

# Migration into and out of North Carolina: Exploring census data

BY DAVID WALBERT

Data for this page is drawn from the U. S. Census of Population and Housing (see <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/>).

Just how many people left North Carolina in the first half of the nineteenth century — and where did they go? To answer questions like this, the best place to turn is census records. The census can't tell us *why* people moved — we'll explore their reasons on the following pages. But a look at the numbers can give us a sense of the scale of the migration.

## Population growth

Before we start, it will help to list the reasons that the state's population might grow or shrink.

Sources of population **growth** include:

- births
- immigration (people freely coming from other states or from other countries)
- slaves brought by immigrants from other states
- purchase of slaves from other states
- importation of slaves from Africa (before 1810)

Sources of population **loss** include:

- deaths
- emigration (people freely leaving the state)
- slaves taken with emigrants to other states
- sale of slaves to other states

## NORTH CAROLINA

Let's look at the total number of people living in North Carolina between 1790 and 1860.

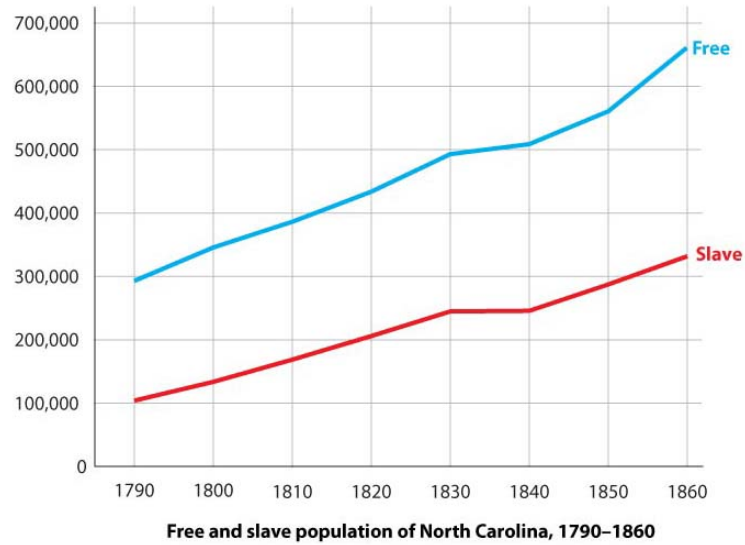


Figure 1. Free and slave population of North Carolina, 1790–1860.

### Questions

1. When was population growth slowest in North Carolina?
2. When was it fastest?
3. Did free and slave population grow at the same rate, or were there differences? Why might this be?

### THE UNITED STATES

Now let's compare North Carolina's population growth to the growth of population in the entire United States.

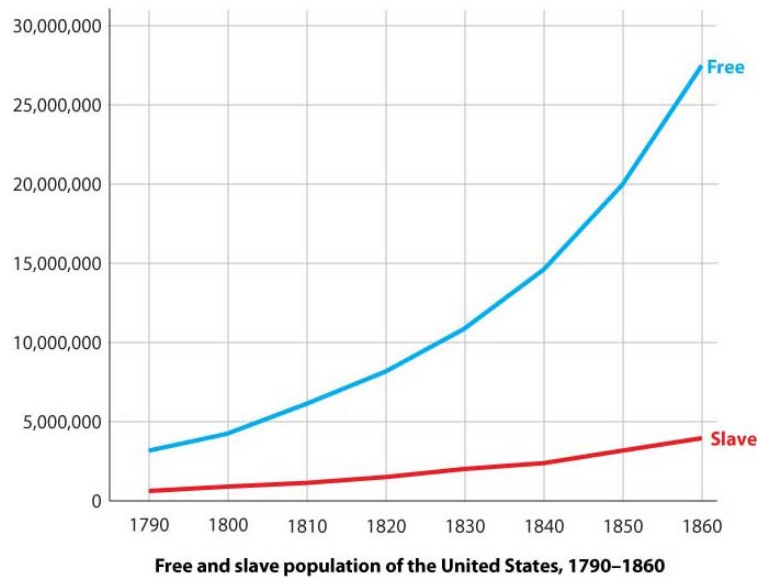


Figure 2. Free and slave population of the United States, 1790–1860.

