Have you ever tried unsuccessfully to find your ancestor in the census and concluded that the census taker didn’t count your ancestor?

It turns out that enumerators (census takers) have done a pretty good job. A search is much more likely to fail because of transcribing and indexing errors.

What do you do if you don’t find your ancestor in a particular census? Here are some tips.

1. Doing an Ancestry.com search of All Collections (the first choice in the Search drop down list, often yields so many results that you might scroll through several pages before finding the result you want.

There are a couple of ways to get fewer and more meaningful hits.

One way is to immediately drill down to the desired census year. From the Search drop down list, click on Card Catalog. In the Title box, enter something like “1930 federal census.” This will point you to the desired census, while eliminating foreign and state censuses. Click on the link for 1930 United States Federal Census and enter your search terms in the Search boxes.

The following strategy will show you the state censuses, which exist for some states in various years. This can give you finer resolution regarding your ancestor’s location. Instead of searching in the Card Catalog, click on All Collections from the main Search drop down list, and enter your search terms. On the next screen, on the left, below All Categories, click on Census & Voter Lists. (You could have gotten here by selecting Census & Voter Lists from the main Search list, but this method lets you switch database categories more easily.)

On the next screen, click on 1930s, in our example. If you still see too many databases that are not interesting, you can further drill down by clicking on 1930 United States Federal Census or another desired database.

1. Try using wildcards in Ancestry.com. An asterisk (\*) takes the place of one or more characters, and a question mark (?) takes the place of a single character. Use wildcards especially in place of vowels, and use one consonant in place of doubled consonants. One of my ancestor surnames is Westcoat, also written Wescott, Wescote, Wescot, and others. To get hits on all of these variations, enter W?s\*t\*

As you go back in time, cursive script is harder to read, especially upper case letters. Try using a wildcard in place of these letters. Study the page in the census to find the same letter used in a different name. Perhaps that will help you to determine what the letter actually is.

1. Use nicknames, middle names instead of first names, and initials for first and middle names. Try reversing first and last names. Use abbreviations, such as “Wm” for “William.”
2. Search for other family members that should be in the same household for the census year that you’re searching.
3. During periods of migration in the 1800s, neighbors often moved together. Try searching for neighbors from earlier and later censuses to see if your ancestor shows up in the census in which he/she is “missing.”
4. Even in periods of less migration, search for a neighbor from a different census, then see if your ancestor is still located nearby in the census of interest. I once found the surname Pierce written and indexed as Perion, so it didn’t show up with a wildcard search.
5. Check multiple sources. Although we’re promoting Ancestry.com, other sources such as FamilySearch were indexed separately. Your ancestor may be indexed correctly in another source. It’s worth noting that Ancestry.com is the only census source that allows alternate information to be displayed from submissions by subscribers. Over time Ancestry.com is more likely to have the correct indexing.
6. Sometimes it becomes necessary to resort to browsing the census. There are tools for determining an enumeration district at Steve Morse’s One-Step Web site at <stevemorse.org>. (This Web site was the subject of Katherine Ralson’s tip of the month for July.}