

How Canadian National Censuses Are Organized

Introduction

Knowing where your ancestor lived is very helpful when you need to search a census that is not indexed. Names and boundaries of census districts and subdistricts, however, may have different names and boundaries than the counties, towns, or municipalities they cover.

For gazetteers and maps to help with searching a census, go back to the previous screen and select a province from the table.

Census districts

Canadian national census records are arranged by census year, province, and by census districts and subdistricts within the province.

- Census districts roughly followed the boundaries of *electoral* or voting districts.
- A census usually resulted in shifts and changes in the electoral districts.

In areas of rapid growth, such as the prairie and western provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories), district names and boundaries may be vastly different from census to census.

In the eastern provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec) the population was more stable. Therefore, there were few changes to census district names and only minor shifts in boundaries from census to census. However, the districts of northern Ontario (which are administrative divisions, rather than counties) often had different boundaries than the census districts.

- Census districts may be named after electoral districts rather than after familiar towns or municipalities in the prairie and western provinces. In the eastern provinces, census districts are usually named after the counties or large cities they cover.

Three Ontario census districts, Bothwell, Cardwell, and Monck (which were called counties on the census) existed for census and election purposes only.

Bothwell included some townships from Kent and Lambton counties.

Cardwell included some townships from Simcoe and Peel counties.

Monck included some townships from Lincoln, Haldimand, and Welland counties.

- Large cities such as Toronto and Montreal may have several census districts.

Census subdistricts

The census districts were divided into geographical areas, called **subdistricts**.

- Census subdistricts were usually named after the townships or city wards they covered in the eastern provinces. In the prairie and western provinces, they were often named after the voting precincts they covered, which may or may not match the names of towns or municipalities in the area.
- Larger villages and towns were often separate census subdistricts, yet may include some outlying areas.
- Most villages were enumerated as part of the township or voting precinct where they were located.

Subdistricts in more populated places often had two or more **divisions**. Each division is the area or neighborhood covered by a census taker.

Numbers assigned to census districts and subdistricts

In most cases, you will **not** need to know the numbers that were assigned to census districts and subdistricts.

The numbers are important however, if you search a census index that refers to the census districts, subdistricts, and divisions by numbers rather than by names. If you use the book version of the *Index to the 1871 Census of Ontario*, for example, the district numbers are helpful. Each of the 30 volumes contains one or more counties and refers only to the numbers and letters of the census districts, subdistricts, and divisions.

The 1871 and 1881 censuses

- District numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) were assigned geographically from a map of the province. An adjoining county or electoral district was given the next census district number. For a map of the 1871 census districts of Ontario on the Internet, see [Queens University](#).
- Subdistrict letters (a, b, c, etc.) were also assigned geographically, so neighboring townships roughly follow each other on the census schedules.
- Numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) were assigned to **divisions**.

The 1891 and 1901 censuses

These follow an alphabetical arrangement for all levels: province, district, and subdistrict. Numbers were assigned, starting with British Columbia and moving eastward across Canada.