

# RACE, IDENTITY & THE U.S. CENSUS

## *From Creation to Classification to Control*

Racial labels in America were not created by the people being labeled.  
They were created by governments for tracking, control, labor, and law.

## BEFORE CENSUS & COLONIAL AMERICA (Pre-1790)

### Identity BEFORE America

- People identified by:
  - Nation / tribe
  - Family
  - Language
  - Religion
- No one identified as “Black” or “White” in a racial sense
- These are modern political categories

### Early colonial terms used (not census yet):

- African
- Moor
- Negro (from Spanish/Portuguese negro = “black/dark”)
- Slave / Servant (status, not race)

Race had not yet been standardized  
Status mattered more than skin tone

## 1790 FIRST U.S. CENSUS

The U.S. Constitution required a census for:

- Taxation
- Representation
- Property & labor counting

Categories used in 1790:

- Free White Males (16+)
  - Free White Males (under 16)
  - Free White Females
  - All other free persons
  - Slaves
- 
- Enslaved people were not named
  - Not identified by ethnicity or origin
  - Counted as property (3/5 compromise)

This was economic accounting, not identity recognition

## **EARLY 1800s RACE BECOMES FIXED (1820–1840)**

As slavery expanded, so did racial labeling.

New distinctions appear:

- Free Colored Persons
- Slaves
- Whites

The word “Negro” becomes standardized in government use.

- “Negro” becomes a legal race
- Laws begin attaching rights and restrictions to race
- Identity becomes biological in law, not cultural

## **MID-1800s SLAVERY To EMANCIPATION (1850–1870)**

1850 Census

- First time enslaved people counted individually (still unnamed)
- Categories include:
  - White
  - Black
  - Mulatto

“Mulatto” was used to track mixing, not identity

1870 Census (Post-Emancipation)

- First census after slavery
- First time formerly enslaved people counted as persons

Categories:

- White
- Black
- Mulatto

Still no African, no tribe, no nationality

This is when:

- “Slave” to “Freedman”
- “Colored” becomes common socially

## **LATE 1800s EARLY 1900s (1880–1930)**

Racial science and eugenics influence census categories.

Additional labels appear:

- Quadroon
- Octoroon

Purpose:

- Measure “blood”
- Enforce segregation
- Support Jim Crow laws

This period:

- Solidifies White vs Negro
- Erases ethnic origins
- Reinforces inferiority narratives

## **1930 CENSUS A MAJOR SHIFT**

For the first time:

- “Negro” becomes the dominant federal term
- “Mulatto” is removed

Categories simplified to:

- White
- Negro
- Indian
- Chinese
- Japanese

Why this matters:

- Identity compressed
- Diversity erased
- One label applied to millions of different people

## **MID-1900s CIVIL RIGHTS ERA (1940–1960)**

Terms in use:

- Negro (official)
- Colored (social)
- Black (emerging cultural identity)

1950–60s:

- “Black” begins to be reclaimed
- “Negro” still used by government

Important distinction:

- Government labels lag behind cultural shifts

## **1970 CENSUS “BLACK” BECOMES OFFICIAL**

For the first time:

- People could self-identify
- “Black” replaces “Negro” in many forms

Categories:

- White
- Black
- American Indian
- Asian

This marks:

- Increased agency
- Still no ethnic specificity

## **1980–1990s “AFRICAN AMERICAN”**

“African American” emerges as:

- A cultural-political term
- Inspired by other hyphenated identities (Italian-American, etc.)

Used to:

- Reconnect to ancestry (symbolically)
- Gain political recognition

But still:

- Africa is a continent, not ethnicity
- No tribe, no language, no nation specified

## **2000–PRESENT MODERN CENSUS**

Current options include:

- Black or African American
- White
- Asian
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- Two or more races

Optional ethnicity question:

- Hispanic / Latino (not considered a race)

Still missing:

- Tribal origins
- Ancient identity
- Biblical lineage
- Ethnic precision

## **SUMMARY: WHAT THESE NAMES WERE REALLY FOR**

Term - Purpose

Slave - Property & labor

Free Colored - Legal status

Negro - Racial classification

Black - Visual grouping

African American - Political & cultural identity

None of these were created to restore identity

All were created to administer populations

**Census:** A government population count used historically for taxation, representation, and administration.

**Classification vs Identity:** Administrative labels do not equal cultural or ancestral origin.

**Historical labeling:** Categories changed over time based on legal and political priorities not personal identity restoration.