The U.S. Census Bureau is proud of its history of continually evolving to ensure an accurate count of the people of the United States. To accomplish this, the Census Bureau has long embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce representative of local communities and the people who were a part of the neighborhoods that they counted. For this reason, census work was often one of the few government jobs open to minorities. Beginning with the 1870 Census (the first after the abolition of slavery), the Census Bureau began hiring African Americans as enumerators and data processors. With the creation of a permanent Census Bureau in 1902, Black workers and statisticians found an environment with an inclusiveness far greater than many contemporary institutions.

George Washington Francis was born in 1820, in the state of New York. Much of George’s early life remains buried or lost in the historical record. Early rumors that George had relations in the Haitian aristocracy do not appear later in his life, either due to the downfall of the emperor or from a better understanding of his genealogy. In 1850, the first year in which all individuals, except slaves, had their names listed in the census, George appeared in Bridgeport, Connecticut—where he worked as a barber and lived with his wife, Charity, and their two sons, George and Thomas. The previous year, in September 1849, George attended the Connecticut State Convention of Colored Men at New Haven where he represented Bridgeport and held several official positions. As an active supporter for the rights and social uplift of African Americans, George once again represented Bridgeport at the State Colored Convention in 1854 held in Middletown, Connecticut.

On June 21, 1858, tragedy struck the Francis family when Charity passed away. George had company in his grief—Catherine Beach, a white woman and wife of a well-to-do Bridgeport merchant who lost her husband in December 1858. Catherine and George’s friendship evolved and they set up a dry goods store together. They then eloped in New York in October 1859. When Catherine’s friends found out about the marriage several months later, they had her committed to an insane asylum.
George, who had been in New York City attending to his business concerns, quickly arrived and secured Catherine’s freedom. The same day they left Bridgeport and settled on Sullivan Street in New York City, where they would live for the rest of their lives. George operated a restaurant and continued with a myriad of business dealings, including as a fancy goods dealer. By 1870, George had not only found business success, but had become involved with politics. In May of 1870, George represented his district of New York City at the State Republican Convention. He associated with eminent men, such as showman and Connecticut politician, P.T. Barnum. In fact, Barnum provided a reference letter for George in February of 1870 that may have been used to help procure his first government patronage job—that of census marshal and census clerk for the 1870 Census.

Despite the diligence displayed by George in his census taking, many other politically appointed census marshals did not have the necessary skills or work ethic to complete the job. New York City, as well as Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Indianapolis, all received a second enumeration late in 1870. This marked the first time addresses appeared on census surveys in New York City as an early form of quality control. Following the conclusion of the 1870 decennial operations, George’s performance and connections earned him a job in the U.S. Customs House.

George worked in the same offices and hallways as notable coworkers like author Herman Melville, and he served under Customs House boss and future U.S. president Chester A. Arthur. As president, Arthur helped to enforce civil service reforms that ensured qualified, rather than well-connected, individuals received jobs. Some of these jobs included census enumerators, who underwent professional training and testing for the first time in 1880.

George continued his work within the Republican Party. He participated in rallies and demonstrations to advance the cause of African Americans throughout the 1870s, and the Republican association in his New York district bore his name as its official title. George used his political power to work towards the rights and social improvement of his fellow African Americans, and celebrated successful gains such as the passage of the 15th Amendment.

In 1872, George and several other notable black leaders gathered together to celebrate in their progress on the birthday of Thaddeus Stevens, a notable abolitionist and equality crusader. Catherine passed away in 1873, and after a lifetime of hard-won success, George followed her on January 18, 1878. The Census Bureau is proud to count George among the ranks of its alumni.