Don't Ignore Census Enumerators Post-1870

Stuart W. Doyle suggests that local canvassers had a better chance for accuracy because of their familiarity with the people whose lives they recorded

(U.S. Census Bureau)

The federal decennial census is a principal resource for novice and expert researchers of their US ancestry. The initial six censuses, from 1790 through 1840, provide pertinent genealogical details such as the names of household heads who were free citizens, age groupings per household, name and ages of pensioners (1840), immigration and naturalization data (1820 and 1830) and occupation labeled under agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing categories. Women were invisible for the most part, and slaves received no acknowledgment until 1850. That year's census, and the 1860 edition, included schedules that identified human chattel, but only by age, gender, color and occasionally other physical descriptions. The 1850 census added particular value to the enumeration process because it was the first to record the name, age, race/color and gender of all free citizens per household. The 1880 census offered more by specifying the relationship of all household members to whoever headed it.

Without a doubt, the details one can glean from the federal census, even when they are not fully accurate, can open doors to the past. Those portals may reveal facts that validate hunches and suspicions, or reveal serious weaknesses in theories and accepted beliefs. There is one item of census information, however, that researchers generally may ignore, but should not. It is the census enumerator. When uncovering ancestral truths based on census data, researchers could fare well by considering the name of the person who documented the population in their focus area.

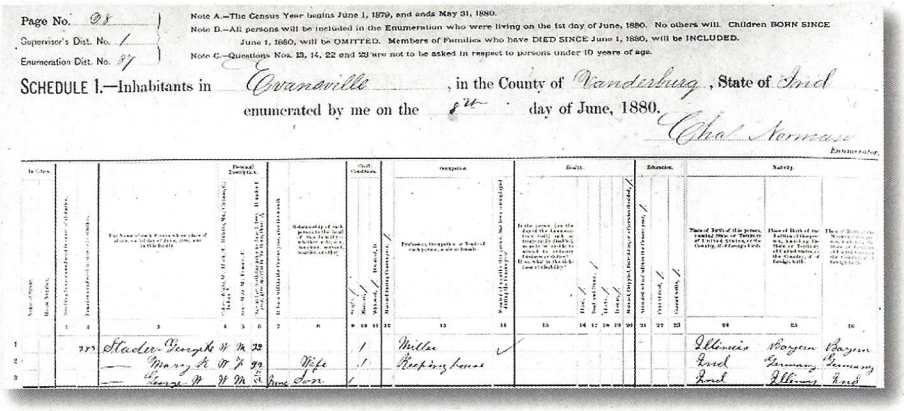
This observation can prove fruitful when studying the 1880 census and those following. The reason is that you may see the names of local citizens as county enumerators. In other words, a neighbor of your ancestor may have performed the day-to-day census chore. Charles Norman of Evansville, Indiana was an example. Born in May 1847, Norman had become a teacher before marrying in 1876 and living his remaining days, until August 1911, in Evansville. By the end of the '70s, he was a sewing machine salesman. Next, he became a canvassing agent who served as the enumerator for part of Evansville in Indiana's 1880 census of Vanderburgh County. At that time, Evansville was a thriving city with a population

totaling 29,280, according to *biggestuscities.com*.

The urban landscape of Vanderburgh County, which is situated on the Ohio River, gives even more perspective into Norman's unique knowledge of the region, especially since he lived there pre and post Civil War. Before the war, runaway slaves targeted Vanderburgh as a gateway to freedom. With Reconstruction came Evansville's burgeoning growth as a commercial and industrial market. In turn, thousands of people migrated there, which led to ethnic and cultural diversity that gave the area a different look and feel.

Although he covered a major city (at that time), Norman would have been knowledgeable in areas such as racial demographics and standard occupations as well as some extended family relationships and histories. He would have been able to record information with a better understanding of the citizens and the community than, say, the marshals whom the government tapped for the job during previous census cycles.

