



# COUNTING HEADS IN 1791:

## The United States Census in Vermont

How many people are in your school? If you don't know, how could you find out? You could stand by the front door and count heads in the morning. Or give one person the job of counting each class. You could then add the numbers together to get the total. The United States government did something like this when it began the first United States census in 1790.

A census is an **official** count of the people who live in a place. One of the first things the United States Congress did was to order a census of the country.

To know why an official count or census is important, you have to know how our **federal** government works. Laws are made by the United States Congress, a body of men and women who represent the different states. They are elected by citizens of each state.

Congress is made up of two groups, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each state, large or small in population, sends two senators to the Senate.

The House of Representatives is different. There, states with more people have more representatives. How could representatives be divided by population if no one knew the population of each state? The census is a way of finding out.

There was another reason for the census. The Revolutionary War had cost a great deal of money, and the young nation had to find ways to pay this debt. One way was to divide it equally among all the people. To do this, they had to first find out how many people there were.

### THAT'S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY!

Say this. The population of Vermont in 1791 was 85,539 people. That was easy for you to say. Wasn't it? But in a few breaths you've just stated a figure that took eighteen months to find out.

The first census began in 1790. When Vermont joined the Union in 1791, the count of our state had begun. Thomas Jefferson, who was Secretary of State at the time, was responsible for it.

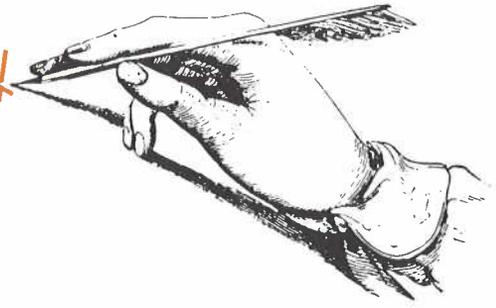
The job of actually counting people fell to the U.S. Marshal's Service. The marshal for each state hired assistants to go door to door. They were paid one dollar for each 300 people interviewed in a town. But in the country, where people were few and far between, the pay was one dollar for every 150 people.

Like most of the country at this time, traveling in Vermont was difficult. The few roads were narrow, muddy, and full of holes. Many were only trails marked by blazed trees. You crossed rivers at fords where the water was shallow. Of course, transportation was by foot, horseback, or coach.

Going house to house, the census takers asked six questions.

- Who was the head of the household?
- How many free, white males age sixteen and older lived there?
- How many free, white males under sixteen?
- How many free, white females?





How many other free persons?  
How many slaves?

If the government knew the number of males above sixteen, it would know the number of soldiers it could get if there were a war. All “other free persons” included Native Americans and free blacks who paid taxes. Most Native Americans, who did not pay taxes or belong to a white town, were not counted.

of their history. In fact, an article in the *Vermont Gazette* of September 26, 1791 gives the census totals and says, “To the Honor of Humanity, NO SLAVES.”

## TO THE HONOR OF HUMANITY, NO SLAVES

What’s in a number? When the state population in 1791 numbered in the thousands, why would sixteen men get people talking? Because these sixteen were listed as slaves.

The Vermont state constitution was the first to outlaw slavery. Yet the United States in 1791 was a slave-holding society. People owned other men, women, and children as property. The **majority** of the slaves were black people. Slavery was an injustice that was not corrected until the Civil War, seventy-five years later.

Look at the state-by-state summary of the 1790 census in this article. Look under the **category** of slaves. You will see that sixteen are listed for Vermont. They were really free black men living in Bennington County, many of them with their families. They were counted as slaves by mistake.

