

REMARKS ABOUT THE CENSUS OF 1850

by Louise Pettus

Census taking began in 1790, and every ten years since, for two major purposes. First, because the U. S. Constitution requires an enumeration of the population for purposes of determining representation in the House of Representatives. Second, in early censuses it was to gather information on the number of men eligible for military service.

In every census after 1790 additional questions were asked and we find more boxes checked. The 1850 census is especially valuable because it is the first census to list everyone in the household and not just the head of household.

Most libraries contain microfilm reels of each census taken in the library's county or area. Some large libraries have microfilmed copies of all the censuses taken in the United States. In addition, some libraries also have data summaries in bound volumes. For example, Dacus Library of Winthrop University in Rock Hill has bound volumes that are summaries of all censuses that were published three years after the census was taken. Winthrop's original copy is one of 240 copies allotted to South Carolina. The following remarks are about the 1850 census titled *The Seventh Census of the United States - 1850* published by the Government Printing Office in 1853.

Inside the bulky volume that probably weighs 10 pounds I was surprised to find in the introduction this statement: "The persons who are selected as enumerators are often proved, by the returns, to be entirely incompetent, for which perhaps, the low rate of compensation or the mode of appointment be assigned as a reason. The districts embraced by each enumerator are too large; if practicable, for accuracy, they should be as small as the districts in Great Britain. . . .It would be well for the Congress to recommend the establish of State Bureaus of Statistics. . . ."

Now, experienced genealogists know that you can't place one-hundred percent trust in the information but it is surprising (and refreshing) that the statisticians said so in 1850 and it was printed by the government on the first page and in the first paragraph. Who were these underpaid census takers? They were also called "Assistant Marshals" because they were appointed by the U. S. Marshals and the U. S. Marshal could appoint anyone he wished who was male and had a horse. If one examines a number of censuses taken in various places one soon realizes that some census takers were much more careful and no doubt more accurate, than others. But even the best sometimes made mistakes and the best of intentions went awry (the 1820 census of Lancaster District is completely alphabetized which is handy if you simply want to quickly locate your family but you have no idea who the neighbors were or what area of the county the people lived in). Think of all the time the well-meaning census taker took to do that alphabetizing!

But back to the report which lists "Errors on the Schedules." The statisticians inform the Congress that "Names, dwellings, and families are sometimes found to be duplicated. The name of a male is sometimes checked in the column for females, etc. . . .The value of real estate is taken loosely, and induces no confidence. . . .In regard to ages the assistant marshals are often remiss with infants. They omit fractions and show all to be one year of age, instead of noting the parts of the year, etc. On this account, some counties include no births within the year. . . .In the present works many towns are mixed up with the counties and could not be separated. The smaller towns in the South are generally neglected." The statisticians were particularly unhappy with the information relating to slaves, ". . .as the same person may own slaves in different counties or

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States, or in several parts of the county, the actual number of slaveholders cannot easily be ascertained. . ."

From anecdotal evidence that sometimes census takers recorded information from personal knowledge (which might be inaccurate), talked to neighbors or even asked children or visiting relatives. The census taker generally made notes which were later transcribed on to the official pages that were to be returned to Washington. The census taker's wife and children might help with the copying (sometimes there is varying handwriting from page to page). Before the 1850 listing of number of males, number of females in household without divulging names, it has been observed that many were servants, boarders or visitors with no way to determine relationship to head of household.

The 1850 census was a mammoth undertaking. Six hundred forty thousand pages were turned in. These pages were bound in nearly 800 volumes. The report said that the returns from the years 1790 through 1830 were unbound and "in great confusion."

There were 45 U. S. Marshals (S. C. had 6 Congressional districts and therefore 6 marshals) and the Marshals appointed 3,231 Assistant Marshals. Census results were returned by mail with the earliest return arriving 29 August 1850 and the latest (from California) 17 February 1852. The starting date for all was June 1.

The book breaks down the 1850 information into states and counties (but not individuals). Some of the 1850 York District items of interest:

1. There was in the county one male and one female over 100 years of age.
2. Under one year of age there were 109 males and 107 females.
3. Between the ages of 20-30 there were 979 males and 1,030 females.
4. There were 97 free Blacks with one over 100 years and one between 90 and 100.
5. York District had a total of 11,426 white and free colored and 8,007 slaves.
6. There were no colleges in the district; but there were 5 public schools with 168 pupils and 10 academies with 260 pupils. There were 509 illiterates (230 men and 279 women).
7. Free blacks had one church that would seat 300 people. Baptists had 7 churches seating 1,450; 5 Methodist churches seated 1,690; 10 Presbyterian churches seated 3,620 and minor sects (unnamed) were 3 seating 770.

Payment to the census takers varied according to task. The pay in 1850 was 2 cents for each person and 10 cents a mile for travel with directions to "multiply the square root of the number of dwellings by the square root of the number of square miles in the division." Each farm enumerated was 10 cents and "each establishment of productive industry" was 15 cents. Two cents was paid for each name of a deceased person (from this the Mortality Statistics were derived).

Indians were not taxed(or represented in Congress) and therefore not included.

The cost of taking the 1850 census was \$1,318,027.53 (in 1790 the cost was \$44,377.28).

York District was also a part of the agricultural census that accompanied the people census. Some of the figures: 11,313 sheep; 35,797 swine; 39,536 bushels of sweet potatoes; 8,665 bushels of Irish potatoes and 219,599 pounds of butter.