From 1790 to 1840, marshals representing US judicial districts conducted the census; however, they tended to delegate the legwork to assistants. These assistant marshals were enumerators covering specific divisions that included "one or more counties, cities, towns, townships, hundreds, or parishes, or of a territory, plainly and distinctly bounded by water courses, mountains, or public roads", as described in the publication ***First Census of the United States 1790: Vermont.*** Throughout this time, however, a multitude of concerns about the efficiency and effectiveness of the data-gathering process resulted in major changes for the preparation of the 1850 census. This prep time represented a first for public discussion about the nature of the census canvassers. "Up to this point, debate surrounding the census had focused almost entirely around the scope and content of the enumeration," notes the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS USA), a project that collects and distributes US census data. "Congress and the Secretaries of State had not expressed any concern regarding the effectiveness of marshals and their assistants in their job of enumerating the population."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Note A.—The Census Year begins June 1, 1879, and ends May 31, 1880.
Note B.—All persons will be included in the Enumeration who were living on the 1st day of June, 1880. No others will. Children BORN SINCE June 1, 1880, will be OMITTED. Members of Families who have DIED SINCE June 1, 1880, will be INCLUDED.
Note C.—Questions Nos. 13, 14, 22 and 23 are not to be asked in respect to persons under 10 years of age.

SCHEDULE 1.—Inhabitants in Evansville, in the County of Vanderburg, State of Ind
enumerated by me on the 24 day of June, 1880.
Chas Norman
Enumerator.

1800 Census of Evansville, Indiana indicating Charles Norman as the enumerator. (Ancestry.com - photographed and cropped by Stuart Doyle)

By the time of the 1880 census, preparation matters had progressed to where the judicial marshals were replaced by specially appointed supervisors. Among their responsibilities was selecting canvassers (enumerators) using general guidelines with regard to "physical activity, and to aptness, neatness, and accuracy in writing and in the use of figures", to "active" and "energetic" young men "of good address". Census superintendent since 1870, Francis Amasa Walker advised "Unless the officer appointed be fairly proficient in all clerical exercises, he will find his duties [very] trying and his pay very meager." He preferred enumerators who possessed prior experience as officials or in certain occupations, according to IPUMS USA. A further description of the attributes desired is as follows:

"Township assessors and other local officers" were "almost beyond the reach of error" due to their familiarity with "the names, residence, occupations, personal characteristics, and to a degree the history of the inhabitants"; postmasters at small offices had learned precision in filling out forms; country physicians appreciated "the value of reliable statistics" and understood "vital conditions . . . and the history of families"; and schoolteachers were "accustomed to Keep lists and make reports."[1]

[1] Ruggles, Steven, and Russell R. Menard. CENSUS OF POPULATION, 1880 (UNITED STATES): PUBLIC USE SAMPLE (Computer file). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Department of History, Social Science Research Laboratory (producer), 1994. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (distributor), 1995.

Given that background, researchers should look again at censuses post 1870 to see if the enumerator's name is recognizable. If it is unfamiliar, per se, determine if the surname was common locally. Or, conduct a quick search via Ancestry.com or other genealogy databases to find out if the enumerator was a local resident. When that is the case, there is a better chance to assess the validity of the data recorded for each household.

