Finding Revolutionary War Patriots in Your Family Tree

Next year, the United States will mark the 250th anniversary of the first battles of the American Revolution, which occurred in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, on April 19, 1775. The war lasted more than eight years before the Treaty of Paris formally ended the conflict on September 3, 1783. Many Americans with colonial roots have ancestors or relatives who served on the side of the Patriots—whether they know it or not. The time for research is now! This article presents the best published resources and online databases to help you identify and further research your Patriot connections.

Eligibility for military service

The colonists adopted the English militia system that required all men between the ages of 16 and 60 to serve in the militia.[1] Exceptions were made for politicians, judges, teachers, ministers, Native Americans, African Americans, and others in specific occupations. Men who were exempt from training with the militia were required to keep arms—or have them provided by the head of the household—and be available in case of an emergency. When the alarms were sounded in 1775, many men left their homes and marched with their local militia towards Lexington and Concord to assist.[2]

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In general, Revolutionary War soldiers were between 18 and 35 years old, giving these men an estimated birth year range between 1735 and 1760. Keep in mind that young teenagers served as battle musicians, such as drummer boys, and older men served in colonial militias.

Men from state militias were drafted into the Continental Army for a period of one to three years. However, not everyone who was drafted served in the military. Some draftees paid substitutes to take their places in the army. Many substitutes came from lower social classes. While some entered into the arrangement willingly, others were forced into fighting. Indentured servants and apprentices often were substitutes for their masters and, sometimes, enslaved persons were substitutes for their enslavers.[3]

Dr. Robert Allison, Professor of History, Language & Global Culture at Suffolk University and author of many books on the Revolutionary War, estimates a minimum of 250,000 men served in the military during the war. Of these, approximately 230,000 soldiers were in the Continental Army and 145,000 in the militias.[4]

Muster rolls

Muster rolls offer the first proof of service for many Revolutionary War soldiers. At roll calls, soldiers responded when their names were read aloud, and their presence was noted in the muster rolls. These lists documented all troops, including officers and soldiers, who were present or accounted for on muster day. The

records may include the date the soldier joined a regiment, suffered injuries or died in battle, transferred to another regiment, or deserted.

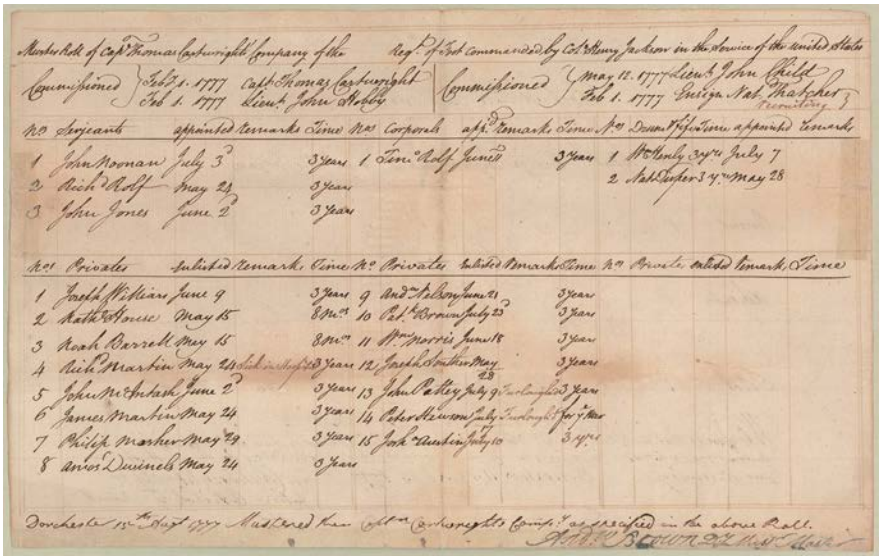
To locate muster rolls for a specific individual, consult the relevant collections with images on the National Archives, Ancestry.com, or Fold3 websites. A text-only version is available on FamilySearch.[5]

Images of index cards provide summaries of each individual's military service, including regiment information, muster roll status, and other remarks, plus the volume and page number for the muster rolls.

The original muster rolls are in Record Group 93, War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. FamilySearch, Ancestry, and Fold3 (owned by Ancestry) have digitized and made them available. The collections are arranged by the type of service, military unit, and jacket or folder number, and they also include payroll returns, supply records, and other information collected by the War Department.[6]

Individual state muster roll records are held at state archives. For Massachusetts, consult the index file cards at the Massachusetts State Archives for soldiers who participated in Massachusetts regiments between 1779 and 1833.[7] For other states, look for Revolutionary War finding aids and collections on state archive websites and websites like ArchiveGrid.[8]

When muster rolls are not available, seek out the quartermaster rolls as an alternative source of information. These rolls list the names of soldiers who were given food, arms, and other supplies. Quartermaster rolls can be found at state archives and local repositories.



