State census work can be best understood against the background of the important and excellent United States censuses. Although the national census organization in the U.S. has become perhaps the world’s best, the development from a simple beginning in 1790 to the present was slow, at least in the early decades. Art. A, sec. 2 of the U.S. Constitution provided for the U.S. census:

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this Union according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other persons. The actual enumeration shall be made within three years after the first meeting of the Congress of the United States and within every subsequent term of ten years in such manner as they shall by law direct.

Although this was a landmark in census development, it limited the work to an enumeration of the inhabitants of the country. Very early there were demands for other information, such as data on agriculture and industry. In the rapidly developing states and territories the ten-year interval was sometimes longer than convenient for state and local government, especially in frontier areas.

As demands came for more frequent or more detailed data on population, manufacturing, industry or agriculture, the national census organization was lacking in both experience and skills. For nearly fifty years the question of the constitutionality of such additional census work was a deterrent to progress. When people needed more data on population or in new fields, they turned to the states for them.

Actually State census work goes back into colonial times, census enumerations being reported in Massachusetts as early as 1643; Rhode Island, 1708; and New Hampshire, 1767.1 In 1854 the Superintendent of the United States Census reported that 20 of the 31 states then in the Union had some kind of state census.2 Although the earliest work was concerned largely with population, some later state enumerations included agriculture, manufacturing and mining. These state censuses have now disappeared, except for the mid-decade one in Massachusetts3 and a somewhat different one which provides population data annually in Kansas.4
Territorial Census Work by Wisconsin

Like other states, Wisconsin engaged in census-taking during territorial days. Eleven state censuses were taken between 1836 and 1905. The first five came between 1836 and 1847. These territorial censuses were concerned only with population, first for the organization of the territorial government and then for statehood. A provision for state censuses at ten-year intervals was also written into the Wisconsin State Constitution in 1848.

The first territorial census of 1836 was described in a report of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1892. The editor pointed out that the Act of Congress, April 20, 1836, establishing the territorial government of Wisconsin provided that previous to

WISCONSIN TERRITORIAL CENSUS - 1836
SEX RATIO OF POPULATION

THREE COUNTIES - BROWN, IOWA, MILWAUKEE

In the census of 1836 the population was shown by age groups. The inhabitants age 21 years and over were 77 per cent men and 23 per cent women for Brown, Iowa, and Milwaukee Counties. Crawford County is not included in this chart because the data were influenced by the military personnel stationed at Fort Crawford.
the first election the governor should order a census or enumeration of inhabitants of the several counties to be made by the sheriffs and reported to him. Upon the basis of this census the governor was to apportion in the ratio of population the council members and representatives, Indians excepted.

The first territorial census for Wisconsin was taken in July of 1836. No printed blanks were furnished for the enumeration. Sheriffs were instructed simply to report in writing the names of white families, with the number of persons in each family, divided into four groups:

I. Males under 21 years
II. Females under 21 years
III. Males 21 years and over
IV. Females 21 years and over

In 1836 Wisconsin Territory was much larger than present Wisconsin because it included most of Iowa, Minnesota, and other land west of the Mississippi River to about the present site of Bismark, N. D. The enumeration, however, covered only the populated parts of Wisconsin and some of the counties of Iowa west of the Mississippi River, an area temporarily attached to Wisconsin Territory.

In mid 19th century most states had their own census.

In 1854 of the thirty states in the U.S., twenty-one had their own census. Wisconsin took censuses from 1836 to 1905.
pending further organization. Governor Dodge provided for representation in the Territorial Council (13 members) and House of Representatives (26 members) on the basis of population, which for the four counties—Brown, Crawford, Iowa, and Milwaukee—amounted to 11,683 persons.

In 1838 the Territory took another census of population, again by the county sheriffs, with the data recorded by towns and cities. No age divisions were required. The sheriffs recorded the names of the master, mistress, steward, or overseer of each household, and the township in which the family lived. They recorded the number of white males, white females, free males of color, and free females of color, with a column for totals and one for remarks. Each sheriff was required to summarize the reports and submit them to the Secretary of the Territory.

In 1842 another territorial census was authorized and taken. The headings were the same as those in 1838, with the addition of a column for errata.

As statehood approached, a further census enumeration was necessary. An Act in Relation to the Formation of the State Government, January 31, 1846, provided in sec. 1 that every white male inhabitant above the age of 21 who resided in the territory six months previous to the census and who was a citizen of the U. S. or had filed his declaration of intention, according to U. S. naturalization laws, was authorized to vote for or against the formation of a state government in Wisconsin. Sec. 3 provided for the governor to appoint in each of the counties some suitable person to enumerate the number of inhabitants, omitting non-citizen Indians and officers and soldiers of the U. S. Army. The census-takers were empowered to choose as many assistants as necessary, assigning to each one a portion of his county accurately defined either by Congressional Township lines, the boundaries of towns organized for town government, or distinctly bounded by water courses or public roads.

