

Using Military Records

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Military service records are a rich source for genealogical information, often supplying descriptions of personal skills and traits, family background, personal history, physical appearance, and engagements fought. Information was collected on family members to whom remains could be shipped and who might later qualify for benefits. Those applying for such benefits had to prove the soldier or sailor's service occurred and their **relationship** to the service member. Supporting documents, like marriage records, became part of the participant's military service record. **Military pension files** and **bounty land warrants** are among the most useful for sorting out same named individuals during eras with **limited name pools** and **tracking migration**. **Obituaries, newspaper accounts**, and **military gravestone inscriptions** can fill in gaps left by **destroyed or lost unit records**.

Military service is a proud, voluntary tradition in many families. During times of emergency in different eras and locations, it was also a **legal requirement**, so the majority of males in a time and place would generally appear in military records. To assess the likelihood of finding information on your forebears in military records, compare your ancestors' ages with the **ages deemed fit for military service** in each relevant country and major war. Consider **collateral lines** (brothers, uncles, cousins) as well, since their information might reveal key facts for your direct line. Your **home pedigree software** can filter results for you to identify all relevant ancestors. Don't limit your search to the actual war years. Many men were already serving, sometimes for many years, prior to a war breaking out. Hence, they would not have been drafted or need to register at the outset of war. **Survivor benefit applications** would likely appear many years later. Participants and their widows were tracked in **censuses** for decades. Consider male children and teens also. During the American Revolution, men aged 16 to 60 were deemed fit for service, however some younger boys signed up. See **Phillip Hoose, We Were There Too! Young People in U.S. History**.

Numerous **federal and state censuses** tracked military participants and their widows for decades following a war. Participants in the military might later apply for and receive, or be denied, **pensions**. There may have been extended **military hospital** stays for wounds or disease contracted in the course of war, or an ancestor's final residence may have been in a **soldiers home** – each leaving behind additional records. Participants' widows or children could apply for survivor's benefits, including **military bounty land**.

Civilians who supplied food, freighting or other services, and supplies are included in military records. Loyalists, suspected spies, and those who fought on the other side might appear in **amnesty papers, investigations, prisoner exchanges, or POW camp rosters**.

ACCESSING MILITARY RECORDS

US military records are housed in two repositories of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Records from the Revolutionary War through 1912 are at the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. Records from World War I to the present are at the National Military Personnel

Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis, Missouri. See archives.gov/veterans. **To order military records, use NATF 85** for military pension and bounty land warrant applications, **NATF 86** for military service records for Army veterans discharged before 1912, and SF-180 for Post World War I records. A military veteran or next of kin (surviving spouse that has not remarried, father, mother, son, daughter, sister, or brother) of a deceased, former member of the military can use eVetRecs to request military records. Law requires an original signature for some record requests, so forms must be downloaded, printed out, signed and returned. Military records become “archival” (no longer covered by privacy protections) 62 years after the service member's separation from the military.

Several genealogical web sites like **Ancestry.com** and **FamilySearch.org** link to military records. **Fold3.com**, a subscription site available for free use at Family History Centers, is a particularly useful and user friendly website, providing digitized material from the Revolutionary War through more modern conflicts. It offers the clearest system for filtering results by war, location, unit, and surname. Privacy rules apply, and for some countries direct relationship to the service member is required for access. In addition to draft registration and compiled service records or “packet” materials, Fold3 offers details on battlegrounds, maps, and extensive photo collections. It allows users to label photos, share stories, and create memorial pages with additional information. **Search** for the person by name or place using Keyword or Browse functions. Use the **Site links** at the bottom of the page.

The photo gallery is increasingly extensive. Under the thumbnail, click **Quick Look** to show a larger view of the image and transcribed details. Tools in the left side bar fit to height or width, zoom, pan hand, or magnify one section. To navigate, use arrows at either side of image or use **Filmstrip** at the bottom of the page. The **Browse toolbar** at the top shows “breadcrumbs” leading to the source. Add to your gallery, download to your desktop, email to a friend, print, spotlight, comment, connect, or annotate. Register to make contributions. Your remarks are your own. You can update, edit or remove them later. Labeling people or things in a picture makes them searchable and easier to locate on the image. Your annotations link to Your Profile, making it easy for interested members to contact you. Make difficult-to-read handwriting or an unusual name readable to all. While viewing an image, click the Annotate button in the Viewer's toolbar. Drag the handles on the selection box around the part of the image you want to annotate. Choose type of annotation (Person, Place, Date or Other) you are adding. Transcribe what you see and click Save.

