

Although the pre-1850 USCensuses and the early American tax lists usually name only household heads, such lists can be invaluable in constructing a relatively complete list of all families of a particular surname, embedded in their neighborhood context. It is in the local neighborhoods that one is most likely to find “allied families”—families of other surnames related to the families of particular interest by blood, by marriage, or merely by strong friendship. Any sort of list that is reasonably comprehensive of the names of the householders for a particular area can provide the basic framework for a serious family history project.

Moreover, once the families of interest have been identified, the same kinds of lists can be used to track these families from place to place—one of the most difficult tasks of the would-be historian of the early immigrant and pioneer families of America.

However, the value, and the interpretation, of these lists depends on their continuity as well as their comprehensiveness. The USCensus was supposed to count every family, but it did so only every ten years. The ideal would be a series of universal poll tax lists compiled every year by a tax assessor who systematically canvassed his assigned neighborhoods from one household to the next. With this sort of record set, changes from year to year can be enormously valuable in providing clues to the composition of families.

For example, if, in the years 1-5, households headed by John and James MacGuffin were found in a certain township, and within reasonable proximity to each other on the list, it is likely that they are related, either as brothers, or as father and son (of course if the surname were a common one like White, a blood relationship would be considerably less likely). If then, in year 6, a third household headed by a William MacGuffin appeared, it would be likely that he was the son of one of the other two. Or if in that same year 6, the two original households were now found to be headed by John MacGuffin and Margaret MacGuffin, most likely the original James has died and Margaret is his widow. Or if the household headed by James simply disappears from the township, while a new household headed by James MacGuffin appears in a different township or county for that year, it may well be that the original James has simply moved his family to a different place.

It should be emphasized that no conclusions can be drawn from such lists considered by themselves. There are too many different ways of interpreting such data. However, all by themselves such lists, even if they provide nothing but the bare names, can at least suggest good working hypotheses, and where other relevant data can be found, the presence, or absence, of certain names on a list can constitute valuable circumstantial evidence towards the reconstruction of the families of interest.

For example, the USCensuses, even the earliest, provide additional detail on the age and sex of household members that can help differentiate families of the same name from each other by generation, and even suggest which of a set of likely brothers is the oldest. Similarly, tax assessment lists that provide details on the kind and value of taxable property (typically at least the acreage owned, and the number of slaves, horses, cattle, luxury items and licensed businesses) can help to differentiate households by their differences of status and wealth, and reflect family evolutions as property flows from the older to the younger generations.

The kinds of tentative inferences one might draw from such data is usually merely a starting point, and should be followed up by a comprehensive canvass of the probate, land, and court records for the surname of interest within the jurisdiction, but if these other records are sparse or non-existent, census and tax lists may be the only game in town.

Unfortunately, the actual tax records found typically depart from the ideal to a significant degree. As noted, USCensuses are taken only once every 10 years, which isn't frequent enough to adequately track the evolving family situation over time, and the early colonial tax lists are often spotty, especially for newly created counties, with only a few surviving lists per decade. Furthermore, many of these tax

lists have been alphabetized, even across a whole county, which pretty much destroys any clues to relationships by geographical propinquity.

The value of this kind of evidence, then, depends, first, on a thorough accumulation of all the extant tax and census records over an extended period of time, and second, on accurate characterization of the original lists, including the page *and line* numbers of each entry, so that, provided the list is unalphabetized, it can be readily ascertained when households are close to each other on the list, and so, probably, on the ground. It is equally vital to note gaps in the temporal record—which years are present and which missing—so that the best possible estimate can be made of the period a householder dwelt in the same location, and so could not have been the householder of the same name who appears on a list for a different jurisdiction (although one must beware of land tax lists that may include the names of non-resident property owners, without styling them thus). Also, since county structure on the frontier was also changing along with the growth of settlement, it is also necessary to note when new counties were hived off from old, to identify child and parent counties, and to examine the lists for both.

There is yet another vital kind of context that needs to be considered: the changing laws and regulations governing the meaning and composition of the censuses or tax lists. For example, in Pennsylvania during the colonial period, there was a category of taxable persons called “freemen”, or sometimes “single freemen”. These were unmarried men who had reached the age of 21 and continued to dwell in the township they grew up in—or perhaps drifted into. When a man with a surname one is tracking pops up for the first time on the freeman’s list for a particular year, it is a good bet that he has just turned 21, and is the son of one of the other nearby householders with the same surname—most likely one in the same township. But to correctly interpret the tax data one finds, one must be familiar with the local colonial laws.

