



March 2, 2010

History of Census: Step back in time

Kevin Costello

Community Recorder guest columnist

(Editor's note: This is the first of two articles highlighting the history and importance of the U.S. Census.)

The U.S. Constitution empowers Congress to undertake a census to count every person living in the United States of America and to use that count to determine representation in Congress. The first census began more than a year after the inauguration of President George Washington and in the first meeting of Congress. Congress assigned responsibility for the 1790 Census to the marshals of the U.S. judicial districts. The pay allowed for the 1790 "enumerators" was very small. It did not exceed \$1 for 50 people properly recorded on the census rolls.

The First Federal Congress established a special committee to prepare the questions to be included in the first census. Virginia Rep. James Madison recommended five of the initial six questions. The questions involved gender, race, relationship to the head of household and the number of slaves, if any. The first U.S. Census in 1790 was led under the direction of Thomas Jefferson, the secretary of state. Marshals took the census in the original 13 states plus the districts of Kentucky, Maine, Vermont and the Southwest Territory (Tennessee). The first Census Day was Aug. 2, 1790, and not April 1.

Today, the Census includes other questions beyond the simple count of the number of people because, on numerous occasions, the courts have said the Constitution gives Congress the authority to collect statistics so it can use this information to govern. It is interesting to know that the 2010 Census questionnaire is one of the shortest in history and it comes very close in length and scope that our founding fathers envisioned in 1790.

Everyone in the household answers seven questions related to name, gender, race, ethnicity and whether they sometime live somewhere else. The head of household answers how many people live in the residence, whether it is a house, apartment mobile home and provides a telephone number for census workers to follow-up, if necessary (unlike the first 1790 Census).

For more information about the U.S. Census, visit www.census.gov. Another article about the importance of the U.S. Census to Boone County will be featured in an upcoming edition of the *Recorder*.

Kevin P. Costello is chairman of the Boone County Complete Count Committee. Other members include Adam Howard, Boone County Fiscal Court; Bob Townsend, city of Florence; Connie Goins, city of Walton; Kathy Porter, city of Union; and Greta Southard, Boone County Library District.
