

Exhibit at state archives tallies history, importance of census

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PROVIDENCE — During the first snow of the winter, Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea took shelter during a pre-planned trip to the state archives where she examined a copy of the 1870 U.S. census opened to a section examining North Kingstown.

“Just look at the penmanship,” she said. “Think about being the person who sat down and wrote this up every day.”

The book is part of an exhibit called “Count Me In!” open to the public at the archives through March 2020.

“I think it really helps people value the information the census gathers,” Ashley Selima, the state archivist, said. “It gives people a sense of its scope and importance.”

Included among the documents is a copy of the U.S. Constitution opened to Article One, which mandates a count of the U.S. population for purposes of congressional apportionment.

Since then, it has grown into a method to determine the distribution of federal funds nationwide.

“The 2020 census will shape the future of our state,” Gorbea said.

“Not only does it define our voice in Congress it also determines Rhode Island’s share of more than \$700 billion in federal funding for things like schools, highways and community resources.”

The archives include several exhibits, including a series of iPads by one wall that show population



An exhibit at the Rhode Island State Archives explores the history of the census in the United States. [THE PROVIDENCE

JOURNAL/BOB BREIDENBACH]

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characteristics by town over a time according to a viewer’s preferences.

On a wall opposite the entrance, is a timeline that shows the evolution of the census from church counts during the Colonial era up through the present day.

The first population count in the state — using church records — happened in the early 1600s and counted white, landowning men and church members in what was then a British colony and included only a small number of today’s communities, including Portsmouth, Providence, and Newport.

Gorbea said that it is a far cry from today when those charged with the census and using its data are concerned about undercounted

communities.

“The only people who had a voice [at the time] were landowners,” Gorbea said. “What affects [the count] more today is geography and architecture. Rhode Island is a very urban state.”

Historically undercounted communities, according to Gorbea, tended to live in multifamily tenements where some apartments may have easily been missed.

Of course, public information is a part of the equation and that is something that concerns the secretary of state as the federal government has not allocated the funds previously set aside for outreach efforts.

Other factors include the fact that Providence County was the only part of the country where there was any census testing in 2018 with 2020 set to be the first one with an online response option.

No funds were allocated for advertising during the 2018 End-to-End Test.

According to Census Bureau data, 56% of people self-responded before enumerators were sent out

to homes. Around 65% of respondents from all races responded via the internet.

Self-response rates were significantly lower for “Hispanic” households with only 43% self-responding, compared to 67% for all of the other groups, of which 59% responded via the internet.

The highest internet response rates belonged to Asian-Americans at 79%, followed by Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders at 69%, Whites at 66%.

Blacks responded online at a rate of 54% and American Indians and Alaskan natives at 44%.

The census said that the results “reinforced beliefs that certain demographics are less prone [to] respond via the internet.”

Gorbea suspected that news around the citizenship question may have suppressed response rates through fear even if the Supreme Court eventually struck it down.

“This time, ensuring that everyone is going to be counted will be harder,” Gorbea said, adding that all the census data is kept confidential for 72 years by law. “That makes it really important to remind people why it is important to be counted.”

“I want to make sure Rhode Islanders have an opportunity to see how the census impacts us.”

The exhibit is free and open to the public during Archive hours from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday at 337 Westminister St.

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