### Questions

1. When was population growth fastest across the U.S.?
2. How did population growth nationwide compare to the growth of population in North Carolina? Was it faster, slower, about the same? When was there the biggest difference?
3. Did free and slave population grow at the same rate, or were there differences? Why might this be?

### GRAPHS VS. RAW DATA

Graphs can give us a quick visual sense of the data, but they can also be misleading. Here, we've presented two graphs with different *scales* and asked you to compare them. The population of the United States was so much bigger than that of North Carolina that we couldn't easily present them on the same graph. As a result, the population numbers are much higher on the second graph even though the two graphs are the same physical size. Essentially, we've squashed a really tall graph to make it fit your web browser.

Why is that a problem? When you look at population growth, you're looking at the *slope* of the graph — how fast it rises. If we stretch or shrink the graph, the slope will seem to change. In this case, even though it's clear that U.S. population was rising more quickly over time, in fact, it was rising even faster than the graph suggests.

The numbers don't change, though, so if you want to check the data, here's a table of population for North Carolina and the United States every ten years — the data from which we drew the graphs.

Free, slave, and total population of North Carolina and the United States, 1790–1860

## Out-migration

The first few censuses only counted total population, divided by demographic groups — white and nonwhite, male and female, free and slave, and age ranges. By the middle of the nineteenth century, though, census officials began to ask other questions that can help historians today answer questions about that time. In 1850, for example, the census asked people which state they had been born in, and so we can learn how many residents of each state had been born in North Carolina. These numbers give us a sense of the scale of out-migration in the early 1800s.

The map of the U.S. in 1850 will help you see where migration was heaviest.



Figure 3. Map of the United States and territories in 1850.

Number of people born in North Carolina and living in other states in 1850

### Questions

1. Which states and territories (other than North Carolina itself, of course) had the most residents born in North Carolina? Where were those states — did they border North Carolina? Did North Carolinians tend to go north? south? west?
2. Add up the numbers from each state and territory. What percentage of people born in North Carolina lived elsewhere by 1850?

## Immigration

Finally, let's consider immigration into the United States. The 1850 census also tracked the number of foreign-born people living in each state and their country of birth, so we have good data on immigration in the mid-nineteenth century.

Foreign-born people living in North Carolina and in the United States, by country of origin, 1850

### Questions

1. Look at the bottom rows of the table first, labeled “total population” and “total foreign.” What percentage of the population of the United States was foreign-born? What percentage of North Carolina’s population was foreign-born?
2. From what countries was immigration into the U.S. heaviest?
3. From what countries was immigration into North Carolina heaviest?
4. Why might there have been such a discrepancy in immigration rates between North Carolina and the nation as a whole? (You probably can’t answer this question fully yet — but keep it in mind as you continue reading about North Carolina before the Civil War.

## Looking ahead: Push and pull factors

As you explore the documents in this chapter and those that follow, think about the factors that led people to leave North Carolina. Historians talk about two kinds of reasons for migration: push factors and pull factors. *Push factors* are reasons people might want to leave a place, while *pull factors* are things that attract them to a new home. What pushed people out of North Carolina in the first decades of the nineteenth century? What lured them to the West?

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### On the web

#### North Carolina: The Rip Van Winkle State

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/ripvanwinkle.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will explore the various nicknames that North Carolina has been given throughout history, focusing on the nickname given to it during the early 1800s: the Rip Van Winkle state. Students will listen to the legend of Rip Van Winkle then discuss the story. Finally, students will learn about the lack of progression in North Carolina during the early 1800s, exploring the relationship between the legend and the perception of North Carolina as “The Rip Van Winkle State.” This lesson will culminate with students creating their own picture book based on what they have learned about the “sleep of indifference” in 1800s North Carolina.

#### More from LEARN NC

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## About the author

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David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

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### Figure 3 (page 4)

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