

Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Census Tick Marks and Codes—Revisited Yet Again!" *Ancestry Daily News*, 04 January 2005; archived at Ancestry.com, *Learning Center* <http://www.ancestry.com/learn/library/article.aspx?article=9505>.

Census Tick Marks and Codes--Revisited Yet Again!

What riddles they pose--those curious markings all over our ancestral census entries! Stray check marks, letters, and numerals prompt us to wonder whether clues lurk behind their cryptic facade.

A correspondent recently asked me about wee little numbers in the "occupational" column of the 1900 census. Coincidentally, that same week a list-serve poster raised the same question, saying the Census Bureau had told her to ignore them because they were "office notes" of "no genealogical value."

The list-serve poster was reluctant to take the Bureau's word for it. After all, staffers of archives and government agencies often underestimate our use of every shred of information. In this case, experience had taught the list-serve poster that similar markings on passenger lists were indeed clues to other material.(1)

So, given that the discouraging advice of a busy Bureau staffer offered no explanation of what the codes actually mean, let's see if we can interpret those markings and determine whether they have "genealogical value." As with our previous articles on the subject of census annotations,(2) you may wish to follow along by viewing the page images at www.ancestry.com.

The Problem

In 1900, Mary Stewart was a sixty-nine-year-old widow in Whistler Village, Mobile County, Alabama (District 87, Ancestry image 7). A thirty-seven-year-old single son and a grandson shared her home. No occupation is cited for either adult. In that blank on Mary's entry we see two annotations: "ng" and "0-0-2." Might these cryptic notes, her descendant wondered, reveal anything more about Mary?

As mentioned in our earlier articles on this subject, when we use censuses it is wise to study the instructions given to enumerators in that particular year.(3) In 1900, the Bureau gave numerous do's and don'ts for recording occupational data, but those instructions do not mention "ng" or any numerical codes. Thus, odds are, the annotations were made by the Bureau's D.C. office and were likely codes for the use of punch-card operators in compiling that year's statistics. Operating on this premise, can we discover what the codes represent?

Defining a Pattern

"Ng" is fairly obvious. It appears repeatedly throughout Whistler's enumeration

but only where occupations are not given. Almost certainly, “not given” is exactly what “ng” stands for.

On the other hand, “0-0-2” requires considerably more analysis. First, let's extract a list of every entry in which 0-0-2 appears. (There's more than a few of them.)

Next, let's compare each entry against the others for similarities and dissimilarities. Once done, we can pose a series of test questions:

- Is 0-0-2 simply a punch-card code for “occupation not given”? No. That code appears in various cases in which the occupation is indeed given. Meanwhile, in other cases where the occupation is also omitted, different codes appear.
- Could 0-0-2 represent not just one code, but multiple codes relating to occupations? Probably. The three digits are separated by dashes in every case rather than being written as, say, 002. That suggests the digits are divided into fields in which each represents something different. This hypothesis is reinforced by variations in the code—typically 0-0-1, or 0-0-2, or 0-0-3, etc.—although variations also occur in the middle digit (e.g., 0-1-2, or 0-1-5, or 0-3-6).
- Could each code set represent a particular occupation? Two factors suggest not: 0-0-2 appears for Mary and some others who had no occupation at all. Yet some others coded 0-0-2 have a variety of occupations. For example, the servant Margaret Talbert (image 6, entry 59/59) and the raftsman Ralph Dunahoo (image 25, entry 278/279) are both coded 0-0-2.
- If these codes do relate to occupations, why do some people with occupations have a second set of codes in addition to this one—while others with occupations have no codes at all? For this question, a pattern is easily spotted. Codes appear only in the occupation column for heads of households, not for other employed household members.
- Could one field of the code treat the head-of-household while another field treats the other occupants?
- Could one field represent a total for the household, while other fields represent others in the dwelling?

Testing these last two questions leads to useful answers. Let's start with some specific household data for our “person of interest,” Mary Stewart in dwelling/family 69/69:

Stewart, Mary, 64, widow, no occupation. (0-0-2)
———, Ausman?, 37, son, single, no occupation (uncoded)
———, Calabe, 12, grandson, single, at school (uncoded)

McGreu, Mary, 43, boarder, divorced, day laborer (uncoded)
———, Willie, grandson, 12, single, no occupation (uncoded)
———, Walter, G. Son, 9, single, no occupation (uncoded)

Analyzing Mary's household by relationships and work status, we can group the six people as follows:

- a widow and adult son, both unemployed

- a grandson attending school
- an employed boarder and her 2 grandsons

Continuing this analysis in other nearby households, we generate the following:

