



Preparing for HistoryForge: Resource Gathering

Project Scope:

Before you get started, you should consider the size and scope of your initial project. Places with large populations may want to pick a specific focus area and build that out adding records from multiple censuses and other sources. Places with smaller populations may chose to start with a specific census and work their way through the entire census for the community before moving to a second census.

Compile a list of available resources such as maps, city directories, and any others that could help to locate or provide additional information about buildings and people in your community.

Census Records:

Census records for your community are available for free on [FamilySearch](#).

We recommend using FamilySearch for HistoryForge for that reason and because it allows users to adjust the census image directly from the site making it easier to view.

Determine which census year your installation will start with.

HistoryForge currently covers the 1850-1950 censuses. In Ithaca we started with the 1910 census because it included a lot of valuable information about immigration and the 1910 Sanborn Fire Insurance Atlas was the latest and most comprehensive that the Library of Congress had made available at the time for Ithaca, NY. You might decide to start with a specific census year based on the available resources, local history interests, or for other reasons.

The questions asked on the census changed over time. The National Archives has helpful information and resources about historical censuses on their [About Census Records](#) page. For information about the censuses and how they changed over time, the Census Bureau has provided an [overview of the census across the decades](#) and an [index of questions asked on the censuses by decade](#).

Locations that decide to focus their on a small area and add multiple historical censuses may want to consider how census enumeration districts changed over time see [Steve Morse's Unified Census ED Finder](#) (1870-1950 censuses).

*Note that the 1880 Census was the first to include columns for street name and house number, however, some communities did not have standard addresses (house numbers and street names) included in the census until much later. For rural communities without standard addresses the 1950 census was the first to include instructions to enumerators for capturing the location of each rural household such that someone else could follow the route and find the buildings.

Maps:

Many Sanborn Fire Insurance Atlases have already been digitized by the Library of Congress as well as a few other libraries and are available to download for free.

Check local archives and repositories as well as nearby college and university libraries for other historical map sets.

Census Enumeration District Maps for the 1900-1940 US censuses can be found [here](#).

Census Enumeration District Maps for the 1950 US census can be found [here](#).

Resource for determining historical county boundary changes: [The Newberry Library's Atlas of Historical County Boundaries](#).

City Directories:*

Check local archives and repositories as well as nearby college and university libraries for city or farm directories for your location. Digitized directories are helpful, but those that are searchable are even better. If your institution decides to digitize city directories for this project, use OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software so your volunteers can easily search the resulting pdfs.

*Not all communities had directories printed at regular intervals. Knowing the historic resources available for your community can help determine which censuses to focus on initially and whether you can find alternative resources that will help you locate people.

We are currently developing workflows for communities that did not historically have standard street addresses. If you are interested in learning more, contact us.



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