

BC Archives Research Guide

CENSUSES

Unlike city/business directories and voters lists, the census was intended to capture information about every individual. Although attempts were made to include records for Indigenous and Chinese populations, there was not a systematic enumeration until 1901 when the Indigenous population was enumerated by “Indian Agency.”

Access digitized versions of census schedules from 1825-1926 at [Library and Archives Canada \(LAC\)](#).

In addition to searches by the place where the census enumeration took place, you can also search by various kinds of personal information recorded in the census schedules such as names, age, birth place, religion and occupation. The search index was prepared by volunteers who may not always have known how to spell a name, and there may be times when a name search alone will not work.

Try these search tips to see if they will improve your search results:

1. For the largest number of results, limit your search to one term in any of the fields.
2. Search only by surname, as it is the most reliable part of a person’s name. Given names were often shortened or possibly not recorded.
3. Make use of the wildcard symbol * to produce more results when you are searching by a common surname.
4. Use the Province dropdown list to select, for example, British Columbia, and the list of Census Districts and Sub-Districts to reduce results when you are searching by a common surname and know in which province the person lived at the time of the census.
5. Click on the PDF or JPEG links to view a record. Both format types can be enlarged for ease of viewing.

Original paper copies were destroyed after microfilming in the 1950s. The microfilming of these records was not of consistent quality and not all images are readable.

CENSUSES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Not all censuses included BC in their enumeration. Those that do include the following:

[The 1881 Census](#)

There are 4,278,327 references in the 1881 census database (48,886 in BC) and the enumeration (standardized) date was as of April 4, 1881. The federal Department of Agriculture organized the 1881 census. BC was divided into five census districts (Cariboo, New Westminster, Vancouver, Victoria and Yale) and 26 sub-districts. Local census enumerators were appointed to record detailed information about the population: name, age, sex, racial origin, religion, profession, wages, education and health. This information was written down in what is known as Schedule 1. This schedule is the only one of eight different schedules prepared by the enumerators.

[The 1891 Census](#)

There are 4,833,239 references in the 1891 census database (98,173 in BC) and the enumeration (standardized) date was as of April 5, 1891. The federal Department of Agriculture organized the 1891 census. The original paper copies were destroyed after microfilming in 1955.

[The 1901 Census](#)

There are 5,371,315 references in the 1901 census database (178,657 in BC). The federal Department of Agriculture organized the 1901 census. On another schedule (Schedule 2), they collected information about buildings, lands, churches and schools.

The following Indian Agency schedules did not survive and were possibly lost by Statistics Canada before being microfilmed: Kamloops-Okanagan, Northwest Coast, and Williams Lake agencies. If you do not locate an Indigenous person within the agency return, it is possible that they were not living on a reserve, and were included in the regular census for their geographic area.

The 1911 Census

There are 7,204,838 references in the 1911 census database (392,480 in BC). The federal Department of Agriculture organized the 1911 census. British Columbia was re-divided into seven census districts (Comox-Atlin, Kootenay, Nanaimo, New Westminster, Vancouver, Victoria City and Yale/Cariboo), with each district divided into sub-districts.

The Indian Agency schedules are included as sub-districts in the regular census for their geographic area.

The 1921 Census

There are 8,788,483 references in the 1921 census database (524,582 in BC). BC was re-divided into 11 census districts (Cariboo, Comox, Fraser Valley, Kootenay East, Kootenay West, Nanaimo, New Westminster, Skeena, Vancouver, Vancouver Centre, Vancouver South, Victoria (City), Yale), with each district divided into sub-districts.

Censuses after 1926

Census returns after 1926 are still in the custody of Statistics Canada. The records will be opened for public use and transferred to Library and Archives Canada 92 calendar years after the taking of a census. The only exception is for people who require information about themselves, for pension or other legal purposes. See [Accessing my census](#) at Statistics Canada.

RESOURCES AT THE BC ARCHIVES

There are a number of published sources that deal with census returns in the [BC Archives Library](#).

The BC Archives holds microfilm copies of only BC records for the following years: 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911. They are available in the BC Archives' Reference Room.

- [GR-0469](#) British Columbia portion of the 1881 census
- [GR-0288](#) British Columbia portions of the 1891 census
- [GR-2927](#) British Columbia portion of the 1901 census
- [GR-3261](#) British Columbia portion of the 1911 census

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Library and Archives Canada (LAC), [Censuses](#)
 - [Finding Aid 300: Other census and related documents \(1640 to 1945\)](#)
 - [First Nations: Census records in RG10](#)
- Family Search.org, [Historical Records](#)
- viHistory, [Census Records for Vancouver Island from 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 & 1911](#)