

U. S. MILITARY PENSION APPLICATION FILES

Loretta Evans, AG®
420 Maple
Idaho Falls, Idaho 83402
E-mail: lusegenealogy@msn.com

The history of United States military pension records begins with the Revolutionary War and continues into the 20th century. Most pensions were small, and they were limited in scope. Only a small percentage of the soldiers who served in the military were granted pensions. The National Archives has preserved the pension records, and they are a treasure-trove of information for the family historian.

Immediate pensions were often granted for the dependents of soldiers who died in the military. Officers may have been granted pensions long before enlisted men. However, Congress would wait until most of the veterans had died before granting general pensions for service in a specific war. Some states granted military pensions, such as the pensions granted by many southern states to Confederate soldiers. Often a pension would consist of a dollar amount sent to the veteran at regular intervals.

Before the Civil War, men may have been paid with a bounty land warrant. The warrant was for a specified number of acres of federal land, often in the West. Some men did not want to move, and they sold their warrants to others. Except for the Revolutionary War, the Bounty Land Warrant Files have been kept separate from the Pension Application Files. Far more men applied for a Bounty Land Warrant than applied for a pension. For example, War of 1812 Bounty Land Warrants became available in the 1850's, but cash pensions were not offered until the early 1870's.

The applicant for a pension had to prove that he had served in the war by listing the dates of service, the



AG® certification mark is the sole property of the International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists. All Rights Reserved.

company served with and the names of officers who lead the company. He had to show that he was indeed the soldier he claimed to be. He might use pages from a family Bible or certificates of religious ordinances to prove his birth and marriage information. Many applications ask the soldier to list his spouse and children. His places of residence since military service could be listed. Often pension files contain documents from the War Department showing the veteran's military records. Sometimes a physical description of the man is included. If the soldier was disabled, his injuries and symptoms would be described.

Some applications were made by widows, parents, or orphans of the soldier if he had died. They often contain genealogical dates and places. When an application was denied, it was still filed. If the soldier was not granted a pension, it does not mean that the application would not have information that might be important to his descendants.

Until early in the 20th Century, letters from people requesting information from the pension files were sometimes included in the pension envelope. Often these people were descendants of the soldier who were trying to join lineage societies such as the DAR. These letters can give a researcher clues to the soldier's descendants. Occasionally they can be a gold mine giving information about other family members: For example, there is a letter in the Revolutionary War pension file for Edmund Burnet of Trumbull County, Ohio. It is from his great-grandson. He requests information from Edmund's file. Then he mentions that his other great-grandfather, James Burnside, was a fifer in the Revolution from Butler County, Pennsylvania. He would like information about James as well. For one genealogist, this was the first clue of that great-grandfather's name. It broke open research on that other line.



How do I know if I had a relative who served in the military?

First of all, do the math to see if he was about the right age to have served during an armed conflict. Men would likely have been between ages 16 and 45, but drummer boys as young as ten years old may have served. Older men may have trained new recruits.

Are military insignia or other information carved on his tombstone? If the letters, GAR, appear, they stand for Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal

organization for Union veterans of the Civil War. Is his grave registered with the state in which he died? Is he buried in a military cemetery? Such gravesites can be found here: <http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/>. His obituary may list his military service. Military memorabilia may have been passed down through the family.

The 1840 census asked heads of households if they had served in the Revolutionary War. In 1890 there was a special census of Union Civil War veterans.

Military service record indexes are found at FamilySearch, Ancestry, and Fold3. The state from which he served can give a clue if the man's name was common. The National Parks Service has a database of soldiers and sailors who served on both sides of the Civil War: <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>.

What about military service records?

The National Archives has records for all federal (not state) military service from the Revolutionary War until the start of World War I. This includes service in Indian wars.

For an article on 20th-Century Military Records and how to get them, go to:
<http://www.archives.gov/research/military/veterans/prologue-spotlight-nprc.html>.

Service records do not contain nearly as much information as the pension application files. However, every veteran should have a service record. Only a few veterans applied for pensions.

How do I know if an ancestor applied for a military pension?

On FamilySearch you can do a standard search from an individual in Family Tree. Then you can limit the search to “Military Records.”

