

Snapshots of America: Pages from the 1880 Census**Era: The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900)**

Document Citations: Page 1, E.D. 100, Salem, Henry County, Iowa, U.S. Federal Population Census, 1880, (Microfilm Publication T9, Roll 344), Record Group 29 (RG 29); National Archives-Central Plains Region, Kansas City, MO.

Page 2, E.D. 101, Shawnee, Johnson County, Kansas, U.S. Federal Population Census, 1880, (Microfilm Publication T9, Roll 384), Record Group 29 (RG 29); National Archives-Central Plains Region, Kansas City, MO.

Page 32, E.D. 4, St. Louis, St. Louis City, Missouri, U.S. Federal Population Census, 1880, (Microfilm Publication T9, Roll 717), Record Group 29 (RG 29); National Archives-Central Plains Region, Kansas City, MO.

Page 2, E.D. 190, Territory N.W. of Holt, Unorganized Territory, Nebraska, U.S. Federal Population Census, 1880, (Microfilm Publication T9, Roll 757), Record Group 29 (RG 29); National Archives-Central Plains Region, Kansas City, MO.

Background:

The Federal Population Census has been taken every ten years since 1790. The Constitution requires the taking of a decennial census in order to ensure that each state is allotted the correct number of seats in the House of Representatives. By 1850, the census collected much personal information about Americans. This data is of great value to historians studying communities for two reasons: it gives a statistical portrait of ages, occupations, birthplaces, and other factors for virtually every community in the United States, and it gives concrete information about individuals.

In 1880, as in previous census years, the Census Bureau employed enumerators, or census-takers, to go from door to door collecting information on each household within an enumeration district. The enumerators wrote the information on worksheets, and then transferred the data to the official census sheet before sending it to the Census Bureau. Errors are not uncommon: the enumerator may have been given incorrect information, or he might have recorded it incorrectly. Misspelled names are quite common: the spelling of a name was not among the questions asked.

These four census pages demonstrate the variety of people and communities found throughout Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska in 1880. They can be used together or separately. The page from St. Louis, Missouri depicts a neighborhood in what was then the sixth-largest city in America, while the other three pages depict small town, village, and rural America.

Suggested Teaching Activities.

1. Form class into groups and give each group a copy of each of the four transcription pages **with the location information removed**. Tell students that these pages are from the 1880 census, and that each page is from one of four states: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, or Nebraska. Depending on your preference, give additional clues. Ask students to try to determine the state each page comes from. Discuss each group's conclusions as a class. Use this discussion as a springboard for exploring the differing forms of economic development and settlement in various parts of the Midwest and the contributing factors.
2. Give students a copy of the Constitution, and ask them to find the portion (Article I, Section 2) that directs the government to take a census (enumeration) every ten years. Discuss the primary purpose of the census, and how we have adapted it to serve other uses as well.
3. Divide students into four groups and give each group one of the census pages and its transcription. Assign each group to tally and analyze the birthplaces of the people found on the census page. Discuss the results and place them in their historical context.
4. Assign each student the identity of a person on one of the census pages, and ask the student to write a first-person paragraph or give an oral report introducing this person, his or her family, and the neighbors using the information found on the census.
5. Divide students into groups and assign a topic such as occupations, family structure, ethnicity, or literacy, to each group. Ask each group to analyze the census page data pertaining to the topic. Then have each group report to the class, using visuals such as a chart or graph, on the results of the analysis. For instance, do the occupations reflect a local economy based on agriculture? Would any of the occupations have required formal education?
6. Find the St. Louis neighborhood visited by the census-taker using one of the addresses listed on the left-hand side of the census page and mapping software. Investigate the history of this portion of the city, and discuss whether or not the census data supports historian's conclusions about the area.
7. Find a historical map or birdseye view of one or more of the communities represented in the census pages. The Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, which are available at some libraries, work well for St. Louis. Give students an opportunity to examine the map. Brainstorm ways in which a historian can increase his or her understanding of community by examining a graphical representation of it.
8. Conduct a classroom census on a neutral topic. Have one student act as the enumerator and gather the information from each student orally. After each student has been interviewed, show the results to the class. Discuss how the data might be interpreted. Are any trends apparent? Are there any errors due to the way the census was taken?