

Why Irish Census Records Matter

Census records are among the most valuable sources for Irish family history research, providing snapshots of entire families at specific points in time. They reveal names, ages, occupations, relationships, literacy levels, and even the ability to speak Irish. However, Irish census research presents unique challenges. Unlike many countries where complete census series survive, Ireland's records have been devastated by deliberate destruction and tragic accidents.

The Irish Census Story: 1813-1926

Ireland's first statutory census was undertaken in May 1813. This initial attempt was poorly executed, covering only part of the country and recording population numbers rather than individual names, except in very limited areas such as Dublin. The 1821 census marked the start of a decennial series, with censuses conducted every ten years up to 1911. The 1911 census was the last to be taken when all of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. After independence, the 1926 census became the first census of the Irish Free State.

Each census evolved in scope and detail:

- 1821 First to record individual names, ages, occupations, relationships to head of household, acreage held, and house details. Servants' names were often omitted
- 1831 More limited in scope, recording only heads of households by name with other family members shown as numbers. Religious denomination was recorded.
- 1841 First where householders filled out returns instead of government enumerators, designed for single-day completion and listing all household members
- 1851 Similar to 1841 but added questions about Irish language ability
- 1861 Expanded religious questions to include all household members
- 1911 Added details about marriage duration and children born and surviving

The Great Destruction

The story of Irish census records is largely one of loss. The 1861 and 1871 censuses were deliberately destroyed by government order after statistical analysis, unlike in England and Wales where copies were preserved. During World War I, the 1881 and 1891 censuses were pulped due to paper shortages, despite appeals for their preservation. The catastrophic fire at the Public Record Office in Dublin in 1922 destroyed most remaining pre-1901 census returns.

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Irish Census Records Timeline

Year	Status	Notes
1813	⚠️ Incomplete	First census attempt; only part of the country counted
1821	🔥 Mostly destroyed	Lost in 1922 Public Record Office fire; fragments survive
1831	🔥 Mostly destroyed	Lost in 1922 Public Record Office fire; fragments survive
1841	🔥 Mostly destroyed	Lost in 1922 Public Record Office fire; fragments survive
1851	🔥 Mostly destroyed	Lost in 1922 Public Record Office fire; fragments survive
1861	❌ Destroyed*	Deliberately destroyed by order after statistical compilation
1871	❌ Destroyed*	Deliberately destroyed by order after statistical compilation
1881	♻️ Destroyed	Pulped during WWI likely due to paper shortages
1891	♻️ Destroyed	Pulped during WWI likely due to paper shortages
1901	✅ Complete	Fully available online via National Archives of Ireland
1911	✅ Complete	Fully available online via National Archives of Ireland
1921	❌ Not conducted	No census due to Irish War of Independence
1926	✅ Complete	First census of Irish Free State; release scheduled April 2026

* Only one extract survives for 1861 and 1871 census

What Survives Today

- 1901 and 1911 censuses survive in their entirety and are freely available online through the National Archives of Ireland (NAI)
- 1926 census is complete and preserved, scheduled for public release in April 2026 following the 100-year rule
- 1821-1851 censuses exist only in fragments covering specific parishes or baronies in Antrim, Cavan, Cork, Dublin, Fermanagh, Galway, King's County (Offaly), Londonderry, Meath, and Waterford
- 1861-1891 censuses are almost entirely lost, with only two known extracts surviving - 1861 for Enniscorthy, Wexford and 1871 Drumcondra & Loughbrackan, Meath
- Thousands of certified copies and transcripts were made before 1922, particularly after the Old Age Pension Act of 1908. These records provide valuable glimpses into destroyed census returns.

The National Archives of Ireland and the Virtual Record Treasury of Ireland provide essential resources for Irish census research.

This is the first in a series of publications by AGI on Irish Census Records

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1901 Census of Ireland

AGI Irish Census Records

The 1901 Census of Ireland

The 1901 Census holds a special place in Irish family history. It is the earliest surviving complete census for the entire island and provides a window into everyday life at the start of the 20th century.

Earlier census material had suffered devastating losses. The 1821–1851 censuses, once preserved at the Public Record Office of Ireland, were almost entirely destroyed in the 1922 fire during the Civil War. The 1861–1891 censuses were destroyed after their statistics had been compiled. Against this backdrop of loss, the 1901 returns are especially valuable.

What the 1901 Census Records

The 1901 Census was enumerated on 31 March 1901. Each head of household was required to complete Form A, recording every person present in the dwelling that night. Information gathered included:

- Name and relationship to the head of household
- Age, sex and marital status
- Religion
- Literacy and occupation
- County of birth
- Ability to speak English or Irish

Beyond individual details, the census forms provide a vivid portrait of daily life. The House and Building Return (Form B1) detailed the number of rooms, windows and the type of roof, while the Out-Offices and Farm-Steadings Return (Form B2) listed outhouses such as stables, cow-houses, dairies or piggeries. The Enumerator's Abstract (Form N) grouped households by townland or street, giving a community-wide perspective.

Taken together, these forms do more than name individuals; they capture the structure of the family, the physical makeup of the property they lived in and the occupations that shaped their daily existence. By examining these records researchers gain a snapshot of the relative wealth, social standing, and living conditions of their ancestors. The census allows us to see not only who they were but how they lived.

Particular Features of the 1901 Census

The 1901 returns reveal Irish society on the cusp of major change. As a pre-independence record, the census documents life under British rule, recording not only Irish families but also soldiers, police and government officials. The census also captures the diversity of 1901 Ireland, including individuals from Britain and across Europe, as well as foreign-born children of returned emigrants or soldiers who had served in places such as India, Canada, Australia or New Zealand.

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