

Smith, Johnson, and Jones: Researching Very Common Surnames

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If you have a rare and unusual surname, searching census records, vital records, and online databases is fairly easy. You'll be able to easily trace your family lines free from the worry that you might have found the wrong individuals that share your ancestors' names. My last name, however, is Brown. In the 1990 federal census, Brown was the fifth most-common American surname. This article is dedicated to all our readers who, like me, have extremely common surnames to research. How can you search for your ancestors and make sure you've found the right ones with a surname like Johnson, Williams, Miller, Davis, or Brown? Here are a few ideas.

- Since you have a common surname, pay special attention to first names. When you're conducting your online census searches for a family, choose the family member with the least common first name, and search for that individual. Once you've found him or her, you'll know you have the right family.
- Location, location, location. Locality is everything when searching for common surnames.

There are a lot of Brown families in Indiana, for example. But because I know that my ancestors came from a little town called French Lick in Orange County, Indiana, I've been able to find and identify them even though they have a very common surname. If you don't know what county or town your

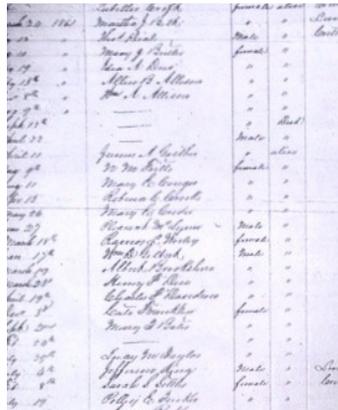
ancestors came from, interview living relatives to get the most specific information you can.

- If you're searching within a large city, you'll find dozens of families with your same surname. To figure out which Tom Jones is your ancestor, map them out. Print out a street map of the city from GoogleMaps, and then use the streets and house numbers listed on the census to map out each Tom Jones and his family that could be your ancestors. Then compare addresses listed on other documents—civil registrations of births, death certificates, and military records—to narrow them down.

- Most importantly, don't jump to any conclusions. Don't assume that just because someone has the same name as your ancestor

that it really is your ancestor. With common surnames you must be sure to check the names of all family members to be sure you've got the right family. Check birthdates, too. Doing research on these kinds of family lines can be a lot more challenging than researching ancestors with rare surnames. But by paying careful attention

to first names and localities, by mapping out your ancestors' places of residence within large cities, and by double-checking every match, you can successfully find your ancestors—even if they have a surname like Wilson or Jones.



How can you search for your ancestors and make sure you've found the right ones with a surname like Johnson, Williams, Miller, Davis, or Brown?