

## Researching Military Records

There are two basic types of military records: service records and benefit or pension records. Both have value in understanding your ancestor's life. Service records can include muster rolls, unit rosters, correspondence and hospital records. The enlistment record, if available, can contain a physical description of the individual, and the all important birth date and location. Service records are not organized by surname, but by when and where in the armed forces the person served.

Pension records will have a plethora of both military and personal data. Since these files will contain the when and where that your veteran served, it will make it easier to obtain their service records. Since veterans had to provide proof of service, you can find valuable data such as rank and unit, period of service, residence and so forth. Often, pension records will have notarized statements from the veteran, his family, and friends attesting to facts about the veteran's life. It is not unusual to get a listing of children, dates of birth, death, marriages, residences, etc. These affidavits, that are from the people who knew him, can describe his health and tidbits about his life. A great grandfather of ours described an incident at the close of the Civil War - "the day after the capture of Jefferson Davis". A number of 5th New York Cavalry came by drunk and struck him with a stone between the eyes, causing him to stagger and blood to run over his face. For several years after, a slight pressure on the bone between his eyes would cause blood to run out his nose. All this was described in his pension file! So if you only search for one type of record, get your ancestors pension file. It will contain much useful family history information.

Pension records from 1775 to 1916 are available from the National Archives. Visiting the archives yourself will speed up the process, but since most of us cannot, you must submit an application. Basic information can be found at <http://www.nara.gov/research/ordering/milordr.html>. But you will need to request NATF Form 85, which you can do by e-mail to: [inquire@nara.gov](mailto:inquire@nara.gov). Be sure to include the form number, the number of copies you want, and your name and mailing address.

These forms are also used for requesting more than one type of record, so be sure to check the pension record box. When filling out the form, don't guess on any of the required data, unless you absolutely have to. Otherwise, the researcher may not find your file. Getting these records is a slow process. When you send in the form, plan to wait a while (one to three months). The archives will send a copy of your form back to you indicating if they have or have not found your file. If they have, you will need to send in a copying fee as indicated on the form.

For pension records after 1916, you will need to contact the National Personnel Records Center. The request must come from the veteran or the veteran's immediate family. If the veteran is still living, he or she must give written consent for the release of the records. All genealogical requests should be submitted on GSA Form R6-7231 or Standard Form 180. You can only make one request per form, so be sure to order enough forms. To obtain a copy of the form, write to:

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National Personnel Records Center  
9700 Page Boulevard  
St. Louis, MO 63132

Just like the National Archives, the Personnel Records Center will conduct a search. If they are able to locate the file, they will photocopy it and send you a bill. Once you return the payment, they will send you the copies.

Service records are generally obtained through either of the above two institutions.

What if you think an ancestor served in a war, but you're not sure. Well, try the following sources.

- Local history books from the area where the veteran lived.
- Archives for the state from which the veteran lived.
- "Unit histories" found in state and local libraries.
- Local historical society in the area where the soldier lived at the time of the war. Local historical societies frequently have unit rosters.

So let us remember those who served and died with the words of Sir Walter Scott:

Soldier, rest! Thy warfare o'er,  
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking,  
Dream of battled fields no more.  
Days of danger, nights of waking.

For more info:

RootsWeb Military Lessons:

<http://rwguide.rootsweb.com/military/militarylinks.html#guide>

Cyndi's List of militray links: <http://www.cyndislist.com/military.htm>

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress invites your participation in the Veterans' Oral History Project. Veterans can participate by printing out the forms found at: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/vets/kit.html>.

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