Australian Census records and their substitutes

On April 3, 1881 the first simultaneous census of Australia and all the British Empire took place. The total population of Australia was recorded as 2,250,194 and of those, 222,939 were living in Sydney.

Those Census records from Australia which had recorded individual names have unfortunately not survived, as they were destroyed in the Garden Palace Fire of 1882.

Fortunately the State Library has an extensive collection of NSW directories dating from 1808, and electoral rolls from 1842. Add to this an extensive collection of Commonwealth electoral rolls dating from Federation, and there are a number of sources that can be used as a substitute for the missing census returns.

The first NSW Census held in 1828 has survived and copies are held in the library's Family and Local history area, Lower Ground 2 (Macquarie Street Wing).
Muster records [5] are another useful source for the early colonial period. The first muster or systematic survey of the population was made in 1795. Whilst this and earlier population surveys of NSW cannot be found, the library holds the earliest muster to survive, the original 1800 Settlers Muster. [6]

Inquire at the Family and Local History Desk for more information about the musters that are the earliest records of their kind for New South Wales. Many have been published including the 1800 Settlers' Muster [2] and can be accessed on the family history shelves.


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