See the **FamilySearch.org Learning Center's** Military article.

FOR EACH MAJOR WAR, there are specialized websites of great value. See the FamilySearch Wiki or Cyndis List for suggested sites. The unique circumstances of each conflict generated specific record types. For example, one of the primary causes of the War of 1812 was the continual kidnapping of thousands of American sailors from civilian ships to serve in the British Navy. From about 1803 through the end of the Napoleonic Wars, American ships were stopped by British war ships, and experienced sailors were abducted or “impressed” from American crews. The claim was that the men were actually British subjects or deserters who were being pressed into service of the Crown. Some were, but most were not. **Seamen's Protection Certificates** were issued to prove American citizenship, but were generally ignored when ships were illegally boarded. From as early

as 1793, captains were to file formal **letters of protest** with the nearest U.S. Consul and the State Department when men were abducted. The French and Spanish also employed press gangs, but there were fewer incidents against Americans. See Indexes to Seamen's Protection Certificate Applications and Proofs of Citizenship at <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=49193> and <http://library.mysticseaport.org/initiative/protectionindex.cfm>.

Read about each war your ancestors may have experienced and determine which records might appear with their names included. Family stories may already have made you aware of ancestors who served in the military. Check with heritage societies like the DAR and SAR to see if a well documented lineage from an ancestor in a particular conflict has already been assembled.

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Access **NSSAR or S.A.R. (National Society, Sons of the American Revolution)** applications from 1889 to 1970 through Ancestry.com order a copy directly from the organization. Request a living member's application for the benefit of your own membership, or obtain a copy of a deceased member's application for a modest fee. See <http://www.sar.org/node/132>.

SAR headquarters staff will search for and send you the latest application filed on a specific patriot ancestor, or send you a "record" copy [approved and annotated] of the application for a specific member by name or by national number.

D.A.R. or Daughters of the American Revolution

http://www.dar.org/library/online_research.cfm.

Ancestor Database is not a comprehensive list of all individuals who served in the Revolutionary War, but indexes provide researchers with citations to millions of names and genealogical subjects. New patriots are added as they are proven through DAR membership applications and supplementals. The DAR Library Analytical Card Index “reveals buried information in thousands of published studies.” Although pension information is available online elsewhere, the Revolutionary War Pension Index “includes the names of other persons mentioned in the pension papers, such as someone who swore an affidavit stating that they had served with the pension applicant during the Revolution or were aware of the applicants service during the war. The presence of such information may be the only place where another individual's Revolutionary War service appears – in someone else's pension application.”

See the **DAR Online Library Catalog** at <http://www.dar.org/library/onlinlib.cfm>.

Whether you know much about a nation's history or not, your ancestors are likely to have been involved or have been greatly impacted by war across the centuries. Read basic background information about each relevant conflict. The stakes, the scope, and level of involvement of your ancestor may surprise you.

WAR OF 1812

An astounding number of **readily accessible, genealogically relevant records were generated during the War of 1812 era**. America's “Second War of Independence” involved **over half a million** regular army and navy personnel, state militia, volunteer soldiers, and privateers; as well as innumerable civilian suppliers and freighters. **All males 18 to 40** were required to register for service when war broke out. **Only 12% were regular army, navy or marines. The vast majority**

were in state militias, with half of those serving three months or less as the fighting neared their homes. **Lists of impressed sailors, official protests filed by their captains, documents on prisoner exchanges, POW records, proofs of naturalization, privateer letters and prize money, personal descriptions of discharged soldiers, pensions, newspaper accounts, and bounty land records** are among the types of records available online today.

The 18 states forming the U.S. had not yet formed a sense of national unity and often seemed to work at cross purposes. Bolstered by political dissent, regional self-interest, and public apathy in some areas, the British decisively won nearly every battle and almost succeeded in re-taking America. Nonetheless, the war produced stunning naval victories, trained a generation of officers who would lead the country through the Civil War, and brought about a new national identity.

Your ancestor may well have been involved in the War of 1812 if:

- Born between 1772-1794 (age 18-40 in 1812)
- The age listed in the 1850 US Federal Census is in the late 50s or older
- Receiving survivor's benefits or a widows pension from service of a family member

Newspapers published accounts of press gang activity, naval engagements, recruitment calls, local heroes, war taxation, impact on the local economy, prisoner exchanges, and POWs. About 400 newspapers were operating during the War of 1812 era. Check GenealogyBank and Newspaper Archives for articles relevant to your ancestor and his neighborhood. Do likewise for ancestors in other conflicts.

