



## Using Agricultural Schedules to Research Our Farming Ancestors

Presenter: John Manning

### Background

- As far back as the 1820 US decennial census, the government was interested in how many people were engaged in farming. Before 1820, the U.S. census primarily focused on the population size in specific areas. U.S. and state agricultural census schedules can provide us insight into the lives of our farming ancestors.

### Early History of Agricultural Surveys

- 1791 – Arthur Young, an English researcher, requested that George Washington provide information on farmland prices, types of plants and livestock raised, and prices paid for commodities.
- 1792 – The Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture was established, making it one of the earliest agricultural societies in the U.S. and soon followed by other States.
- 1819 – The U.S. Department of Treasury prepared a report on agricultural imports and exports.
- 1837 – Massachusetts completed a four-year study on agricultural production in each county in the Commonwealth.
- 1838 – Martin Van Buren proposes the establishment of a Bureau of Agriculture. As a result, agricultural information was collected and published in the 1840 Census of Agriculture.

### Agribusiness is Part of Our American History

- In America's earliest days, almost everyone was a farmer to provide food for their families.
- By 1840, estimates indicate that about nine million people were farmers, comprising about sixty-nine (69) percent of the workforce.
- Farm machinery evolved from improved horse-drawn plows and reapers to agricultural steam engines that powered farm machinery like threshing machines.
- Westward expansion, the Homestead Act, and the nation's needs all increased the demand for agricultural products.

### What Ag Censuses Are Available for Genealogists?

- Federal (non-population) censuses were recorded for 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880.
- State agricultural censuses were generally recorded as part of either the Federal Census or the State's Decennial Census.
- Not every State collected the information.
- Some regional digitally searchable examples include:
  - Kansas: 1865, 1875, 1885, 1895, 1905, 1915, 1925
  - Missouri: 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880
  - Iowa: 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880
  - Nebraska: 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880
  - Illinois: 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880
- **A key point to remember is the data in the reported year is from the previous farming year (e.g., the 1870 census is the 1869 farm data).**

### What Kind of Information Can We Find?

- What was the farmer's name, and how much property did he own?
- Was the property improved (suitable for farming) or unimproved?
- What type of fencing was used (stone, rail, barbed wire, etc.)?
- What is the value of the land and buildings?
- What types of livestock did he raise?
  - Cattle, Hogs, Sheep
  - Milk cows
  - Chickens
- What types of crops did he produce?
  - Types of grains (corn, oats, wheat, sorghum) or hay (alfalfa, grasses)
  - Types of trees used in production (apple, peach, cherry, berries)
- What was the profit (or loss) from the previous year's farming activities?
- How did the family live (daily chores)?
- Did they become more or less wealthy over time?
- Did they change their farming practices?
- As the farmer aged, how did that affect farming operations?

### Research Sources:

- **Ancestry.com:** "U.S., Selected Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850-1880".
- **FamilySearch.org:** "United States Census Agriculture Schedules".
- **Federal Agricultural Census Summaries:** U.S. Department of Agriculture/National Agricultural Statistics Service: <https://www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/>.
  - These summaries contain data for states and counties (not townships) from 1840 through 2017.
- **USDA Census of Agriculture Historical Archive:** <https://agcensus.library.cornell.edu/>.
  - This is a collaborative project between Cornell University and USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS).
- **State and Local Archives**
  - Missouri: <https://www.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/census/pages/agsup>
  - Kansas: on microfilm for 1919, and 1937 to 1981.

### Recommended Reading:

- Dollarhide, William, *The Census Book: Facts, Schedules & Worksheets for the U.S. Federal Censuses*; (Family Roots Publishing; 2019), ISBN: 978-1628592665.
- Hurt, R. Douglas, *American Farms: Exploring Their History*; (Krieger Publishing Company, 1996), ISBN: 978-0894648915.
- Hurt, R. Douglas, *Agriculture in the Midwest, 1815–1900*; (University of Nebraska Press, 2023), ISBN: 978-1496233493.
- Manning, John, "Insight from Agricultural Schedules: A Farmer's Life in Pottawatomie County, Kansas." *Kansas Kin*, Riley County Genealogical Society (May 2023), [https://rileycgs.com/upload/2021\\_November/Kansas\\_Kin\\_v61\\_n1\\_May\\_2023\\_R\\_1682813325\\_1682820237.pdf](https://rileycgs.com/upload/2021_November/Kansas_Kin_v61_n1_May_2023_R_1682813325_1682820237.pdf) : accessed 17 June 2024.