

# Censational Census Strategies – Mary Kircher Roddy

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## STRATEGIES FOR FINDING MISSING PERSONS

- Search by first name only or first name and one other parameter – James is James is James and indexers generally recognize it. But Ahern might be misheard as Hern or mistranscribed as Abern
- Search by middle names and/or initials – Henry Michael might show up as Henry in 1870 and Michael in 1880
- Look for known relatives and then page backward or forward
- Understand and use wildcards – make sure to wildcard for double letters and vowels. For example Barrett might be Barrit, Barit, Baret, etc... B\*r\*t\* will pick up most of these
- Search for young children – this works because they are more likely to be identified on the census closer to their real age (it's harder to mistake a two-year-old for an eight-year-old than it is a 42 year old for a 48-year old.) Also if you have kids born on the 7, 8, or 9 years (1857, 58 or 59) they are more likely to appear on the census near where they were born and be listed with a correct birth state than their parent who might have been born in Pennsylvania, raised in Ohio and living in Iowa – Dad's birthplace might be listed as any of those
- Find known neighbors – If you can't find your ancestor in 1920 – search for his 1910 neighbors (next door or within a page or two) and you might find your ancestor. It works great for homeowners but some people are long-term renters and you'll find them in the same place for decades

## MAKE THE MOST OF THE RESOURCE

- Look at the neighboring households – you might find family members there – married daughters or unknown siblings
- Look at the birthplaces of neighbors near your ancestor. Make note of those that came from the same place as your ancestor or his wife. They may be unknown relatives. They may also be part of a chain migration scheme. If you get stuck and you can't narrow down exactly where in Pennsylvania or Germany your ancestor came from, start to research his neighbors born in the same general place. It may very well be you'll find their specific place of origin and when you start digging in the records from that location, you'll find your ancestor started from there, too.
- Look on the right side of the census – particularly for 1880 and beyond. Tick marks in columns for insane or idiotic, months in school, months out of work, etc can tell you much about your ancestors' lives. The data is there – use it!

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- Even if no relationship is specified (particularly on 1870) that doesn't mean there isn't one – if your farmer ancestor has a laborer or farmhand or even a servant in the house they might be a nephew or sister-in-law. Take the time to research these people – they might lead you to more family members or places of origin
- Compare, compare, compare – Compare your ancestors to their neighbors. Was everyone of the same ethnic base? Is your ancestor a professional in a neighborhood of laborers? How does his educational level, the value of his property, his homeownership status compare with his neighbors? Look at the birthplaces of his children compared with the birthplaces of the neighbors' children – did he just move to this community or was he one of the early settlers in a community? All these points of analysis will help, too, when it comes time for you to write your family history.
- Compile a list of surname variants – from census records across time and from known relatives

### MISCELLANEOUS MISTAKES

- Just because you've found your person once on the census, don't necessarily stop looking. I have found several people in my research listed twice and heard reports of people being listed 3 or more times
- Remember the censuses we use are copies, not the enumerator's original work. The census taker might have made mistakes when she or she copied the data onto the forms to be turned in
- The 1870 census had some particular issues – semi-literate enumerators in the South may have missed 10% of the population. It was so bad in some northern cities that a second enumeration was taken in New York City, Indianapolis, Philadelphia and St. Louis. If you have people listed in these cities in 1870 be sure to try to track down both enumerations
- Where children are listed with a fractional age, eg 7/12, these numbers can sometimes be misread, resulting in their age being shown as 72
- Genders may be mis-recorded, perhaps because of nicknames or semi-androgynous names like Francis. If you can't find your person and you just know they should be there, try them with a different gender
- Check the last images in the set for an enumeration district. For example, on the 1940 census, I have found 2 members of a household enumerated on one page and then 38 pages later, near the end of the listings for that particular enumeration district I've found one or two more

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members of that same household, and they were family members, not boarders or someone who might easily be missed. Same issues on 1910 in San Francisco.

- Get to know your census taker – the enumerators generally lived in close proximity to where they enumerated. Try to find their household listed on the census just so you can “know” them better. Also consider what ethnic relationship they have to their clientele. If they or their parents are of the same ethnic background as the people they’re enumerating, they are more likely to get the names right in an immigrant community. Always look at who the enumerator was.

### JUST BECAUSE...

- As they say, “If all else fails, read the instructions.” The enumerators were given instructions and were trained (more or less) to take the census. Look at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/tEnumInstr.shtml> to see the instructions for the enumerators for various census years. Learn what “boarder” and “lodger” meant for the census
- Make use of maps – if you can find a map contemporary to the census, use it to track the census taker’s path. It might help you to recognize a “misspelled” ancestor or confirm that an ancestor was indeed missed by the enumerator
- The census pages were not always filmed in order. If you find your family at the bottom of a page, and you go to the next page and don’t see more family members, verify that the household numbers are following in numerical order. It may be that the “next” page might be out of order.
- Soundex isn’t dead –Soundex was valuable because it worked. And it still works, because letters still sound alike. So keep those groups of sound alike letters in your head. When you just can’t find your ancestor Mr. Avon Barksdale with the Bs, try looking for him as Parksdale. And mix up the inside-the-word letters as well. Spiros Vondopolous might be recorded on the census as Vontafalis
- Pay it forward. When you find your person - misspelled, mistranscribed, miswhateverhisnameis, - provide the alternate information to Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, wherever. It might help another researcher and it’s good karma for you.