Your military ancestor may have been American, but might appear in records of other countries. For example, in the War of 1812, numerous records were also generated in **Canada**, where much of the fighting occurred. Records exist, both in the U.S, and in England, for the thousands of Americans kidnapped from private ships to serve in the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. Consider sources in other countries for different wars that might include your ancestor.

- **British Regiments in Canada**
<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~crossroads/regiments/>
- **GENUKI:** <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/details?Uri=C2689134>
- **War of 1812 Casualty Database:** <http://www.1812casualties.org/>

Enemy Aliens

Additional records were generated on the **12,000 British subjects who were living in the U.S.** when the War of 1812 broke out – most of them unnaturalized, long-term residents. **Non-citizens subject to the British crown** were required to register their names, occupations, and residences. Many **Irish** residents were subject to this law, although they had little reason to favor the British. Reporting to **local marshalls**, their travel was restricted, their property was to be sold, and they were to leave the country within six months. See

<https://archive.org/stream/warof1812paperso02unit#page/n9/mode/2up>

In a similar move, individuals with Japanese ancestry were placed in interment camps during World War II in America. Search for “enemy alien” records related to each war.

THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES – AMERICA’S CIVIL WAR

Between 1861 and 1865, three million Americans took up arms in the Civil War.

Approximately 620,000 soldiers lost their lives to battlefield injuries or disease during the war years, with an estimated 750,000 dying thereafter. 10% of the North’s 20–45 year old male population died. 30% of the South’s 18–40 year old white males died. **6.3 million soldier records** were compiled, checked and edited for accuracy by the National Park Service, the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) and the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS)

Every soldier who participated, from either the **Union or the Confederacy**, should have a record on this website. The **Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database** is maintained by the National Park System. This outstanding website includes **Unit histories** for both the Union and Confederate Armies, descriptions of 384 significant battles, sailors records, prisoner of war records, burial records, medal of honor recipients, and other historical information.

Check the FamilySearch Wiki for suggestions about unique records related to each war. During the American Civil War, every two weeks on average, usually at the company level, soldiers' names were recorded on muster rolls. Beginning in the 1880s, the Department of the Army indexed these records originally to determine **pension eligibility**. Historians have determined that approximately 3.5 million soldiers actually fought in the War. A soldier may have served in more than one regiment, served under two names, or with spelling variations. Chances are high that one of these circumstances applied to your ancestor, since there are 6.3 million General Index Cards for 3.5 million soldiers. Frederick Dyer devoted himself to writing the histories of all the Union regiments. After the war, the Department of the Army assembled some of its vast information on the War and published the multi-volume work entitled the "**Official Records of the War of the Rebellion.**"

The full service records are housed at the National Archives and Records Administration.

Use the film number listed in the **Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System** record to obtain copies of those records. Additionally, all records in this database have been **transcribed** from the National Archives' original documents; alternate names and/or misspellings are recorded as initially documented. Nearly all Confederate War Department records were transferred to the US War Department in Washington, D.C., to confirm eligibility for veterans benefits and pensions.

Military hospitals and soldiers homes: Disease claimed many servicemen, more often than actual wounds. Check **cemeteries associated with hospitals and homes for needy veterans and widows**. In the Civil War, for example, one in thirteen soldiers became amputees. Many spent their final years in military hospitals or soldiers’ homes.

Many servicemen were buried in **unmarked graves**, some in **shallow mass graves**, and some were **re-buried** at a later time far from where they died. Of the 15,000 Union soldiers buried at Fredericksburg National Cemetery, **85% could not be identified**. The Veterans Administration’s **National Cemetery System** provided grave spaces and markers for over **three million** veterans and their families in national, state and other cemeteries. National Cemetery System records include the **private burials for which cemetery markers were provided**. National Cemeteries are managed by the National Park Service. **Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War** hosts an

online graves database, searchable by name, unit, state, cemetery, even town of burial. See <http://www.suvcwdb.org/home/search.php?action=search>.

The following censuses specifically inquired about military service and widows.

1862 Illinois census of able bodied male citizens, age 18-45 (at Illinois State Archives)

1864 Arizona Territorial Census

1865 State Census for IL, KS, MA, MN and NY. The New York Census (29 counties) lists non-war related deaths and war casualties. Every fourth page lists those who were away from the residence serving in the military.