A more specific search in FamilySearch go to “Search – Records.” Then click on records for the United States. Pension indexes are found under these titles: United States Civil War and Later Pension Index, 1861-1917; United States Civil War Widows and Other Dependents Pension Files, 1861-1934; United States General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934; United States Index to Indian Wars Pensions Files, 1892-1926; United States Mexican War Pension Index, 1887-1926; United States Mormon Battalion Pension Applications, 1846-1923; United States Navy Widows’ Certificates, 1861-1910; United States Old War Pension Index, 1815-1910; United States Remarried Widows Index to Pensions Applications, 18887-1942; United States Revolutionary war Pension and Bounty Land Warrant applications 1800-1900; United States Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards, 1907-1933; and United States War of 1812 Index to Pension Application Files 1812-1910.

For Civil War Union pensions, Ancestry.com has digitized the pension application index. From the home page, click on “Military Records.” Then click on “U.S. Civil War Soldiers 1861-1865.” From there, click on “U.S. Civil War Pension Index : General Index to Pension Files 1861 – 1934.” Be creative with spelling. You can even search with a keyword, such as the widow’s name or the state.

At Fold3, click on the name of the war, then click on a title that includes “pension index.”

Be creative with spelling. Use the state from which the soldier served to help you decide if you have the right man. The widow’s name may be on the card as well.

Where can I get a copy of a military pension file?

Selected documents from Revolutionary War Pension Files can be found on HeritageQuest. The full files can be found at Fold3.

Pension file applications for the War of 1812 are beginning to be posted on Fold3. You can make a financial contribution to support this project.

Pension file applications for the Mormon Battalion from the Mexican American War are found on Fold3.

Widow’s applications for the Civil War are beginning to be posted on Fold3.

To order a file directly from the National Archives, go to: www.archives.gov. Then click on "Shop Online." Click on "Order Reproductions." Click on "Order Reproductions." Click on "Military Service and Pension Records." Then click on "Federal Military Pension Application" and choose whether the file was Pre-Civil War or Civil War and Later.

Records for veterans of the Civil War and later conflicts cost \$80.00 with an additional fee if the file is especially large. For files before the Civil War, the cost is \$55.00. The National Archives can take several months to respond to these requests.

A more cost and time-effective approach is to hire a professional researcher to go to the National Archives and scan the file for you. Average cost is \$50 to \$80 for a Civil War file, but the turn-around time can be just a few days. To find a professional researcher who could do this type of research go to one of the sites below.

Professional Genealogists can be found at:

The Association of Professional Genealogists: <https://www.apgen.org/>

The Board for Certification of Genealogists: <http://www.bcgcertification.org/>

The International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists: <https://www.icapgen.org/>

The last two organizations provide professional credentials to genealogists. Those listed have shown their skills in a rigorous application process.

Find someone who lives in Washington, DC; Virginia; or Maryland. Contact the researcher and ask if they do look-ups at the National Archives. Be sure you are clear what their charges will be. Some will charge extra for transportation and/or parking. Others include those expenses in their estimated price. You can pay by check or sometimes by credit card or PayPal. The professional will put the images on a document sharing site like DropBox and/or send you a CD.

Employees at the National Archives are under time pressure. If they cannot find the file easily, they may tell you it isn't there. A professional may be more persistent. She may be able to locate the file even though the employee was not able to find it.

Cert. No. **601192**

Name, *Jonathan W. Pike*

Rank, *Privt.*; Service, *Co. B. 16th Ohio*

Agency, { Original Roll: *Pittsburgh* }
{ **DEAD** }
{ *Transf'd*, 18*91*, to *Pittsburgh*, 18*91*, to *Pittsburgh* }

Issued *June 20*, 18*91*

Mailed *" 29*, 18*91*

Rate and Period, \$ *10*, from *July 15*, 18*91*

Action complete
by Board of Revision.

1888

What if my ancestor fought for the Confederacy?

Some states offered pensions for Confederate soldiers. They are not nearly as detailed as the Union equivalents, but they are useful. Confederate pensions are indexed by the state the soldier was living in when he applied for a pension. That may not necessarily have been the state under which he served. These files can be found on Ancestry.com.