracket ("before," "after," or "between") date for deaths, much of my research was compiled before I learned this lesson. Clearly, my ahnentafel needed retrofitting.

I foolishly began by creating a list for the males born between 1700 and 1790 as potential candidates. As I was deleting one who died in 1785, I realized that his widow might well have survived until 1790. She probably wouldn't be a head of household on the enumeration (assuming it was even a state with a surviving enumeration), but she was alive when the Constitution was enacted.

Although I claim to focus my research on females, this made me realize how much I was focusing on the beginning of their lives, to identify their parents. Once their husbands died, I'd pretty much neglected them. Did they maintain their own households or go to live with a child? If so, which child? I felt guilty for the neglect.

I added a field to my ahnentafel: state of residence in 1790. My ancestors migrated. A lot. In just glancing at the chart, I couldn't remember where many of them lived in 1790. When I looked into my files, I discovered this was because I often hadn't focused enough on the migration to have determined this. Therefore, I really hadn't learned as much as I thought I had about the family. I felt guilty again.

The last step involved no guilt. I logged onto Ancestry.com and viewed the 1790 census images where possible. But I didn't just view them as genealogical data. I paused to look at the household construction and the names of the neighbors and ponder a bit on them as people. How did they react to the census enumerator? What might have been their thoughts on the new form of government?

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