The appointment of special persons to take the 1846 census was a major departure from previous census work by the sheriffs or their deputies in each county. The appointed persons were required to take an oath that they would obtain an exact enumeration of all residents within their county or division and make duplicate reports for the Secretary of the Territory and the Register of Deeds. A penalty was provided in sec. 6 of the Act for failure to perform assignments properly. The enumeration was to begin on June 1, 1846, and be completed within 30 days.

Upon the basis of the population determined in this census the governor was to issue a proclamation and appoint delegates apportioned to each county and territory according to population for the
first state constitutional convention. Thus this census differed from previous ones, the details being carefully prescribed for the purpose of Statehood.

The first Constitution for Wisconsin, produced by a constitutional convention in 1846, was rejected by the voters in a referendum in April, 1847. To provide a basis in the territory for the apportionment of members for a second constitutional convention, a special legislative session in October 1847, passed a new act for the formation of a state government. Secs. 13–19 provided for another census in December 1847, only 18 months after the previous one. This census recorded 210,546 people, an almost unbelievable increase of 35 per cent in a year and a half.

**STATE CENSUS CONTINUED UNDER THE WISCONSIN CONSTITUTION**

The five censuses of population during territorial days in Wisconsin were largely for the apportionment of representatives to the territorial legislature and the constitutional conventions, but of course they also showed the rapid growth in population and the advancement of the frontier.

After Wisconsin became a state, the Constitution provided for the continuing of the state census enumerations at ten-year intervals for the mid-decade years ending in five.⁹ Six such censuses were conducted for the mid-decade years from 1855 to 1905.
Obviously during a period of rapid settlement, population change, and the frequent addition of new counties, apportionment of the members of the legislature according to population needed to be made frequently. The state Constitution provided that the membership of the legislature be reapportioned after each census enumeration, both federal and state, every five years. As the state became more mature and population more stable, however, the need for such frequent reapportionment was less pressing than during the days of most rapid growth and geographic advance of the population.

In November, 1910, a constitutional amendment relating to reapportionment was adopted. It provided that apportionment of members of the legislature according to population should be done only at ten-year intervals in accordance with the U.S. census, thus eliminating the need for a state census of population. The 1905 census, therefore, the sixth one under statehood, was the last of the Wisconsin state censuses as provided under the Constitution.

Agricultural, Manufacturing and Mineral Data in the Wisconsin State Census

The territorial and state census as in Wisconsin was developed originally for the enumeration of the inhabitants. An explosive increase in the work began with the 1885 census. The Revised Statutes of 1878 had made substantial additions to state census work. These included a long list of questions on agriculture (animals, crop acreage, land tenure, equipment, product values), manufactured products and minerals produced in the state. The new material was so extensive that much larger reports for the censuses for 1885, 1895 and 1905 were required, with major portions devoted to the new subjects.

The responsibility for carrying out this enlarged work was assigned to the Secretary of State, who prepared the schedules and sent them to county clerks for enumeration by town, city, and village clerks. The county clerks filed the original reports with the Registers of Deeds and sent copies to the Secretary of State, who was responsible for tabulation and publication.

Filing original reports in the counties and making hand-written copies for the Secretary of State had serious faults. There is no evidence that counties had much use for the original documents, many of which were lost, and the making of copies by cheap labor in the counties resulted in errors and omissions which reduced the accuracy of the tabulations.

Although the reasons that triggered the spectacular enlargement of the Wisconsin state censuses beginning with 1885 are not en-
tirely clear, several are apparent. To begin with, the state economy was largely agricultural and with the post-Civil War depression of the 1870's and 80's, data on agricultural trends and changes were of great interest. Another and perhaps major reason was that the U.S. Congress in the census legislation for 1880 authorized the Secretary of the Interior to pay states and territories half the cost of a mid-decade census in 1885 if they met certain requirements. Apparently Congress hoped that if all states could perform a mid-decade census patterned after the U.S. census, mid-decade data for the nation might be produced. As a result more elaborate state censuses, including many of the U.S. census inquiries of 1880, were taken in various states and territories, but the U.S. census of 1880 had been so enlarged that states could not duplicate it entirely. A few received federal payments but most of them, like Wisconsin, did not. Although this federal legislation applied only to 1885 and was not re-enacted, Wisconsin continued the enlarged program through the 1905 census.

