

Genealogy's Greatest Loss:

What Happened to the 1890 Federal Census?

Many genealogy researchers have become frustrated once they began searching for the 1890 US Federal Census. Soon, the researchers learn the 1890 Schedules was destroyed by a fire in the National Archives in 1921. This statement is only partially true. Part of the census was lost in 1921 but the fate of the remaining schedules stands testament to the dangers of government miscommunication and red tape.

The Eleventh Census of the United States taken in June 1890 would have provided a wonderful study of our country if available today. Over 47,000 enumerators usually chosen by political appointment, distributed the schedules in advance to give the residents time to complete the forms. Once completed the population of the US topped over 62 million individuals.

Shortly before publication in 1896, the original 1890 special schedules for mortality, crime, pauperism and benevolence, special classes, and portions of the transportation and insurance schedules were damaged and finally destroyed by the Department of the Interior. However, according to a 1903 census clerk the general population schedules seem to be in good shape.

In the afternoon of January 10, 1921, the schedules were located in the basement of the Commerce Building. That afternoon, building fireman James Foster reported seeing smoke. The fire department was called.

The fire was contained to the basement level of the building but flooded most of the area. Once extinguished no immediate surveys were done of the damage. The records were allowed to remain soaking in water overnight. The next morning when the damage was assessed. The census director, Sam Rogers sent a note to the Secretary of Commerce reporting:

“...a cursory examination show that the census schedules from 1790 to and including 1870, with the exception of those for 1830 and 1840, are on the fifth floor of the Commerce Building and have not been damaged. The schedules of the censuses of 1830, 1840, 1880, 1900 and 1910 have been damaged by water, and it is estimated that ten percent of these schedules will have to be opened and dried and some of them recopied.”

These schedules were located in the basement in a vault considered at the time to be fire and waterproof. However, the archivist had discovered a small broken pane of glass, which allowed water to seep in damaging the schedules located in low shelves. .

The 1890 schedule did not fair as well. It was located outside the vault. Director Sam Rogers continued and reported in the same document to the Secretary of Commerce the damage.

“Approximately 25 percent of these schedules have been destroyed and it is estimated the 50 per cent of

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the remainder have been damaged by water, smoke and fire.”

The preliminary report by Census Bureau Clerk T. J. Fitzgerald was much more pessimistic. Fitzgerald reported that the 1890 records were ruined and that no method of restoration would be capable of restoring the records.

The cause of the 1921 fire was never determined. Although some speculate that a worker in the basement was smoking and set off the blaze. Others believe bundles of papers spontaneously combusted causing the blaze.

The remaining schedules of the 1890 census abandoned by the government, survived for many years. Rumors speculated that Census Director Sam Rogers had recommended that the schedules be destroyed. The public and historians were outraged and began a letter writing campaign. Each letter received much the same reply the records were not to be destroyed and plans were being made to provide a suitable archive.

In May of 1921, the census remained in temporary storage and the new census director William Steuart reported they would gradually deteriorate. The records returned to the census building at Steuart's order.

Ten years would pass and finally in December of 1932, the Chief clerk of the Bureau of Census sent the Librarian of Congress a list of papers to destroy. Included in the list was Item 22, “Schedules, Population-1890, Original.” The librarian gave the okay to destroy the list of records including the 1890 Census Schedule. Congress authorized the destruction and February 21, 1933. Only a small note in the census bureau file marks the official demise of the record. It state “remaining schedules destroyed by Department of Commerce in 1934 (not approved by the Geographer.)”

Of course, many researchers fail to realize that some of the original schedule still exists. In 1942 during the move to the new building a bundle of the Illinois schedules appeared during a shipment. In 1953, more fragments were discovered including those from Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas and the District of Columbia. The remnants of the 1890 census have been filmed and are available through many sources. There are only three rolls of microfilm containing the records. Only about 6,000 names are listed on these precious pieces of our past.

Many researchers lament over the loss of these records but we must be grateful that most pages of the United States Federal Census Schedules survived. Imagine just how difficult North American research would be without the census.

