

# Who Was Thaddeus Lee?

## Using the 1940 Digitized Census for Personalized Historical Inquiry

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Once every 10 years, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) makes millions of U.S. census records available for use by eager historians and genealogists.<sup>1</sup> The release of a new batch of census records is a highly anticipated event, but only for the select few who are able to access the published microfilm versions of the census. That changed on April 2, 2012, when NARA published the 1940 census online, making it available instantly and free of charge. The 1940 census includes a remarkable collection of information. Census enumerators collected information on 81 topics.<sup>2</sup> Given that the census is perhaps the single most important collection of American historical records, the online publication of the 1940 census was an immediate sensation.

The release of the 1940 census offers social studies teachers and students valuable opportunities to learn about history. By using the census records, teachers can open a window into the past for their students, and introduce to them a remarkable assortment of scholars and enthusiasts doing history.

### Digitizing the 1940 Census

In the relatively brief history of digitized content, the publication of the 1940 census is a hallmark event. The fact that these records are so easily accessed means that teachers and students can quickly gather information as they inquire about the past. The census includes information about people that students will know, perhaps even family members. As a window into the past, the 1940 census is a great source for generating questions, fitting with the emphasis on questioning in the Common Core and the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

The sheer volume of available content is remarkable, consisting of over 3.8

million scanned documents. NARA's website allows searching and browsing of the census records and downloading standard and high-resolution PDF versions. On partner sites, such as Ancestry.com, additional features enable users to interact with documents, save online, share, annotate, and even help transcribe. The release of the 1940 census encouraged an amazing outpouring of collaborative archival and historical work. This collaborative effort included the work of private genealogical services such as Archives.com, FamilySearch.org, and FindMyPast, who partnered to create the U.S. Community Indexing Project.<sup>3</sup> The project involved the transcription of handwritten 1940 census population schedules and culminated in the development of an online search index that makes the census readily available to a wide variety of users.

### *Doing History with the 1940 Census*

Inquiry with the 1940 census falls into a tradition of research using census records

that dates to the early 1960s. Historians such as Lee Benson, who studied nineteenth-century census records to analyze voting behavior in the 1830s, and Stephan Thernstrom, who examined social mobility in nineteenth-century Newburyport, Massachusetts, pioneered the use of census records in historical research.<sup>4</sup> Benson's and Thernstrom's work was part of the cliometrics movement, which popularized the research potential of manuscript censuses. The online publication and collaborative indexing of the 1940 census enables teachers and students to unpack and participate in such research, even examining the work of cliometricians such as Benson and Thernstrom.

Such historical research requires knowledge of context and historiography. Understanding the contested history of census counting provides an opportunity to peek behind the facade of the 'finished' history students often read in textbooks. An example of such context can be found in Margo Anderson's, *The American Census: A Social History*, where Anderson describes the "politics of counting" and the controversies over how the Bureau of the Census constructed its surveys and the implications for how we understand the social history of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

### Who Was Thaddeus Lee?

The historical records in the census are suited for a wide range of historical



borhood block was named Thaddeus Lee, the grandfather of one of the authors of this article. He was 42 when the census was taken on April 1, 1940, was married and had a 16-year-old son. He was a high school graduate, worked 70 hours a week, and reported an annual salary of \$5,000. As one of three homeowners on the block, Thaddeus (whose name appears as “Thad” in the 1940 census) listed his home value at \$5,000. Not only was home ownership less common in 1940 than today, students might also note that Thaddeus Lee’s salary was equal to the value of his home. Today, that ratio is often much higher. In the decade of the 2000s the average income to home value ratio was 1:4.

The census also frames the lives of individuals and enables a type of personal and biographical research that is appealing to students.

Students might also notice that Thaddeus Lee and his wife Eddie both reported their highest grade completed was the 4th year of high school. In fact, only five of the 33 adults over the age of 20 who were listed on Sheet 1A in enumeration district 148-12 had attended college.

There were three people living in the Lee home at 808 Mary Street, but next door was the extended Everson family of eight adults, six of whom were wage earners. In enumeration district 148-12, the range of household sizes was quite broad. It was not uncommon to have extended multi-generational families living under one roof. We can learn much from the 1940 census, from the big questions about national demographics to the life details of individuals like Thaddeus Lee.

**Implications for Classroom Teachers**  
In 1940, the Great Depression was coming to an end and World War II

was beginning. These were large-scale events that are prominently featured in social studies curricula and textbooks. An exciting component of using the 1940 census for instruction is helping students learn about these changes and connecting to the past on a personal level. The millions of records about ordinary people whose names have never appeared in social studies textbooks provide a unique snapshot of the United States in April 1940. Accordingly, the release of the 1940 census comes with enormous instructional potential for social studies classrooms, as there are a number of ways in which it can be used to foster authentic learning experiences.

### Getting Started

From the official 1940 census site (<http://1940census.archives.gov/>), users can click on the ‘Getting Started’ tab. From there, a video that is just over three minutes long can be played. We recommend that at the very least, teachers view this video, or ideally they show it to students as a whole-class activity prior to beginning work with the census.