Another subject included in the state census of Wisconsin beginning in 1885 and continuing for the following two censuses—1895 and 1905—was the “enrollment of militia.” Wisconsin furnished 91,327 men in the Civil War. The 1885 state census recorded

![Number of Farms in Wisconsin, 1850-1960](chart.png)

- **U.S. Decennial Census**
- **Wisconsin State Census**
- **U.S. Mid-decade Census of Agriculture**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number Counties</th>
<th>Enumerated by</th>
<th>Administering State Agency</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Number of Inhabitants</th>
<th>Approximate % Annual Increase from Previous Census</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 1836</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>County Sheriffs</td>
<td>Territorial Governor</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>11,683</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1838</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>County Sheriffs</td>
<td>Secretary of Territory</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>18,139</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1842</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>County Sheriffs</td>
<td>Secretary of Territory</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>44,478</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1846</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Persons appointed by Territorial Governor</td>
<td>Secretary of Territory</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>153,277</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 1847</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Persons appointed by Territorial Governor</td>
<td>Secretary of Territory</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>210,546</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June–July 1855</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>County clerks and town and city clerks</td>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>552,451</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1865</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>County clerks and town and city clerks</td>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>868,325</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1875</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>County clerks and town and city clerks</td>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>1,236,729</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June–July 1885</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>County clerks and town and city clerks</td>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>Population, Agriculture, Manufacturers, Minerals, Ex-soldiers and sailors</td>
<td>1,563,413</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1895</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>County clerks and town and city clerks</td>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>Population, Agriculture, Manufacturers, Minerals, Ex-soldiers and sailors</td>
<td>1,937,915</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1905</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>County clerks and town and city clerks</td>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
<td>Population, Agriculture, Manufacturers, Minerals, Ex-soldiers and sailors</td>
<td>2,228,949</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the names and addresses of 29,686 veterans living in Wisconsin. By 1895 the number of Civil War veterans in the state declined to 26,367 and by 1905 to 9,521. Clearly by another decade few Civil War veterans would remain and the need for this information would disappear.

It is not surprising, therefore, that with the greater stability of the state’s population, thus reducing the need for frequent legislative reapportionment, with agriculture more prosperous and becoming a smaller segment of the state’s growing economy, and with the number of Civil War veterans greatly reduced, the move developed to amend the state constitution to eliminate the state census. The amendment was passed by referendum in 1910, thus closing seven decades of state census work.

These censuses, in addition to serving important purposes in their time, provide a rich mine of historic information. Because they were published by various divisions of the state, by counties, towns, cities, and villages, they provide useful detail for historic studies. Partly because a mid-decade census of population is useful and because some present problems require more frequent censuses than at ten-year intervals, administrators of new projects dealing with apportionment of federal funds are now demanding a federal mid-decade census. In recent years hearings have been held, with many agencies urging Congress to provide a mid-decade census of population. The latest of these hearings was in Washington on May 4 and 5, 1965; a fifty million dollar appropriation was being sought for this purpose.

SUMMARY

State census taking developed in early American history when population and frontiers were changing rapidly. The U.S. Census at ten-year intervals was not frequent enough to provide information necessary under those conditions. State censuses, undertaking to fill a part of the need, for a time served an important purpose. However, they could not provide for the needs of an increasingly complex society over the longer period and they have largely disappeared. Continuing needs for data at shorter intervals caused the U.S. Census in 1925 to undertake a Census of Agriculture at five-year intervals. A Census of Manufacturing is also taken at shorter intervals. Because of other needs for population data at five-year intervals one may expect that the U.S. Census will take action within the next decade.

REFERENCES

4. Statement by Dr. Conrad Taeuber, Assistant Director, U. S. Census Bureau.
7. The legal basis for the 1838 Census is found on pages 239–244 Territorial Laws of Wisconsin 1837, Act No. 53, providing for the taking of a second census or enumeration of the inhabitants of the Territory of Wisconsin, approved December 30, 1837.
9. Section 3 of Article 4 of the Wisconsin Constitution read as follows: “Section 3. The legislature shall provide by law for an enumeration of the inhabitants of the state in the year 1855 and at the end of every ten years thereafter: and at their first session after such an enumeration and also after enumerations made by the authority of the United States the legislature shall apportion and district anew the members of the Senate and Assembly according to the number of inhabitants excluding Indians not taxed and soldiers and officers of the U. S. Army and Navy.

In addition to the above mentioned sources, the various laws and published reports relating to this work in Wisconsin have been examined. Credit must also be given to J. E. Boell, the state archivist, for encouraging a study of which this paper is a part and to the staff of the State Historical Society, especially Librarian Ruth Davis, who has been most helpful. The Secretary of State's office, especially Miss Kay Thompson, assisted in making records available.