It is possible that there were slaves in Vermont who were never counted. But Vermonters in 1791 and today would like to think that slavery was not a part

DISTRICTS	Free white Males of 16 years and upwards, including heads of families.	Free white Males under sixteen years.	Free white Females, including heads of families.	All other free persons.	Slaves.	Total.
<i>Vermont</i>	22435	22328	40505	255	16	85539
<i>N. Hampshire</i>	36086	34851	70160	630	158	141885
<i>Maine</i>	24384	24748	46870	538	NONE	96540
<i>Massachusetts</i>	95453	87289	190582	5463	NONE	378787
<i>Rhode Island</i>	16019	15799	32652	3407	948	68825
<i>Connecticut</i>	60523	54403	117448	2808	2764	237946
<i>New York</i>	83700	78122	152320	4654	21324	340120
<i>New Jersey</i>	45251	41416	83287	2762	11423	184139
<i>Pennsylvania</i>	110788	106948	206363	6537	3737	434373
<i>Delaware</i>	11783	12143	22384	3899	8887	59094
<i>Maryland</i>	55915	51339	101395	8043	103036	319728
<i>Virginia</i>	110936	116135	215046	12866	292627	747610
<i>Kentucky</i>	15154	17057	28922	114	12430	73677
<i>N. Carolina</i>	69988	77506	140710	4975	100572	393751
<i>S. Carolina</i>	35576	37722	66880	1801	107094	249073
<i>Georgia</i>	13103	14044	25739	398	29264	82548
	807094	791850	1541263	59150	694280	3893635

## VOCABULARY

**official** - done by the government

**federal** - national

**majority** - the greater number of people

**category** - group



## Can You Keep a Secret?

When the census taker knocked on their doors, some people did not want to be counted. For some, it was against their religion. Others worried that the count would bring them higher taxes. They were afraid that the census lists were sent to the tax collector. Still others simply did not like other people knowing too much about them. They felt they had a right to **privacy**.

Even though the information was important, the government agreed that the privacy of every citizen must be protected. Each U. S. marshal and census taker had to swear an oath of **confidentiality**. They had to promise not to tell other people or even other parts of the government anything about a person or family. In fact, in this century, census workers have gone to jail rather than tell confidential information.

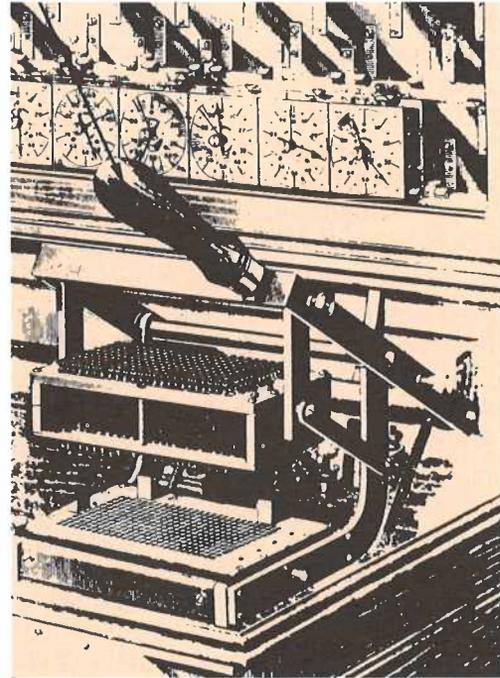
## The Big Count

As we enter the computer age, it is surprising to think that the census led to the invention of the computer. Until 1890, census figures were **tallied** by hand. The numbers of people living on one street were added together. Then the numbers on all the streets. Then the numbers for towns, counties, and the whole nation. That's a lot of addition!

Mistakes were made. Hand counting was very slow. The census is taken every ten years and sometimes one was barely done before the next was begun.

In 1887 Dr. Herman Hollerith invented a card-sorting machine that made counting people easier. Holes were punched in a card to represent numbers of people. The cards were put in the machine, which

counted them. Dr. Hollerith's machine counted eighty cards a minute. This was much faster than a person could do it. In 1896 he founded the company that became International Business Machines or IBM, Vermont's largest corporation.



Dr. Herman Hollerith's census machine

### VOCABULARY

**privacy** - the right to be left alone

**confidentiality** - trust

**tallied** - counted