

Baseline Survey Census Research

Berks County

The Federal population census is an important tool for understanding the history of a community and how that community has changed over time. The census provides data that can help us to better understand Pennsylvania's diverse racial and ethnic populations (referred to as underrepresented communities for purposes of this Baseline Survey effort), where these populations settled historically, and how they left their mark on the Commonwealth's landscape.

Pennsylvania has a history of being ethnically diverse in both the urban areas of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and in the commonwealth's smaller cities and rural areas. Native Americans have called Pennsylvania's lands home for centuries. Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish settlers moved to Pennsylvania in the late 17th century, and were quickly followed by English, German and other Europeans by the turn of the 18th century. Both enslaved and free Africans and African Americans lived in Pennsylvania as early as 1690 and the commonwealth's Black communities grew exponentially with the First Great Migration in the early 20th century. By the mid-20th century, people from almost all racial and ethnic groups had settled in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania's historical racial and ethnic diversity and the surviving older and historic places that embody that diversity is not well understood or well documented. By understanding what populations were present, when, and where they lived, the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office (PA SHPO) can identify and document the older and historic places associated with these underrepresented communities through targeted survey work.

Once this information is collected and added to PA-SHARE, Pennsylvania's online database of older and historic places, this important information will be available to professionals and the public alike, providing everyone with data to support the need to tell broader and more inclusive stories.

It is important to note that census data is only one part of the extensive research that is necessary to understand Pennsylvania's varied and changing communities over the last four hundred years. The information collected, methods for collecting it, and categories and definitions changed from census taker to census taker and from year to year.

Berks County is one of the fifty-two counties in Pennsylvania where PA SHPO and its contractors will be working over the next two years to collect information about historic places that are underrepresented in Pennsylvania's statewide historic inventory.

It is important that PA SHPO collects information about the older and historic places that Pennsylvanian's value in their communities. PA SHPO welcomes public recommendations for places that should be documented in this survey. If you would like to provide your feedback, please fill out this [short survey form](#).



Historic Postcard of Mt. Penn Pagoda, Reading, Berks County

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Berks County was formed on March 11, 1752. It has 73 municipalities and as of the 2020 federal census, the total population was 428,849. The population of Berks County was first recorded in the 1790 US Census. A total of 30,179 inhabitants were recorded, 29,913 of whom were White, 65 were enslaved Black people, and 201 were “Other Free Persons” of non-White race. The total population growth in Berks County remained on a steady, upward trend from 1790 to 1980.

The Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) population of Berks County have historically represented 1% or less of the total population from 1790 to 1960. The percentage of BIPOC increased in 1970 to 2.5% and in 1980 to 5%. The BIPOC population in Berks County from 1790 to 1970 were predominantly Black. The Black population was at its largest in 1980 at 7,691 individuals.

Asians were documented as living in Berks County beginning in 1880 and were predominantly of Chinese descent until 1960. In 1960, the number of Japanese residents (37) exceeded the number of Chinese (31) and Filipino (16) residents. Native Americans were recorded in Berks County in the 1870, 1890, 1910, 1930-1960, and 1980 censuses. Fifteen people of Hispanic descent were recorded in Berks County in the 1930 census. In the 1980 census, the number of Hispanic people outnumbered the number of Black people in Berks County. The “Other” category has been used to describe different groups through time. In 1790 and 1800, “Other” specifically noted BIPOC people, predominantly Black Americans, who were not enslaved. In later decades, it is inconclusive whether “Other” includes only mixed-race people or people of Black, Native American, Asian, or Hispanic descent during any given decade.

	White	Black	Native American	Asian	Hispanic	Other
1790	29913	65	0	0	0	201
1800	32223	19	0	0	0	165
1810	0	0	0	0	0	0
1820	47181	1	0	0	0	477
1830		7	0	0	0	0
1840	64052	526	0	0	0	0
1850	76579	550	0	0	0	0
1860	93321	497	0	0	0	0
1870	105813	424	8	0	0	0
1880	122146	449	0	2	0	0
1890	136748	568	2	9	0	0
1900	158892	709	0	14	0	0
1910	182206	1007	1	8	0	0
1920	199679	1165	0	9	0	1
1930	229364	2321	4	12	15	1
1940	239560	2293	8	18	0	31
1950	252336	3328	20	31	0	25
1960	270582	4689	17	84	0	42
1970	288972	0	0	0	0	7410
1980	297519	7691	213	1595	8913	0

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This graph shows the relationship between BIPOC populations (right side axis) and total population (left side axis) in Berks County from 1790 to 1980. Significant events that had a bearing on the population are included below the graph to show Berks County's total populations at these important points in time.

The 1810 federal census is not digitized and therefore there is no population data. The 1830 census only provided the total population, total number of free persons, and total number of enslaved persons. There were seven enslaved people in Berks County in 1830 and no distinction of race among free people, therefore the BIPOC total for 1830 based on what is known is 7 people. The 1970 census provided no distinction of race among non-White persons in Berks County.

