

# Military Records

A Research Guide from the Heritage Research Center

C O U R T E S Y O F T H E H I G H P O I N T P U B L I C L I B R A R Y

## WHAT YOU'LL FIND WITH-IN:

- Why the interest?
- Colonial conflicts
- The Revolution: Continental v. militia forces
- Loyalists
- Wars of "Manifest Destiny"
- The Civil War
- 20th Century Wars
- On-line access

## HERITAGE RESEARCH CENTER

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### HOURS:

MON: 9:00–6:00

TUE-THU: 9:00–8:00

FRI: 9:00–6:00

SAT: 9–1; 2–6

SUN: CLOSED

## ANCESTORS-IN-ARMS: WHY TAKE AN INTEREST?

The United States was born in the fires of war. The Revolution raged on American soil and pitted colonials against one another. Great sacrifices were made; great risks were taken. The result was nothing short of a miracle. The strongest colonial power in the world went down to defeat through a combination of failed public relations, inept tactics and strategies, over-extended supply chains, foreign intervention, and pure rebel grit and determination. And yes, as every seasoned commander knows, luck played its part.

We don't like to think of



personalities and deeds of the past. The experience of war makes those connections seem all the more immediate and vivid.

But, even if you are not particularly interested in the martial prowess of your ancestors, military records can reveal a great deal about them—everything from where they lived at a particular stage of their lives to migration routes, to their next of kin to the wounds they received to the financial condition of their families, land received as compensation, and even death dates. The possibilities are endless.

ourselves as a militaristic country. The founders mistrusted standing armies and foreign adventures. But there is no doubting that we have a proud and largely triumphant military tradition. Temporary citizen-soldiers provided the bedrock for this success. It is little wonder, then, that genealogists also take pride in their individual soldier-ancestors. Most of us like to find out how we connect to the great

## COLONIAL WARFARE: THE SCORCHED BACKCOUNTRY

The Revolution was not the first test of arms faced by the American colonists. Throughout the colonial period, conflicts proliferated between settlers and their Amerindian neighbors, but also with Britain's colonial rivals, France and Spain. Sometimes colonists fought one another. There were several rebellions against disputed colonial au-

thorities and even an occasional slave revolt. Bacon's Rebellion and the Regulation come to mind. Militiamen were called out in all of these conflicts and since it can be difficult to find the names of young colonial males, muster lists can be invaluable. The records are retained at the state level, since these were wars waged in and by the colo-

nies themselves, but some may be in the British Archives. Many, if not most of the records, derived from secretary of state papers, treasurer's papers, governors' papers and legislative papers, have been published in colonial records series. Stipends may have been awarded to the disabled by colonial assemblies.

## THE REVOLUTION: REGULAR ARMY V. MILITIA

Folks are often interested in joining lineage societies like the DAR and SAR. As a result, proving descent from a Revolutionary patriot is the prime objective of many beginning genealogists. The task involves tracing yourself back link by proven link to a potential patriot, and then proving that that individual did indeed render service. That service need not have been military in nature. Most

potential patriot ancestors provided goods and services for the patriot forces. Those who did take up arms were of two varieties: those (often called regulars) who joined the Continental Army in regiments by state and served for periods of years and those militiamen who were called into action when the fighting entered their neighborhood. These latter often served only a few months at a time, although possibly on several separate occasions. Their opponents were not just British regiments. More frequently, they engaged loyalists or Tories who lived in their vicinity.

Muster lists and payrolls for Continental troops are easy to locate. For North Carolina, they are printed in its state records series. Because regular soldiers

were entitled to state or federal land grants in western territories in proportion to their ranks and terms of service, one will often find bounty land warrants on either the state or federal level for Continental troops. In North Carolina, all of these land grants were situated in the current state of Tennessee, which was then part of North Carolina. No bounty land was ever issued within the current boundaries of North Carolina. Most soldiers never settled on these bounty tracts. They sold their rights to others for ready cash. There were also fraudulent claims for soldiers who never served or who supposedly transferred their rights to others.

For militiamen, there are far fewer resources. A small number of muster rolls survive for these

temporary companies. Militia were not eligible to receive land. The best hope one has for documenting service is when soldiers or widows later filed for a pension, either with the state of North Carolina (usually a disability or widow's pension) or with the federal government later in the 19th century (available first to the indigent and then to everyone.) Barring such a record, one should also check the pay indents and accounts that have survived at the N.C. Archives. These exist as account ledgers and redeemed scrip issued to compensate individuals for materiel or service rendered the Revolutionary government. The scrip was used to pay taxes and fees and could be assigned from person to person like cash. The records of payment will not tell you what service was rendered or exactly where the claimant lived. But one can at least narrow down the region of the state from the names of the examining commissioners or persons to whom the scrip was assigned. This material has been transcribed and indexed by W. P. Haun.

