



# Military Service Records at the National Archives

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A large number of the records documenting military service in the armed forces of the United States of America have been microfilmed and/or digitized. Many of the records that have been microfilmed, but are not online, are available at the National Archives at Riverside. Most of the records that have been digitized can be viewed on the private subscription services, [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) and Fold3, partners with the National Archives in the digitization of the records of the National Archives. Most records, however, have not been microfilmed or digitized as yet but copies can be ordered from the National Archives. The information that follows is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, it is meant to be a brief summary and to provide a starting point for research in the military records in the National Archives.

**If you have questions regarding military service records in the National Archives, send an email to the National Archives at Riverside ([riverside.archives@nara.gov](mailto:riverside.archives@nara.gov)).**

The best single source for information regarding military service records in the National Archives is the book, *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives of the United States*.

Your success in finding the records documenting your ancestor's military service largely depends on answering four basic questions before or during your research:

1. Did the ancestor volunteer, were they drafted, or did they enlist?
2. In which branch of the service did the ancestor serve?
3. Was the ancestor an officer or an enlisted man?
4. In what time period, or in what war, did the ancestor serve?

## **Before World War I**

The three most commonly used records series in the National Archives for this period are the compiled military service records, the pension application files, and records generated in the course of a bounty land claim.

### **Compiled Military Service Records**

Compiled Military Service Records consist of one or more cards containing information abstracted from records that survived from the time period of the person's service. Information was abstracted from muster rolls, returns, pay vouchers, orders, hospital records, courts-martial proceedings, prisoner records, and many other records. Compiled military service records were only prepared for volunteers (both officers and enlisted men). They were not prepared for those in the regular army.

### **Pension Application Files**

Pension Application Files were created if the service member applied for benefits based on his service to the country. Following the service member's death, widows and/or dependants could apply for benefits based on the original service member's service. Pension files are based on service between 1775 and 1916. Pension application files may contain discharge papers, affidavits, depositions of witnesses, narratives of events during service, birth, marriage, and death records, family Bible pages, questionnaire forms, burial information, correspondence, and payment information among many other possibilities. Statutes stipulating eligibility for pensions and other matters changed greatly over the time pensions have been paid. Pensions were much more common beginning with the Civil War.

### **Bounty Land Records**

Bounty Land Warrant Application files are similar in content to pension files but relate generally to the payment of benefits in land rather than money. Bounty land warrant application files are based on service rendered between 1775 and 1855. Many of the bounty land warrant application files for the American Revolution and the War of 1812 were combined with the pension application files. Payment for service in bounty land was much more common than pensions prior to the Civil War.

## **Records Documenting Service in the Regular Army**

The records documenting officers and enlisted men are completely different from one another. The best secondary source to consult for a summary of an officer's career is the *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, From Its Organization, September 29, 1789 to March 2, 1903* by Francis B. Heitman. Personnel records of army officers will be found in the correspondence files of the Adjutant General's Office. Before 1863 the records are not collected together under the officer's name as they are after 1863. Officers' records are also found in the records of the U.S. Military Academy if they attended that institution.

The Regular Army Enlistment Papers are the most important source of information on enlisted men in the regular army. These records are arranged alphabetically and cover the period from 1798 to 1912. The Register of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798-1914, contains summary information about the soldier's enlistment. For soldiers that died between 1862 and 1899, while in the regular army, a Final Statement gives information on the death and personal information.

## **Records Documenting Service in the Navy**

The best secondary source to consult for a summary of an officer's career is the *List of Officers of the Navy of the United States and of the Marine Corps, From 1775 to 1900* edited by Edward W. Callahan. Lists of officers and abstracts of service of naval officers, 1798-1924, can be found on National Archives microfilm publications. Additional information can be found in the records of the Naval and Marine Examining Boards, the Naval and Marine Retiring Boards, and in specific deck logs of Navy vessels. Officers' records are also found in the records of the U.S. Naval Academy if they attended that institution.

Enlistment in the Navy is documented on reports from recruiting stations. These are called Rendezvous Reports and most have been microfilmed. Other sources are the Registers of Enlistment Returns, 1846-1902, the Records Relating to Enlisted Men Who Served in the Navy Between 1842 and 1885, and specific deck logs of Navy vessels. Navy muster rolls and pay rolls, 1798-1938, are also available.

## **Other Records Prior to World War I**

The National Archives also holds records of the Coast Guard and the U.S. Marines during this period. Also, many soldiers and sailors resided in one of the 15 National Homes for Disabled Soldiers and Sailors in their later years. The National Archives holds Historical Registers containing information on the residents of 12 of these institutions.

Of course, there are many records documenting service during this time period that have not been mentioned. Among these are courts-martial records, photographs, medical records, unit histories, unit returns, post returns, draft records, prisoner of war records, headstone records, grave registration records, and the Special Census of Veterans and Widows of the Civil War (1890).

## **World War I and After**

Many changes in the method and procedures for documenting military service came into being with America's entry into World War I. These changes are reflected in the records held by the National Archives.

### **National Personnel Records Center**

Military service records, beginning with service in World War I, and continuing to the present time, are located at the Military Personnel Records (MPR) facility of the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. This is a unit of the National Archives. Order forms, procedures, holdings information, and contact information for this repository are located on their portion of the National Archives website ([www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel](http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel)). This repository also holds unit rosters and morning reports for military units. This facility sustained fire damage in 1973 that destroyed or damaged many army and air force personnel records. It should be noted that this repository holds the personnel records of both men and women who served in the military during this time period.

### **Access to Archival Databases on the National Archives Website**

Many databases have been mounted on the National Archives website and are available for use by genealogists. Among the many databases available are the World War II Army Enlistment Records (that include Women's Army Auxiliary Corps), World War II Prisoners of War, Records of Military Personnel Who Died as a Result of Hostilities During the Korean War, and Records of Korean War Dead and Wounded Army Casualties.

### **Grave Registration and Headstones**

From this time period the National Archives holds Headstone Applications, Burial Case Files, and Interment Control Forms. In addition, the American Battle Monument Commission website ([www.abmc.gov](http://www.abmc.gov)) provides information about service members buried overseas.

### **Other Records – World War I and After**

Of course, there are many other records documenting service during the later time period that have not been mentioned. Among these are World War I Troopship Manifests, courts martial records, photographs, unit histories, casualty lists, unit war diaries, after action reports, missing air crew reports, Navy deck logs and muster rolls, merchant marine log books, and draft records.