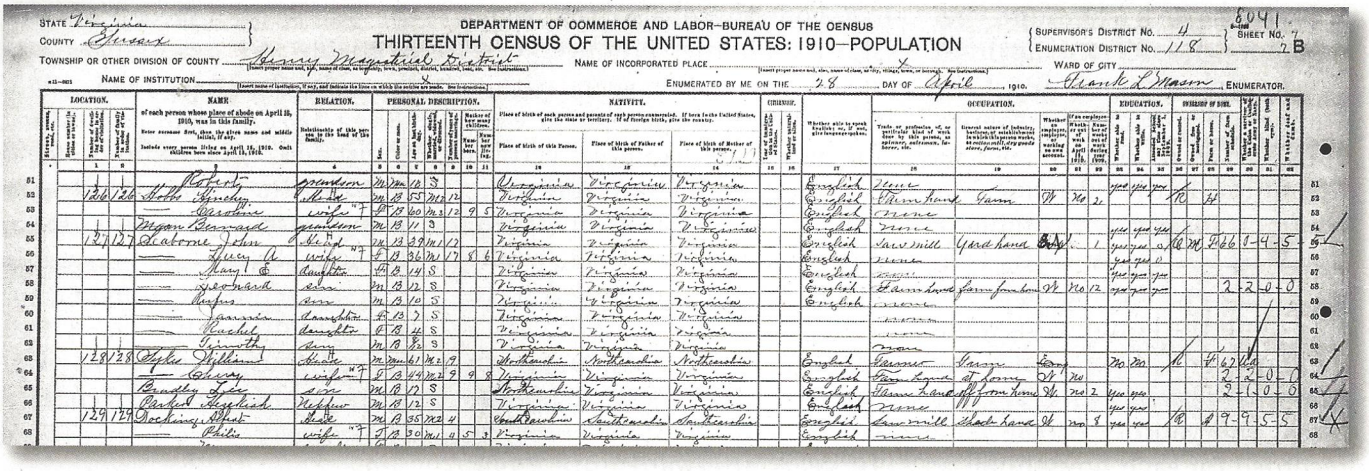
Keep in mind, also, that some states and cities produced censuses during the years within the decade of the federal enumeration. For example, certain jurisdictions in New York state conducted censuses in 1825, 1835, 1845 and 1855, while most of the counties did so in 1865, 1875, 1892, 1905, 1915 and 1925. Florida began its own census recording in 1845, the year it became a state. For every 10 years afterward until 1949, the state conducted a census. Available to researchers are those for the years 1845, 1855, 1867, 1875, 1935 and 1945. The state's archives house local censuses for Leon and Nassau counties in 1885 and 1895, respectively. Another example of a more local enumeration is Alexandria, Virginia, which tracked four wards of its residents from January to February 1808.

Rev. Dr. Frank L. Mason. 1910 federal census enumerator, Sussex County, Virginia. (Photo courtesy of Linda Threadgill)

1910 enumerator: Rev. Dr. Frank L. Mason

To more closely illustrate the research benefit of investigating a census enumerator, consider Rev. Dr. Frank Lewis Mason of Sussex County, Virginia as a case in point. He was born there in 1860 to a free father and a slave mother who was freed before the Civil War's end. Rev. Mason exemplified the high academic and professional potential of African Americans during antebellum America. Most notably, he:

- Earned a doctorate of divinity degree about 1887 at Virginia Union Theological Seminary in Richmond
- Served as president of the Bethany Baptist Association
- Pastored at Rising Star, Royal and Salem Baptist churches in Greensville County, Virginia; and Hunting Quarters Baptist in Sussex County
- Served as Vice Grand Master Watchman for The Grand Lodge Of St. John Watchmen (Masonic) and as a member of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Grand Court Order of Calanthe, and the United Order of True Reformers
- Ran in 1920 as a Republican candidate for US Congress from Virginia's 4th district



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND LABOR—BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
THIRTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1910—POPULATION

STATE Virginia
COUNTY Sussex
TOWNSHIP OR OTHER DIVISION OF COUNTY Henry Magisterial District
NAME OF INCORPORATED PLACE
NAME OF INSTITUTION
ENUMERATED BY ME ON THE 28 DAY OF April, 1910. Frank L Mason ENUMERATOR.
SUPERVISOR'S DISTRICT NO. 4
ENUMERATION DISTRICT NO. 118
SHEET NO. 7 B
WARD OF CITY

1910 US Census Population form showing Frank L. Mason as the enumerator. (Ancestry.com - photographed and cropped by Stuart Doyle)

For the 1910 census, Rev. Mason enumerated the African American population of Sussex County's Henry District. Here is a case where the minority citizens far outnumbered the others, covering 32 of 47 census pages. Aside from being Rev. Mason's birthplace, Sussex was a county in which he had general if not specific familiarity with arguably most of the families residing there. At age 10, his family resided in Stony Creek, one of the county's six districts, but became situated in Henry during the next decade. As an adult, the reverend spent at least 27 years collectively pastoring the aforementioned churches, and those located in Greensville, which borders Sussex to the south, had members who had either lived in or had ties to both counties. Rev. Mason's fraternal organizations comprised men and women whose relatives had longstanding tenure in Sussex, dating as far back as the Colonial era. For example, Anthony Graves, the long-deceased grandfather of one of his subordinate officers in the St. John Watchmen, Fannie-Frances Doyle, was born in Sussex in 1769.