I happen to live in Virginia, and *Hening’s Statutes* is the source for the Virginia colonial laws, but I am still looking for a similar source that provides all the legal details governing colonial Pennsylvania tax records; I have had to work out most of the gist from occasional fortuitous pieces of internal evidence occurring in the list themselves. For some reason, such legal information is very hard to come by, at least in the necessary detail. It is regularly glossed over or even omitted in talks and publications by scholarly experts, which makes one wonder whether they have researched the laws themselves in the necessary detail. And worse, when early census and tax list data is copied down and published, or posted on the internet, these all-important contextual considerations are usually overlooked, which vitiates any solid analysis of the data.

Each list needs to be examined carefully in its entirety to determine its exact purpose, jurisdictional scope, and the dates of its compilation and certification. One should not rely on the interpolated headings of archivists and abstractors, because these are quite often incomplete or even wrong, but note instead the exact intrinsic titles and dates associated with the list. For example, when tax lists are sorted out by archivists and bundled for filing or filming, they are usually titled with the tax year, but colonial tax lists were often compiled near the turn of the year for the ensuing tax year, and many such film titles are inconsistent—some representing the tax year, and some the actual date of the list. Every effort should be made to ascertain both the actual date the list was compiled or certified, and the tax year for which it was compiled, and to include these data in one’s notes and abstracts, or where this information is unknown or uncertain, to note that instead.

Similarly, many USCensus sections are mislabeled with the wrong township, or other county division, or are not labeled consistently. Some of these errors are merely due to unfortunate guesses about source material that was itself inadequately labeled by its original compiler, but more are simply the result of not examining the whole list carefully from beginning to end. This is particularly a

problem with the Ancestry.com USCensus image database, but not a few such errors are carry over of archival titling errors on the original NARA films.

Many other kinds of errors are made in abstracting tax lists. For example, the original forms of names are not preserved—name spellings or abbreviations are “corrected” thus obliterating possibly distinctive spellings or phonetic pronunciations, and quite frequently garbling and altering names due to misreading. Unless one is an expert, not only at reading colonial handwriting in general, but at reading the hand of a particular clerk, the best practice is to transcribe the data literally, as read, and interpolate “?”s where there is any question of one’s reading. I consider myself such an expert in genera, but I often find it necessary to make myself an expert in particular by scanning the work product of a particular idiosyncratic clerk for key “Rosetta Stone” literations. And, I and other scholars always transcribe names literally, except where we expand common given names from standard abbreviations within editorial square brackets, for example, rendering “Wm” in the original text, as “W[illia]m”.

Another sort of abstracting error is the failure to note when fields in the USCensus haven’t been filled in, or even included on the early hand-drawn forms, or when they have been put down in a sequence different from the standard. For example, in the early censuses, there are usually columns to enumerate slaves and free colored persons, and sometimes a total column for the whole household. But the order of the first two of these fields varies from census year to year, and the early hand-drawn forms sometimes omit one or more of these fields, or switch them around. It is quite vital, in abstracting, to be aware of these possibilities, to clearly label ones own columnar categories, and to note the absence of certain fields on the form with an entry other than “0”; I use an “x”, or a “-” for each household where a standard field has been omitted on the hand-drawn form. Similarly, it is also important to indicate when a field can’t be clearly read; I use “*” in lieu of each unreadable character, for that purpose.

An example of the right way to abstract tax lists is Netti Schreiner-Yantis’s *The 1787 Census of Virginia*, which groups the entries for each county by district sublist, giving the name of the tax commissioner for that district as the list identifier. The name of the commissioner, in fact, is often a vital clue to the geographical scope of each list, since he was almost invariably himself a resident of the district he was responsible for.

The names of the tithables are listed exactly as they appear, and in the order found, but unfortunately, most of the individual commissioner’s faircopy lists have been alphabetized by first letter of surname. Fortunately, beginning with the year 1787, the tax commissioners were also required to note the date on which each household’s information was gathered, and although there wasn’t room to include this in the consolidated 3-volume publication of this tax data for all of Virginia, Schreiner-Yantis has supplemented these volumes with a series of individual county booklets with the same information, and even the same pagination, as the consolidated volumes, but with a supplementary section listing the same householders by the dates they were interviewed, along with an index to link the two sets of abstracts. This recovers the all-important neighborhood context for each taxable householder. Finally, even though this extensive compilation necessarily fits every abstract into a single fixed-format line, a separate freeform field is allowed for any special annotations that appear on the original list.

Early USCensuses and tax lists can be invaluable as evidence in the reconstruction of families and their history, provided these lists are reasonably complete and continuous for the area and period of interest, and provided that the essential contexts of the extant set of lists is noted and made part of the abstracted record. Absent these conditions, the most that such data can tell us is that there were people bearing the names we are interested in alive during a particular period, within a general, perhaps county-wide, area. But that doesn’t get us very far down the road toward sorting these people into families and tracking their careers.