

Taming the Census: The Lawmen Who Conducted the First Census

A few days prior to leaving New York City, the first capital of the young United States of America, Congress passed the First Census Act of 1790 in an effort to conduct an “actual Enumeration...within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct”.¹ This crucial piece of legislation established the ground rules for enacting the first census and empowered U.S. marshals to carry out the monumental task of accurately recording America’s population.

Prior to the passage of the [First Census Act in 1790](#), President George Washington celebrated the passage of the Judiciary Act of 1789 by telling Edmond Randolph, the first attorney-general, “I have considered the first arrangement of the judicial department as essential to the happiness of our country... [and] hence the selection of the fittest characters to expound the laws, and dispense justice...”² A little less than a year later, in the fall of 1789, President George Washington appointed fourteen men as the first U.S. marshals, yet he only completed the “first class” of the U.S. Marshal Service with the appointments of John Skinner (1790), William Blount (1790), and Lewis R. Morris (1791).³ Together, these seventeen individuals and their deputies utilized their skills and resources to perform a host of duties that included serving the courts’ subpoenas, arresting federal criminals, maintaining order on the frontier, and leading the effort to create a statistically accurate portrait of the United States’ population.

Carrying out the census was a difficult task in a young country, with little infrastructure and a widely scattered population. The census would commence on August 2, 1790 and close nine months later (May 2, 1791), although several states (Rhode Island, Vermont, and South Carolina) and the Southwest Territory received extensions.⁴ Despite these lags, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson transmitted the first data tables on October 24, 1791, and issued the final report in 1793.

Although given the questions by Congress, each marshal had to design and print his own collection form (schedule).⁵ Even within in a single state, individual enumerators often had to create their own forms. This resulted in the submission of an interesting and varied collection of

¹ U.S. Const. art. I, cl. II.

² From George Washington to Edmund Randolph, 28 September 1789,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last estimated release September 29, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0073>. (Accessed October 11, 2019). <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0073>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 4, 8 September 1789–15 January 1790, ed. Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 106–109.]

³ While he was not a U.S. marshal, William Blount was the governor of “Southwest Territory” (Tennessee) and he oversaw the 1790 enumeration of the territory.

⁴ Vermont and Rhode Island received extensions because they did not become states until after the census had commenced. South Carolina was the last state to submit its numbers on February 5, 1792.

⁵ The British destroyed most of the 1790 schedules during the War of 1812. For this reason, it is often difficult to determine if certain marshals had hired assistants.

sizes, formats, and materials, such as “account books, journals, or ledgers [and] large sheets of paper, neatly ruled and folded”.⁶

The legislation also required the marshals to post the information in two public places for residents to make corrections before submission. For this, each marshal received between 100 and 500 dollars and their assistants would receive a dollar for every 50-300 people enumerated.⁷

⁶ W.S. Rossiter, “The First Census of the United States,” in *A Century of Population Growth/1790-1900*, ed. S.N.D. North, Director (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 49.

⁷ Compensation for the marshals was based on the size and distribution of the population of that state or city—the highest paid was the marshal enumerating Virginia. For their assistants, the compensation was determined by whether their district was rural, a small town, or a city.