Consequently, Rev. Mason as an enumerator was perfectly suited to fill in some genealogical spaces that otherwise may have been left blank. Furthermore, it is well known and understood that African American families in rural southern communities may have been reluctant to open their door to an unfamiliar and white stranger as well as volunteer personal information about their heritage and household. Odds are that someone like the reverend could overcome this hurdle since he was one of their own.

This point is critical for anyone with an interest in or emphasis on the racial and ethnic background of their ancestors, particularly those of African and Native American descent. The reason is that 1910 enumerators were instructed to define "black" as anyone whom the census-taker reasoned to be pure negroes, whereas a mulatto was anyone who had some proportion or perceptible trace of negro blood. The federal censuses beginning in 1870, which was the first to include all persons of color, always have bred confusion because of changing racial classifications of many of the same people every 10 years. The reasons for such inconsistency varied. Among them, light mulattoes moving away and presenting themselves as white after the Civil War, or before then if they were free. Beverly Hemings, son of Sally Hemings, the slave and paramour of President Thomas Jefferson, serves as an example. "He was not legally manumitted, but left Monticello in 1822, evidently with Jefferson's permission, and henceforth lived as a white man," according to The Jefferson Monticello website, Appendix H: Sally Hemings and Her Children (*www.monticello.org*).

Another reason involved Native Americans in the southeastern US who became "negro" or "black" as per the infamous "one-drop" rule of the early 20th century. As explained by F. James Davis, author of ***Who is Black: One Nation's Definition:***

To be considered black in the United States not even half of one's ancestry must be African black. But will one-fourth do, or one-eighth, or less? The nation's answer to the question 'Who is black?" has long been that a black is any person with any known African black ancestry. This definition reflects the long

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experience with slavery and later with Jim Crow segregation. In the South it became known as the "one-drop rule," meaning that a single drop of "black blood" makes a person a black. It is also known as the "one black ancestor rule," some courts have called it the "traceable amount rule," and anthropologists call it the "hypo-descent rule," meaning that racially mixed persons are assigned the status of the subordinate group. This definition emerged from the American South to become the nation's definition, generally accepted by whites and blacks.

Race and ethnicity are just a sampling of the research gray areas that could be clarified when considering that late 1800s-early 1900s census-takers lived among the people whose households they described. Maybe their description of someone as divorced, for instance, indicated the result of a legal judgment rather than a community's description of a couple that has been long separated.

In summary, researchers should take the extra step of considering the identity and background of census enumerators from 1880 forward. The experiences of Charles Norman and Rev. Frank Mason, which occurred in vastly different settings, suggest that the work of local canvassers had a better chance for accuracy because of their familiarity with the people whose lives they recorded. Not only should the findings of these enumerators be examined carefully, perhaps they should serve as a standard for comparison.

STUART W. DOYLE is past president of the Central Florida Chapter of the Afro American Historical & Genealogical Society. Stuart Doyle began genealogical research in the mid 1980s as a passive hobby, but it had become an addictive drug a decade later. His addiction reached a milestone with the publication of ***Roots Exposed: The Lineage and Interrelationships of 15 Family Branches from Virginia's Sussex, Southampton and Greensville Counties.*** This 600-plus-page paperback is Doyle's compilation of his lineage from the 1700s through about 1950. A native of Richmond, Va., Doyle has lived in Orlando, Fla. since 1989. He is an alumnus of the University of Virginia and Temple University and has a career in business communications.