

1890 Census & Fire

Of the census schedules, perhaps none might have been more critical to studies of immigration, industrialization, westward migration, and characteristics of the general population than the 1890 (Eleventh Census) of the United States, taken June 1890. United States residents completed millions of detailed questionnaires, yet only a fragment of the general population schedules and an incomplete set of special schedules enumerating Union veterans and widows are available today. This is a genuine tragedy of records--played out before Congress fully established a National Archives.

There was not a permanent Census Bureau until 1902. The Dept. of the Interior administered the 1890 census. Enumerators were appointed mostly for political reasons. 47,000 in 1890 and no examination required.

From 1790-1880 censuses required all or part of the schedules to be filed with the county but this was not done in 1890. The only copy was forwarded to Washington D.C. Note--if an individual was gone, the census taker was authorized to obtain information from the person living nearest to the family.

U.S. population was returned at nearly 63,000,000 people. Many indictments were filed as a result of this census from fraud.

In 1896, the original "special schedules" for mortality, crime, pauperism and special classes (deaf,dumb,blind & insane) were badly damaged by fire and then destroyed by a Dept. of the Interior order.

- * In January, 1921, at about 5:00, a fireman noticed smoke coming from the boiler room into the file room. The smoke was intense but firemen made it to the basement. They poured 20 streams of water into the building and flooded the cellar. By 9:45 pm, the fire was out but the firemen continued to pour water on the burned area. There was ankle-deep water covering

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the records.

The damage was discovered to be extensive after later examining the documents. They waited for the insurance companies to arrive. Other census records were kept on floors higher in the building and not damaged. No conclusion was ever reached as to the cause of the fire.

The Census Director recommended that Congress authorize destruction of the 1890 census. Many prominent people and organizations wrote to government officials in protest. By May 1921, the schedules were still stacked in a large warehouse, deteriorating each day.

In December 1932, in accordance with federal records procedures of the time, the Chief Clerk of the Bureau of Census sent the Librarian of Congress a list of papers no longer necessary for current business and scheduled for destruction. Congress authorized the destruction on February 21, 1933. They were finally destroyed in 1935.