Opposite page: "Soldiers in uniform," by Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger (Williamsburg, Virginia, ca. 1781–1784), Library of Congress. *Above:* Muster roll of Capt. Thomas Cartwright's Company, Mss C 84, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, American Ancestors.

Compiled service records

FamilySearch's "United States Revolutionary Compiled Service Records, 1775–1783" index collection contains direct links from the index to the soldier's file on Fold3. These records list the name of the soldier, rank, unit, period of service, and any associated muster rolls and pay rolls with the soldier's name.

Published records

Index to Revolutionary War Service Records (1995), a four-volume set by Virgil White, is a useful alphabetical directory organized by surname, then first name. Entries include rank, colonial regiment information, and, occasionally, references to relevant muster rolls.

Published volumes are also available for individual states. For example, *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (1896) was compiled from various muster rolls held at the Massachusetts State Archives. This seventeen-volume alphabetical directory includes information about each man's town of residence, his units and dates of service, his regiments and commanding officers, and his payments.[9]

Census records

The 1840 United States federal census collected the names and ages of "Pensioners for Revolutionary or Military Services" living in each household. Many older pensioners lived with family members. Researching the head of the household's relationship to the pensioner may give you more evidence of the relationship between a potential child and parent. The list of pensioners has been compiled into a separate database, "U.S., Revolutionary War Pensioner Census, 1840," which is available on Ancestry.com.[10]

Revolutionary War pension records

Pension payments were an incentive to soldiers to enlist (and remain) in state militias and the Continental Army. Original pension files are held by the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The records have been digitized and are available on the websites of the National Archives, Fold3, and Ancestry.[11] The pension files include affidavits from the pensioner (if he survived the war), affidavits from fellow soldiers, and correspondence with the War

Department Office, including letters sent by relatives many years after the war requesting copies of files of family members.

The four-volume printed set *Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files* (1990–1992) by Virgil White is a useful resource. This directory is organized alphabetically by pensioners and includes details on their residence, military service, and family members who were referenced in the pension files. The set is available at the Brady Brim-DeForest Library at American Ancestors and at other libraries.

Over time, Congress passed many laws that impacted pension eligibility. For example, prior to 1818, soldiers did not receive a lifetime pension unless they had served for at least nine months or through the end of the war. A complete list of pension laws for the Revolutionary War can be found in William Thomas Roberts Saffell's 1858 volume, *Records of the Revolutionary War*.[12]

Bounty land

In 1776, at the beginning of the war, the Continental Congress offered land grants to officers and soldiers who would fight in the Continental Army. However, there were at least two major issues with this promise. At the time, the Continental Congress had no authority to grant land and, more importantly, they did not have any land to give.

After the Revolutionary War, the new United States Congress had to make good on its promise. The first steps were to identify land and devise a process to award it to eligible soldiers. The federal government reserved 4,000 square miles in the Northwest Territory (now Ohio) for veterans who served in the Continental Army during the war. This area became known as the U.S. Military District of Ohio.

The eligibility for bounty land varied slightly among states for both service in the Continental Army and in

Revolutionary War resources on AmericanAncestors.org

Video resources

Researching Black Patriots and Loyalists During the Revolutionary Era

In this online lecture, Researcher Danielle Rose discusses the service of Black soldiers during the Revolutionary War and their motivations for joining the Patriot and Loyalist sides. She also provides relevant resources, records, and research strategies.

AmericanAncestors.org/video-library/researching-black-patriots-and-loyalists-during-revolutionary-era

Spilling the Tea: Researching Boston Tea Party Patriots

Chief Research Officer Lindsay Fulton describes how to look for genealogical connections to participants in the Boston Tea Party, their families, and those involved in the making of colonial rebellion in Boston. A new lineage society, created in partnership with the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum, is also discussed.

AmericanAncestors.org/video-library/spilling-tea-researching-boston-tea-party-patriots

Databases

Boston Tea Party Participant Biographies

Presented in collaboration with the Boston Tea Party Ships and Museum, this database contains full biographical sketches for participants in the Boston Tea Party and shorter ahnentafel-style reports for their children and children's spouses.

Index of Revolutionary War Pensioners, 1800–1900

This collection, taken from NARA microfilm publication M804, includes an estimated 80,000 pension and bounty-land warrant application files based on the participation of American military, naval, and marine officers and enlisted men in the Revolutionary War. The files are part of Record Group 15, Records of the Veterans Administration.

Massachusetts: Revolutionary War Pensioners' Receipts, 1799–1807 & Massachusetts: Revolutionary War Pensioners' Receipts, 1827–1836

Many Revolutionary War soldiers were given pensions from the federal government for their service. This searchable database, drawn from the manuscript collection at American Ancestors, contains images of receipts for pension funds, including original signatures and marks of pensioners.