William Snyder (image 7, entry 74/74) (0-0-2)

- male, 30, married, “farm laborer,” same code as the unemployed widow Mary
- unemployed wife and one unemployed 8-year-old son (both uncoded)

Mary B. Tomas (image 6, entry 63/63) “N.G.” (0-3-0)

- widowed female, 52, occupation left blank
- son, 25, employed “R.R. laborer” (uncoded)
- son, 14, employed “farm laborer” (uncoded)
- grandson, 5, employed “day laborer” (uncoded)

James Fitzgerald (image 7, entry 68/68) (0-1-3) (also 9-2-a)

- male, 58, married, “carpenter”
- unemployed wife, unemployed 18-year-old son (both uncoded)
- 16-year-old son, employed “RR laborer” (uncoded)
- 13-year-old daughter, attending school (uncoded)

Martin Hendrick (image 7, entry 71/71) (0-0-4) (also 9-2-a)

- male, 30, married, a “carpenter” but unemployed 12 months
- wife, unemployed; 3 children aged 1/12 to 5 (all uncoded)

Newton Murk (image 9, entry 97/98) (0-5-1)

- male, 40, married, “day laborer”
- wife unemployed (uncoded)
- 5 young-adult sisters-in-law, all employed “servants” (uncoded)
- 2 boarders, employed “day laborers” (uncoded)

Polly Sanders (image 15, entry 161/162) (0-0-0)

- married but living alone, 50, “day laborer”

Even from this small sampling, we can draw patterns that hold when tested against the other coded entries in Whistler. For example:

- The last digit (2 in Mary Stewart's case) represents the number of unemployed family members who are dependents on the head of household. Children attending school are treated as unemployed. Boarders are not tallied. In short, data is tallied only for the head-of-household and stated kin.
- The middle digit (0 in Mary's case) represents the employed family members other than the household head. As with James Fitzgerald and Newton Murk, employed family members who are not heads-of-households are—via this middle digit—tallied as employed even though they do not have their own codes. Again, boarders are excluded.

So what about the first digit? I'm leaving that for you to explore on your own! It's a good exercise in analyzing data!

Interpreting the Results

As the Census Bureau advises, this set of occupational codes is essentially bureaucratic. Yet, one might argue they still have a hidden value, if we pause amid all our data-copying to consider not only the curiosity they pose but also the lives they represent.

Take Martin Hendrick for example—the man coded 0-0-4. What lies behind that number? The “routine data” in his entry tells us that he was a carpenter but had not worked in 12 months. The middle “0” in his code reminds us that even though he was unemployed, there was no one else in his household that had a marketable occupation to support the family. Martin's “4” reminds us that he had four nonworking dependents who also had to be supported. But how?

Other “routine data” for this household tell us that the couple had been married eight years. In that short time, Martin had gone from a carefree lad to a man with four other people to feed and clothe, even though he had no job. That “routine” data tells us that he and his wife had buried two children. Was that because his inability to work at his trade created an inability to afford medical care? Are you now wondering why he was out-of-work for twelve months, even though he had a skill that was elite in his social class?

Sure, we might have stopped to analyze all this anyway, but how often do we really do that? Typically, we focus so intently on the data—those basic “facts” like names, ages, birthplaces, and occupations—that we forget to ponder what all those details represent in terms of human lives. This is where these bureaucratic codes can have a not-so-obvious value.

By pausing to consider every oddity, anomaly, and detail, we become more thoughtful, careful researchers—even when the annotations turn out to be “insignificant bureaucratic statistics.” The very effort to discern what those curiosities mean can leave us with a more poignant view of the humanity that census data and statistics represent.

Notes:

1. Marion L. Smith has written a superb online guide to these markings on manifest lists; see *A Guide to Interpreting Passenger List Annotations*, [JewishGen: The Home of Jewish Genealogy](#)
2. Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Interpreting the Tick Marks on Federal Censuses*, *Ancestry Daily News*, 11 March 2004 ; and Mills, "[Census Tick Marks and Annotations—Revisited](#)", ADN, 20 December 2004
3. The simplest guide is *Bureau of the Census, Twenty Censuses: Population and*

Housing Questions, 1790–1980 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1979), found in the Government Documents section of large city libraries and university libraries. Its revision, Jason G. Gauthier's *Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790 to 2000* (Washington: Census Bureau, 2002), deletes valuable portions of the original work but adds informative background discussions.

For years, **Elizabeth Shown Mills** has taught genealogists how to analyze documents for clues. Her latest book, *Isle of Canes*, also teaches us how to use the nuts and bolts of records to create enigmatic lives and engrossing family stories.