

## **NAVIGATING THE NEW YORK CENSUS WITH FEWER TEARS**

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### **Introduction**

There were several state censuses taken in New York starting from 1790. The most valuable for genealogical purposes are the 1905, 1915, and 1925 censuses because that was a time of large influx of immigration. There were numerous assorted aids for navigating through those censuses, but they were often hard to use, covered only specific years or boroughs, and were not available at all libraries.

### **When was the Census Taken?**

The federal census was taken every ten years since 1790.

The New York State census was taken irregularly between 1782 and 1814. It was then taken every ten years between 1825 and 1875. It was taken again in 1892, and the last three were taken in 1905, 1915, and 1925.

In addition, a New York police census (policemen were the census takers) was taken in 1890, but this covered just Manhattan and a small portion of the Bronx.

### **What's in the Census?**

From 1825 to 1845 they were more concerned with statistics than people. The census listed only the heads of household by name. From 1855 to 1875 it listed the name of every person and the place of birth. The 1892 census is the least useful because it doesn't demark where one family ends and the next starts. The 1905 to 1925 censuses are the most useful and most well preserved – they again delimit families, and this was a time of large influx of immigration.

### **Where is the Census?**

Most of the pre-1855 material was not saved. Other years have been preserved on microfilm. Many libraries have copies of these microfilm, such as the New York Public Library, the New York Municipal Archives, the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, and the Family History Library. And recently the census images have been placed on line.

### **Why is the New York census so important?**

Five percent of the US population lived in New York City in the early 1900s. Furthermore, half of the US Jewish population lived there at that time. And more than half of the arriving immigrants settled in New York City for at least a few years before

moving on to points westward, and so quite possibly were enumerated in one of the New York censuses.

### **The Census Taker (1905-1925)**

In 1905 the census taker made two dollars a day and one cent a name. In 1915 he got a raise to two cents a name, and in 1925 he got another raise to three dollars a day. The fact that he was paid by the name would sometimes cause him to be creative in adding names.

He started work on June 1 and was given two weeks to complete the census. He was instructed to be polite unless the respondent was rude to him in which case he had the right to call in the police. He was sometime viewed with suspicion and sized up as a spy. Whole families sometimes moved out for the day to avoid him.

The census was overseen by Florence E. S. Knapp, the NY secretary of state and first woman in NY ever elected to public office by a statewide vote. She was later found guilty of misappropriating money from the State census fund of 1925. The Knapp case turned out to be a factor in the 1925 census being the last New York census ever taken.

### **Finding People in the 1905-1925 Censuses**

There are name indexes for the 1905-1925 census, but often you will not be able to find a person by name. In those cases the census must be searched by address. Your first step is to find out where the person lived in one of the census years. The following aids can be used to determine that:

1. City directories (like phone books but without the phone numbers)
2. Federal census from five years earlier or five years later
3. World War I draft registration cards
4. Voter registration cards
5. Newspaper articles
6. Family documents such as birth, marriage, or death certificates, naturalization records, school records, employment records, religious records, and personal letters.

However the census is not organized by address, so finding the address is only the first step. The census is organized by assembly districts (AD) and election districts (ED). So the next step is determining in what AD/ED a particular address lies.

But what is an AD and ED? An AD is a district represented by an elected official (an assemblyman). The AD boundaries are drawn so that each AD has roughly the same number of people. An ED is a subdivision of an AD, and has one polling place. So the ADs were drawn for representation and the EDs for voting. Neither was created for the census. But to make things simple, it was decided to assign one AD/ED to each census taker, and to organize the census by AD/ED.

The task of obtaining the AD/ED for a particular address was not a simple one. Different aids for doing this existed at different facilities. Some of these aids were:

1. Maps that showed the boundaries of each AD and ED. These exist for 1915 and 1925 but not for 1905.
2. Newspaper descriptions of AD/ED boundaries. These exist for Brooklyn and Manhattan in 1905.
3. Index cards, one for each address, that gives the AD/ED of that addresses. Exists for Manhattan in all three years, for Bronx in 1905, and for Queens in 1915 and 1925. However it is not clear how to interpret the information found on the Queens cards.
4. Address to AD/ED lists. These exist for Brooklyn and Manhattan in 1915. They list each street and give the AD/ED for each range of addresses on the street.
5. Lists showing which streets are in which AD/ED or vice versa. Exists for Brooklyn 1925 (shows the streets in each AD/ED) and Bronx 1925 (shows the AD/EDs that each street passes through).

### **The One-Step Approach**

To say the above aids were cumbersome to use is an understatement. But all this information could serve as the raw material from which to develop tables for a web-based tool that could convert an address to an AD/ED. This was the basis of the New York Census ED/AD finder on the One-Step website (<http://stevemorse.org>). This is a universal on-line finding aid that covers all the boroughs of New York City in each of the three census years.

The One-Step AD/ED finder lets you find an AD/ED in one of two ways. For certain borough/year combinations it lets you select the street and specify a house number, and will show you the AD/ED corresponding to that address. For other combinations it lets you select the street and various adjacent streets (cross streets) and it shows you the AD/EDs that are common to the selected streets.

Although the One-Step AD/ED finder is very simple to use, it does present problems in certain cases. For one, there are some AD/EDs that have diagonal boundaries – that is, the boundary goes diagonally through a city block with two sides of the block's rectangle being in one AD/ED and the other two in another. This problem in geometry results in cases for which the selection of adjacent streets might not be enough to narrow the result down to a single AD/ED but instead give you several that you have to try.

Another problem is the rampant changing of street names that occurred in Queens and in Staten Island. The street names used in the One-Step AD/ED finder are those names that existed when the census was taken. But you might need to find cross streets for a particular address. And to do so, you would use one of the mapping websites, which contains the contemporary names of streets. So you would need some way of converting the new names to the old names and vice versa.

The One-Step site does two things to alleviate the street name-change problem. For one, it provides a Street-Name-Change tool which will show you a list of the name changes. For another it will sometimes have new names as well as the old names in the list of streets that you can select from, so you can directly select the names of streets found on the contemporary map without having to first determine the old names of the streets.