From a logistical standpoint, the 1940 census is easy to use. Searching and browsing on the NARA census website is intuitive. Under the ‘Census Search’ tab, a user can enter a state, county, and street, and instantly locate results. When doing so, however, it is recommended that teachers create an account, so that their search records are more easily saved. Searching by name is possible on partner sites such as <https://familysearch.org/1940census> and [www.ancestry.com/1940-census](http://www.ancestry.com/1940-census). Although you will need to create an account on these sites, the records are free to view. The partner sites also provide tools for using the census records, allowing users to comment, save, share, annotate and connect to other records. While it may be challenging for some students to read these handwritten records, we feel that engaging the actual record is more authentic. Also, while it would be advantageous for students to be connected to the Internet to engage with this census, it is not necessary, as

## Role-Playing Census Game

When students are given the opportunity to explore primary sources such as census records, the class transforms into a highly collaborative, problem-based classroom in which individual students contribute to the direction, the pace, and the outcome of their study. Such experiences can be expanded and enhanced through role-playing and simulation gaming technology. Hope College professor Christian Spielvogel worked to breathe life into the people reported on in the 1860 census for Franklin (Pennsylvania) and Augusta (Virginia) counties with his online tool called *ValleySim: Social Computing Meets Inspired Learning*, <http://valleydev.cs.hope.edu>. Expanding on the one dimensional portrayals that emerge from these 1860 census records, Spielvogel worked diligently to assemble 25 ‘characters’ based on the lives of actual wartime residents as informed by the census records and actual wartime diaries and letters that have been digitized in the *Valley of the Shadow* archive, <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/>. The role-playing mode engages critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, negotiation and communication—skills that are essential to thrive in the twenty-first century. Returning now to Thaddeus Lee and his family in Waycross, Georgia; what might a virtual game based on the 1940 census look like? We encourage you and your students to consider the question.



individual records can be printed out.

Before studying any actual records however, it is also important for students to spend some time just browsing the census records to get a sense of what information was collected.<sup>8</sup> From there, any number of potential inquiries are possible. For example, students might be asked to consider the census question that asked about war service. This information would give students a good sense of the veteran population in specific parts of the country. Of course, April 1940 was 20 months before the United States entered World War II. Individuals with military service listed in the 1940 census would most likely have been veterans of World War I.

### Inquiry Activities

The digitized 1940 census is well suited for inquiry-based learning activities. One activity is for students to do an inquiry about residents in their school's neighborhood. This would be a natural fit with the emphasis on local and state history in most states. An inquiry about the makeup of students' school neighborhood in 1940 could be done as a whole class activity, where the class looks at a collection of records in-depth, or as a more individualized research activity. Student research could be driven by attempts to answer questions such as: What was our community like in 1940? Who lived here? What did they do for a living? And, how does this compare to today? To answer these questions, students would need to examine specific census records in-depth, compare and contrast what they find out about the people profiled in the records, develop contextual knowledge, make inferences, and use evidence to draw conclusions. In so doing, students gain insight—in ways not previously possible—not only into their community, but also into the lives of ordinary people who lived decades ago.

Teachers can expand on this local/community history activity using communication and social networking tools. In such an activity, students might inves-

tigate census records from a community different than their own in collaboration with students from that community. For example, students in North Carolina and Florida might be paired to answer a question about educational attainment in 1940. Students' findings could be corroborated through interviews in their local communities, and students in both states might subsequently collaborate on a presentation.

In another inquiry activity, students might focus on the nature of work in America in 1940. As students comb through records, the teacher can instruct them to pay particular attention to the occupations noted on census records. Students could explore different regions in the United States in terms of occupations. As with our examination of Waycross, Georgia, students could collect data from census categories 28-32, which were focused on the industries and occupations in which people worked, as well as the number of hours people worked per week and their wages. By examining this data, students can get a good sense of what life was like in 1940. To facilitate this work, teachers might have students collect data by category in pairs or small groups and then record that data in a shared spreadsheet. Students can then work in jigsaw groups to examine the data for trends, similarities, and differences with today.

To expand the activity, teachers could have students work in groups to explore places in the United States with different economic characteristics such as New York City; Omaha, Nebraska; rural Alabama; and Los Angeles, and again, compare occupations of the past to those of today. Students might focus their inquiry by asking whether women worked, and if so, in what occupation, and whether certain regions had higher percentages of women in the workforce. An examination of these questions might lead to an exploration of the economic and social changes on the horizon, linked to the United States involvement in World War II.

A more personalized activity would be

for students to look up family members or relatives of friends who lived in the United States in 1940. Students might create a profile of their ancestors or family friends, as we did for Thaddeus Lee, by asking what work they did, how much money they earned, their level of education, where they lived, and the composition of their families. To extend the activity, students could examine census records from other years, ask the same questions, and then examine the changes that occurred. In undertaking this type of activity, students can begin to understand the causal relationships that structure history. 🌐

### Notes

1. Census records are released 72 years after being collected. For additional information see [www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial\\_census\\_records/the\\_72\\_year\\_rule\\_1.html](http://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/the_72_year_rule_1.html).
2. You can learn more about the structure of the 1940 census at [www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/04/02/sample-surveys-and-the-1940-census/](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/04/02/sample-surveys-and-the-1940-census/)
3. See <https://the1940census.com/> for more information on the project.
4. Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961) and Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress* (Harvard, Mass.: Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, 1964).
5. Two books of interest on this topic are Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) and Margo J. Anderson and Stephen E. Fienberg, *Who Counts: The Politics of Census-taking in Contemporary America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).
6. See [www.census.gov/1940census/then\\_and\\_now/how\\_census\\_measures.html](http://www.census.gov/1940census/then_and_now/how_census_measures.html) for more comparisons.
7. 1940 U. S. Census, Ware County, Georgia, population schedule 148, Waycross City, enumeration district (ED) 148-12, sheet 1A.
8. The full list of questions that were asked on the census can be found at <http://1940census.archives.gov/questions-asked/>.

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