1866 State Census for AL asking how many killed, wounded or missing in the war; and Mississippi (11 counties)

1884 Michigan State Census

1885, 1895, 1905, 1915, 1925 Kansas State Censuses: details include whether captured and to which prison veterans had been confined

1885 North Dakota Territorial Census; WI, MN, NM

1890 Federal Census: Special Schedules Enumerating Union Veterans and Widows of Union Veterans of the Civil War

1895, 1905, 1925 IA State Censuses; 1895 MN State Census

1910 US Federal Census asked if residents were Civil War veterans of Army or Navy

1930 US Federal Census asked if residents were Civil War veterans of Army or Navy

Confederate States did not conduct a census, but some Southern states later enumerated Confederate veterans: AL 1907 & 1921; AR 1911; LA 1911

Thousands of civilians were involved in wartime operation of railroads, shipyards, steamships, telegraph lines, banks, freighting, food supplies, mining, and weapons factories. The **“Confederate Citizens File”** contains **650,000 documents** related to Confederate civilians and business firms. Citizen files contain information on government employees, vendors, clerks, messengers, telegraphers, sheriffs, hospital employees, “contract surgeons,” farmers who supplied Confederate forces, steamboat owners, freighters, owners of storage facilities and buildings used by the government, and wagon masters.

Fold3.com has the entire collection of allowed and disallowed cases from the **Southern Claims Commission**. Although less than 8% of cases were approved, claimants who established their loyalty to the Union during the war and provided evidence of property loss could file a damage claim beginning in 1871. Ancestry.com’s [U.S. Southern Claims Commission Master Index, 1871-1880](#) points researchers to complete case files for AL, GA, VA, and WV. Files for other states are at the National Archives.

See the **American Civil War Research Database** at **AlexanderStreet.com**.

DESTROYED RECORDS

During war time, records and repositories are often destroyed. The Civil War is notorious for the 22 county courthouses that were burned. Substitute records were generated as quickly as possible after the war for land and other critical records, but much was permanently lost. Look for substitute or re-created records, which will have limitations, but may be better than nothing.

WORLD WAR I & II Records (See Schaeffer, The Great War for all WWI countries)

Records are also lost after wars end. In 1973, a devastating fire at the **National Personnel Center** in St. Louis destroyed 16–18 million official US military personnel records, mostly from WWI and WWII. There was an 80% loss of U.S. Army personnel discharged November 1, 1912, to January 1, 1960; a 75% loss to records of U.S. Air Force personnel discharged September 25, 1947, to January 1, 1964, with names alphabetically after Hubbard, James E.; some U.S. Army Reserve personnel who performed their initial active duty for training in the late 1950s but who received final discharge as late as 1964; and a few U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps records that were out of their normal file area. Minimal information has been re-created from muster rolls and other records.

A similar disaster overtook British records. The majority of records housed in **Britain's War Office repository** were destroyed on September 8, 1940 during the Arnside Street fire. Over nine million men and women had served between 1914 and 1918. The majority of surviving "Unburnt" records are those of officers. Search the British National Archives at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk. Access the National Archives Catalogue on the National Archives website. Look up three part references: *department* creating the records, *series* of similar records, and *piece* or individual documents. Go to the website's DocumentsOnline section for digitized records. Search by name and download for a fee.

Recommended Reading

- David A. Norris, *Tracing Your Revolutionary War Ancestors*. Toronto, Canada: Moorshead Magazines, Ltd., 2015.
- David A. Norris. *Tracing Your War of 1812 Ancestors*. Toronto, Canada: Moorshead Magazines, Ltd., 2012.
- Joseph Wheelan. Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805. New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003.
- Walter R. Borneman. 1812: The War that Forged a Nation. New York: Harper Collins: 2004.
- James C. Neagle. U.S. Military Records: A Guide to Federal and State Sources, Colonial America to the Present. Orem, Utah: Ancestry, 1994.
- David A. Norris, *Tracing Your Civil War Ancestors*. Toronto, Canada: Moorshead Magazines, Ltd., 2011.
- Edward Zapletal (Ed.). *Tracing Your WWI Military Ancestors*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Moorshead Magazines Ltd., 2014.
- David A. Norris. Life During the Civil War. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Moorshead Magazines Ltd., 2009.
- Michael Varhola. Everyday Life During the Civil War. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Book, 1999.
- William Dollarhide. Genealogical Resources of the Civil War Era. Bountiful, Utah: Family Roots Publishing, 2009.
- William Spencer. First World War Army Service Records: A Guide for Family Historians. Second Edition. Trowbridge, Wiltshire, Great Britain: Cromwell Press, 2008.
- Christina K. Schaefer. The Great War: A Guide to the Service Records of All the World's Fighting Men and Volunteers. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing, 1998.