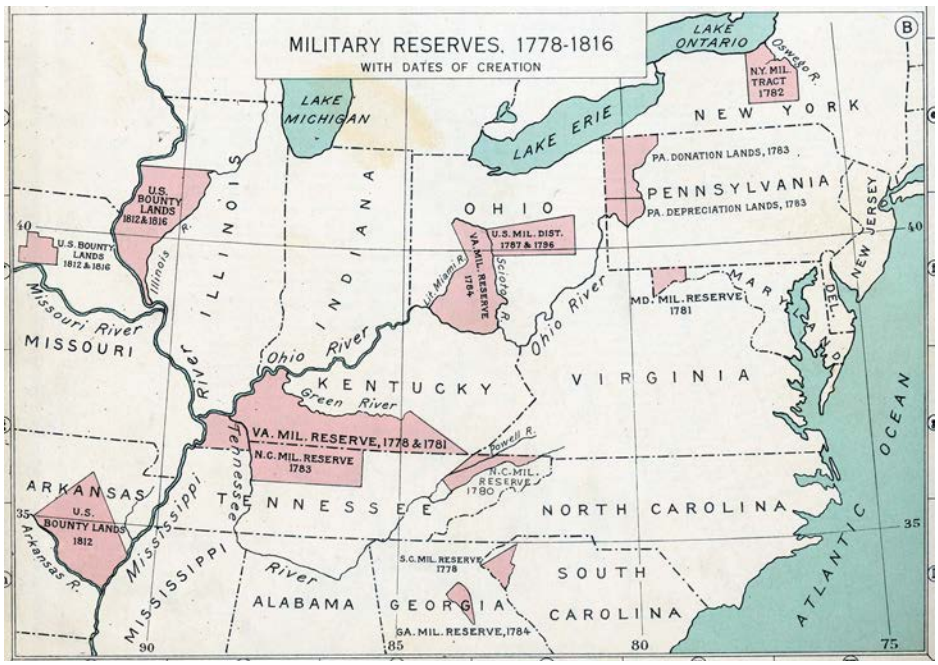
Massachusetts: List of Pensioners

The full title of this volume is *A List of Pensioners in the State of Massachusetts, Comprising Invalid Pensioners and Revolutionary Pensioners Under the Acts of Congress Passed March 18, 1818, May 15, 1828, and June 7, 1832.*

Weymouth, MA: Revolutionary War Soldiers and Sailors, 1775–1783

This collection provides names and descriptive text for 324 veterans from Weymouth, Massachusetts.

state militias. The basic criteria was that if a soldier served in the Continental Line for a minimum of three years or until the end of the war if he had enlisted towards the end of the conflict, he was eligible for bounty land. Initially, the federal government did not allow soldiers to assign their warrants to someone else but, as time passed, it became clear that soldiers were becoming too old to start fresh on new land. The law was changed in 1788 to allow assignment. The law also allowed soldiers to claim bounty land from both the federal government and a state government. The amount of land granted was determined by the soldier's rank at the end of the war.



"Military Reserves, 1778–1816," in the *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*, by Charles O. Paullin (1932), plate 45B. In the *Digital General Collection*, University of Michigan Library Digital Collections.

To receive a land grant, a soldier first had to fill out an application at his local courthouse. If he met the criteria, he was issued a warrant by the War Department (for Continental Army service) or the individual state government (for state militia service). He then took the warrant to the land office responsible for his allotted land to request a survey. After the survey was completed, a patent was issued and, in theory, the soldier took possession of the land. However, not every soldier decided to move to the land he was granted. Some sold their titles to bounty land for cash or disposed of it in other ways.[13]

Initially, the Secretary of War reviewed applications and issued warrants for federal bounty land, while the Treasury Department supervised the land selection and issued the final patent. In 1841, the bounty land process was placed under the Commissioner of Pensions, then, in 1849, the Pension Office was transferred to the Department of the Interior. In 1930, the Bureau of Pensions was placed under Veterans Administration.[14]

The nine states that awarded bounty land for state militia service were Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia.[15] The bounty land for Connecticut was reserved in the Western Reserve (now Ohio) in the United States Military District.[16] Some states allowed the assignment of land to someone else, while others did not.

Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants: Awarded by State Governments (1996) by Lloyd Bockstruck lists the recipients of bounty land alphabetically by surname. Entries include each soldier's name, the state that granted him bounty land, rank, date of warrant, and the number of acres of land awarded.[17]

Patriotic service

Of course, not all patriotic Americans could join the militia or the army. Others provided patriotic service—an act or series of actions that demonstrated loyalty to the American cause. Examples of patriotic service included signing oaths of allegiance to the new government, rendering aid to wounded by serving as a doctor or nurse, furnishing supplies, lending money or munitions, giving patriotic sermons, and serving in local government positions such as selectman and tax collector. Women in particular participated in patriotic service by making homespun clothes, boycotting British goods, and raising money for supplies for Patriot soldiers.