### Did you know?

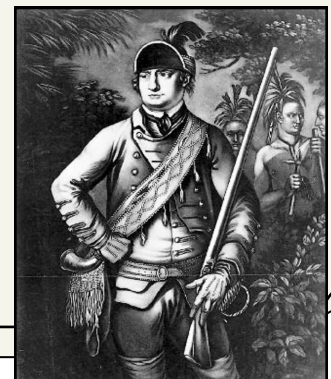
Very few muster rolls or service records survive for those who served in patriot militias—by far the largest proportion of troops engaged.

## THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY?

What about our ancestors who may have fought on the King's side during the Revolutionary War? In general, the wealthier elements in the colonies—large landowners, merchants, persons engaged in trans-Atlantic commerce, some officeholders—as well as recent immigrants like the Highland Scots and some Germans, slaves who absconded to freedom, and people of Indian or mixed-race ancestry tended to side with the King. But there

were also individuals who bore resentments against their patriot neighbors which had little to do with the issues of the War. Some of these individuals engaged in combat, forming independent Tory units or attaching themselves as loyal legions to the British Army. Muster and pay rolls sometimes survive. In North Carolina, some of them can be documented through the records of the Confiscation Commissioners who were empowered to seize and sell their

property, particularly if they had left the state. The Archives also holds duplicates of applications they made to the British government for compensation after they immigrated to Canada, the Caribbean, or the mother country. Those who stayed or left family behind were often subject to prosecution in the district superior courts. Some legislative petitions begging clemency also exist. Accusations of Toryism ran rampant. The many slander cases in local court records from this time attest to the high stakes involved.



## WARS OF AMERICAN EXPANSION: THE WAR OF 1812 & MEXICAN WAR

The War of 1812, provoked by seizure of neutral American ships on the high seas during the Napoleonic Wars, brought fear of immanent invasion to much of the east coast and Mississippi valley. For this reason, local militia were on high alert. In fact, British troops did land at several points, including coastal Carolina and Georgia and the Chesapeake Bay. The backcountry was exposed to potential attacks from Britain's Indian allies and a major conflict did erupt with the Creeks. As in the Revolution, an invasion of Canada was mounted. Most soldiers in the War were never involved in direct combat, however—particularly those from North Carolina.

when Portsmouth and Ocracoke were attacked, but these soldiers were never engaged. Another 7,000 met at Wadesboro in 1814 to join General Jackson but were informed of the New Orleans victory before they began their march. About 1,000 N.C. volunteers served with Col. James Welborn in the Great Lakes campaign and a single regiment served with Jackson against the Creeks. Federal service records and pensions are available for some individuals involved in these last two expeditions. Only state-level pay vouchers, pay and receipt rolls, account books, and muster rolls are available for the larger number of militiamen who rallied but never fought.

divided Americans. Some saw it as a war of naked aggression designed to extend slavery's influence. Political infighting affected North Carolina's participation. Although 3,000 volunteers came forward, only 1,000 ultimately served and none of them saw combat. One hundred and seventy two succumbed to disease. Among the best sources is the Adjutant General's *Roster of North Carolina Troops in the War with Mexico*, published in 1887 and based on records borrowed from the War Department. Service and pension records also exist for North Carolina soldiers.

Seven thousand mustered in 1813

The Mexican War (1846 -1848)

## OUR DARKEST HOUR: THE CIVIL WAR

The Civil War (or the War Between the States, as some like to call it) was certainly the most costly and tragic American conflict, mainly because it was fought on home soil, involved huge casualties (due to a disconnect between tactics and technology), and created bitterness not only between North and South but among Southerners themselves. In fact, its divisive power today in this region is astonishing

considering that nearly one hundred and fifty years have passed.

Whereas participation in the Revolution and the antebellum conflicts was somewhat sporadic, almost anyone with Southern white (and sometimes black) male ancestors between the ages of 16 and 45 in the 1861 to 1865 period is likely to find them involved in military operations. North Carolina provided a large contingent of troops to the Confederate Army and had the highest casualty and mortality figures of any state. This is partly because it was the last state to be brought to heel by Federal forces and was so close to major theatres of operations.

Documenting Confederate ancestry in North Carolina has grown much simpler with the publication of the *North Carolina Troops* series, currently extending to nineteen volumes, most

with supplementary material. Each soldier's combined service record has been summarized and grouped with company and regimental histories. One can also view the original service cards compiled from rosters, reports and pay vouchers on *Fold3.com*—a website available through the Library. One might also refer to the 1890 census of Union veterans (available on *Ancestry.com*) which was a supplement to the federal census roster. Local record-keepers may have recorded Confederate in addition to Union soldiers.

