

Step 11: Military Records
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the tenth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

If you were to pull out a photo album or a box of old family pictures and go through them one at a time, how long would it be before you encountered a snapshot of a family member in a military uniform? If you are one of the seventy-five percent of Americans who can claim at least one family member who has served in the United States military, it probably wouldn't take long.

Such pictures are a valuable resource for family historians and a tremendous aid in your search for genealogical information. In our own search through family pictures, we found pictures of both of our fathers, each of whom served in World War II, one in the navy and the other in the army.

Consider the clues you can uncover from studying a military photograph in your family photo collection:

1. The picture should identify the individual. Be certain you know the individual's real name. For example, if you knew the soldier as Uncle Frank, his legal name may be Francis or even William Frank. His military records will list him under his legal name.
2. The picture should help you determine the war in which the individual served. Look for clues such as the style of uniform, the clothing style of others in the picture, or objects that can determine a time period, such as an automobile. This information is extremely important, as military records are filed according to the time period served.
3. The photograph should help you identify the branch in which your relative served through the uniform he wore. In most cases, military records were kept by branch—army, navy, etc.
4. A careful inspection of the picture may reveal other important clues, such as a symbol or a patch that represents rank or unit (battalion, division, or platoon). Such information is helpful when researching military records.

The information gleaned from a careful examination of an old military photo can be very helpful. But even if you don't have old pictures, this information is critical to have in order to learn more.

It goes without saying that various types of records were created for every individual who served in the United States military. The real concern is learning what and where these records are, and how to use them as a research aid. The basic steps of learning about your military ancestor are:

1. Identify the individual (full legal name).
2. Identify the military branch.

3. Identify the time period.
4. Identify where the records are kept for that time period.
5. Secure the proper request form.
6. Complete and submit the form.

Time Period and War

As with other branches of the federal government, the United States military has kept excellent records of the men and women who have served the country. While these records were never intended to be a source of genealogical information, it is surprising how much information can be gleaned from these records.

It is entirely possible for an individual to have served in the military at any time during the nation's history. But it is generally during war times that most people, usually young men between the ages of eighteen and thirty, enlisted or were drafted.

Below is a list of wars and military actions that the United States has participated in since it became a country. The wars begin with the most recent, since that is how they should be researched when following the basic rules of genealogy—going backward in time, moving from the known to the unknown.

American War Dates

Gulf War, 1991
Vietnam War, 1965-73
Korean War, 1950-53
World War II, 1941-45
World War I, 1917-18
Philippine Insurrection, 1899-1902
Spanish-American War, 1898
Civil War, 1861-65
Mexican War, 1846-48
Indian Wars, 1780s-1800
War of 1812, 1812-15
Revolutionary War, 1775-83

Prior to the Revolution, military service was rendered to the state in which the individual was residing. Therefore, records of that service are kept in the state's archives or historical society. Remember also that even after the United States became a country, it is possible that your ancestor served in a state's militia (National Guard), and those records would also be located by state as long as the unit was not called to aid the federal government. This fact underscores the importance of identifying the branch of military in which your ancestor served. A useful general reference book is *U.S. Military Records* by James C. Neagles (1994, Ancestry). This book should be available in most major genealogical research libraries.

Types of Records

Supposing that your ancestor served the federal government, federal military records fall into one or more of the following categories:

- Draft and conscription records

- Enlistment and service records

- Pension records

- National military cemetery records

Bounty land records, which can be considered pay or pension records, will be covered in a future article dealing with land records. Other types of military records also exist that will be covered in a later article. They include:

- Veterans' administration hospital records

- Soldiers' home records

- Lineage society records, i.e., D.A.R.

- Published unit histories

- Veterans' organizations, i.e., V.F.W.

- Military academy records

- Biographies

As a beginning genealogist, it is best to pursue one particular type of record. Service records and pension records tend to be the most accessible and are recommended for the beginner for that reason. As you learn more about your military ancestor, you can pursue other records to fill in the details of his or her service.

Service Records

Service records comprise the bulk of information the government keeps on any soldier. According to the National Archives and Records Administration, such records document enlistment/appointment, duty stations and assignments, training, qualifications, performance, awards and medals, disciplinary actions, insurance, emergency data, administrative remarks, separation, discharge, retirement, and other personnel actions.