Activities that qualify as patriotic service were mentioned in local newspapers. To access Revolutionary-era papers, seek out collections such as the Early American Newspaper Series.[18] Many of these patriotic activities were also documented in various town records, many of which have been digitized on sites like FamilySearch.org.

To qualify for the purposes of a lineage society, the patriotic act could not be self-serving and had to be for the benefit of Patriots only. Organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) also review an

individual's last action of assistance during the war to determine if they can be considered a Patriot according to their membership criteria. If a person's last action before the end of the war assisted the British, that individual's descendants would not be eligible for membership in these lineage societies.

Lineage societies

Many American lineage societies honor Revolutionary War ancestors who were Patriots, including the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Daughters of the Cincinnati, Children of the American Revolution (CAR), Order of Founders and Patriots, Society of the Cincinnati, Sons of the American Revolution (SAR), and Sons of the Revolution.

The DAR and SAR websites feature databases of recognized Patriots whose descendants have successfully applied for membership. The DAR's Genealogical Research System (GRS) database (at dar.org/grs) includes detailed information on Patriots' biographical details (birth, marriage, death), references to their military or patriotic service, and lists of their children with spouses who were in the ancestral lines of DAR members.

Identifying and learning more about your Patriot connections can be very meaningful, especially as we move through years marking the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. Researching in the resources and records described above can also lead to a deeper appreciation for the sacrifices made by the men and women who fought for independence and started a new country. ◆

Notes

1 Ben Daus-Haberle, "The Militia Clauses and the Original War Powers," *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, February 2021, jnslp.com/2021/02/01/the-militia-clauses-and-the-original-war-powers.

2 "The Militia and Minute Men of 1775," National Park Service, nps.gov/mima/learn/historyculture/the-militia-and-minute-men-of-1775.htm.

3 Christopher Geist, "A Common American Soldier," Colonial Williamsburg, research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/Foundation/journal/Autumn04/soldier.cfm; and Adam E. Zielinski, "Fighting for Freedom: African Americans Choose Sides During the American Revolution," American Battlefield Trust, December 11, 2023, battlefields.org/learn/articles/fighting-freedom-african-americans-during-american-revolution.

4 Robert Allison, *The American Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (2015), 79.

5 See *Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served in the American Army During the Revolutionary War, 1775–1783* (Record Group 93) at the National Archives, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/570910; *U.S., Compiled Revolutionary War Military Service Records, 1775–1783*, Ancestry.com/search/collections/1309; or *US, Revolutionary War Service Records, 1775–1783*, Fold3.com/publication/470/us-revolutionary-war-service-records-1775-1783. (Note: To view the associated images on Fold3.com, you will need a Fold3.com subscription.) For the FamilySearch collection, see *United States Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775–1783*, FamilySearch.org/search/collection/1849623.

6 See *United States Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775–1783*, FamilySearch.org/search/collection/2068326; *U.S., Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775–1783*, Ancestry.com/search/collections/4282; or *US, Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775–1783*, Fold3.com/publication/469/us-revolutionary-war-rolls-1775-1783.

7 See FamilySearch.org/search/collection/2548057.

8 For ArchiveGrid, see researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid.

9 This set can be found at FamilySearch.org/search/catalog/213956. This resource may show more than one entry for the same name, with gaps in military service. To determine whether multiple entries are for a one soldier who lived in different locations over time, additional research is needed. Consult church, tax, and town records, plus land deeds to learn more.

10 See Ancestry.com/search/collections/7678. The database is organized by state, county, and township.

11 See *Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Based on Revolutionary War Service, ca. 1800–ca. 1912* (Record Group 15) at the National Archives, catalog.archives.gov/id/300022; *US, Revolutionary War Pensions, 1800–1900*, at Fold3.com/publication/467/us-revolutionary-war-pensions-1800–1900; and *U.S., Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800–1900*, at Ancestry.com/search/collections/1995.

12 William Thomas Roberts Safell, *Records of the Revolutionary War* (1858), 512–525. Available at https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=osu.32435064341902&seq=1.

13 "United States Military Bounty Land Warrants", FamilySearch Wiki, FamilySearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Military_Bounty_Land_Warrants.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 "United States Military District Genealogy," FamilySearch Wiki, familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Military_District_Genealogy.

17 See Ancestry.com/search/collections/49315.

18 This collection is available through AmericanAncestors.org/search/external-databases.