More and more Union combined service records are becoming available on *Fold3*. Many North Carolinians, white and black, served with the Feds because Union sympathies ran high in some areas, particularly as the war progressed. Finally, one should refer to federal pension files for Union soldiers and to N.C. pensions claimed by Confederates under the legisla-

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tive acts of 1885 and 1901. Only widows and the disabled were originally eligible, but eventually, all survivors were. Confederate pensions for North Carolina can be found on the free *FamilySearch* website.

Records of militia service for older men in North Carolina are quite rare, unless the individuals were officers. A *Roster of Militia Officers of North Carolina, 1861-63* should be consulted. One may also wish to investigate Confederate Soldier's Home Records and records of artificial limbs purchased for amputees at the State Archives. See Wegner's *Phantom Pain*.



## 20th Century Wars



Oddly, it may be easier to document the service of our 19th-century ancestors than it is to do the same for our 20th-century grandparents. That is because many individual personnel records (some sixteen to eighteen million of them) for those discharged between 1912 and 1964 were destroyed in a July 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis which raged for over twenty-two hours. About 80% of Army records for those discharged between 1 Nov 1912 and 1 Jan 1960 were lost as were those for about 75% of Air Force personnel discharged between 25 Sep 1947 and 1 Jan 1964. However, some 6.5 million records were salvaged from fire and water damage and entered into a B file index (B for "burned records"). Many of the documents are badly preserved but are preferable to a total loss. In addition, an R-index file (for "recovered records") was created to accumulate information on soldiers from other sources including morning reports series (which were saved from the fire), Veterans Administration (VA) claims files, individual state records, Multiple Name Pay Vouchers (MPV) from the Adjutant General's Office, Selective Service System (SSS) registration records, pay records from the Government Accounting Office (GAO), as well as medical records from military hospitals, entrance and separation x-rays and organizational records. Individuals seeking service records from the period after 1914 should not be overly-discouraged by these losses. Navy, Marine and Coast Guard records remain largely in-tact and the recovery effort made great strides in providing at least minimal documentation for most service personnel in the affected branches. The National Personnel Records Center can be contacted via e-mail, phone or regular mail. printable on-line personnel record request form is available at the website (<http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/index.html>). All records over 62 years old become generally accessible without proving immediate kinship to the soldier.

Even in cases in which minimal individual records survive, much detail can be gleaned by studying unit-level and command records at the National Archives. This is a laborious process, but details about daily operations and engagements can be gleaned if you know the soldier's unit. Ancestry.com has also provided many on-line indexes related to the World War I and World War II drafts, casualty, and prisoner lists from twentieth-century wars. Finally, one should not forget local records created by draft boards, which occasionally survive, and military discharge papers which soldiers often filed in their home counties when they returned from a conflict. In North Carolina, they were filed with the Register of Deeds offices. Those for Guilford County are on microfilm at the Archives and in the Heritage Research Center.

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## MILITARY MATTERS ON-LINE

Increasingly, access to military records and information about obtaining them is mediated via the Internet. Do not forget, however, the myriad print and manuscript sources which form the bulk of what you will require to complete your research. With that caveat, we recommend the following websites:

- **Ancestry.com.** This on-line behemoth offers some excellent databases particularly for twentieth century wars. Prominent collections include World War I and World War II draft cards, World War II casualties, a veteran's burial site index, enlistment and prisoner-of-war rolls, Marine Corps muster rolls, Sons of the American Revolution membership applications, U. S. Army enlistments, 1798-1914, Korean War casualties, and much more.
- **Fold3.com.** Formerly known as Footnote.com, this website offers direct access to images of many records at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and, as its name suggests, specializes in military-related material. You can get access to unabridged Revolutionary War pension files, service records (Continental) and bounty land warrants. All Confederate and many Union combined service records have been added as well as some service records from the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. There are also indices to Union pension applications, final payment vouchers for pensions, a Vietnam War memorial index, and WWII JAG case files.
- **www.dar.org** The DAR Genealogical Research System allows you to search past applications filed with the DAR and request copies of those applications for the appropriate fee.
- **www.archives.ncdcr.gov** The MARS cataloging system provides an index to N.C. Confederate Pensions.
- **www.archives.gov** and **www.archives.gov/st-louis** NARA and the National Personnel Records Center contain the bulk of military documentation. These sites contain splendid guides to what is available and how to obtain copies.