The useful genealogical data you might learn from service records could include the individual's full name, rank, age, physical description, marital status, occupation, city of birth, and place of residence at enlistment

Pension Records

Pension records represent the real fun for military records research because these are the records that provide the most genealogical data, especially if your military ancestor served prior to the twentieth century.

Because there was no Social Security before the 1930s, many American families depended on the pension awarded to deserving veterans. The federal government awarded pensions to officers, disabled veterans, needy veterans, widows/ orphans of veterans, and veterans who served a certain length of time. But to get such a pension, the veteran had to go through a somewhat lengthy application process. The federal government kept a pension file on every applicant.

Pension files contain all the paperwork associated with the application, including any supporting documentation. From these files you might learn some or all of the following: the applicant's name, spouse's name (possibly even a wife's maiden name), rank, military unit, length of enlistment, and residence at time of application. In some cases, additional information is also included, such as documented proof of service (affidavits from officers or others who could attest to the individual's service), discharge papers that had been given to the applicant at the time of separation, and even personal information like date and place of birth, marriage, or death.

When a widow applied for a pension in the name of her husband, she was required to submit evidence to prove her marriage; this often included the names of any children living with her at the time.

If you are not certain whether your military ancestor received a pension, the federal government has published lists of pensioners at different times in history. These lists give the soldier's name, service information, age, death date, and even his or her heirs. Such lists are available for the years 1792-95, 1813, 1817, 1818, 1820, 1823, 1828, 1831, 1835, 1840, 1849, 1857, 1883, and 1899. These lists can be found in the U.S. Congressional Serial Set located in federal repository libraries or in the libraries of most major universities. Also, the federal censuses of 1840, 1890, and 1910 list veterans and pensioners. These records are available at most major research libraries.

Service and Pension Files

The preservation of all federal records is the responsibility of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, DC. While military records fall under this category, not all military records are kept in Washington. Some military records are stored in the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) located in St. Louis, Missouri. (See also information at Ancestry.com about the recent online release of the Civil War Pension Index.)

As a rule of thumb, military records from the twentieth century can be found at the NPRC, and military records dated before 1900 can be found in the National Archives in Washington, DC. The tables included below detail exactly which records are available and where they can be found.

National Archives and Records Administration: Military Service Records

Service Branch Rank Dates of Service

Volunteers 1775-1902

Army Officers 1789-June 1917
Enlisted 1789-31 Oct. 1912

Navy Officers 1798-1902
Enlisted 1798-1885

Marine Corps Officers 1789-1895
Enlisted 1789-1895

Coast Guard 1791-1919*

Confederate States 1861-65

Pension files (all claims) 1775-1916

*Including service to earlier versions of coast guard

1. The National Archives does not do research for an individual. When the proper information is supplied, the Archives will provide photocopies of records for a fee.
2. To obtain these photocopies, submit standard NATF Form 80, on which you identify the records you seek. Form 80 can be obtained from:

General Reference Branch (NNRG)
National Archives and Records Administration
8th and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20408

National Personnel Records Center (NPRC): Military Personnel Records

Service Branch Rank Earliest Service Dates

Air Force Officers 25 Sept. 1947
Enlisted 25 Sept. 1947

Army Officers Separated 1 Jul. 1917
Enlisted Separated 12 Nov. 1912

Navy Officers Separated 1 Jan. 1903
Enlisted Separated 1 Jan. 1886

Marine Corps Officers Separated 1 Jan. 1905
Enlisted Separated 1 Jan. 1905

Coast Guard Officers Separated 1 Jan. 1898
Enlisted Separated 1 Jan. 1898

1. These records may only be obtained by the individual, a legal representative of the individual, or a family member with written permission of the individual. If the individual has passed away, a family member can obtain the records by proving relationship to the deceased.
2. Between 16 million and 18 million army and air force records held in St. Louis were destroyed by fire in 1973. Alternate sources can be used to reconstruct any destroyed records, but the reconstruction may not be as complete as the original.
3. To obtain a copy of any records that do exist, the individual or legal representative must submit Standard Form 180, Request Pertaining to Military Records, for non-genealogical requests, and OR NA Form 13043 for genealogical requests. This form is available from the National Personnel Records Center (Military Personnel Records) at 9700 Page Boulevard, St. Louis, MO, 63132.