

Researching Your Civil War Ancestor

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The men (and a few women) who served in the Civil War left behind a legacy rich in resources for the family historian. Whether you descend directly from one of these soldiers or if a Civil War veteran is a collateral relative, the records created as a result of their service can give tremendous genealogical information and historical context.

Clues for Service

Not every man in the U.S. served in the war. Consider these clues for service:

- Year of birth. Most men who served were born between **1820 and 1845**.
- Photos and mementos.
- Obituaries and tombstones.
- 1910 census; look at question 30.

Determining the Right Service

Now that you have clues that your ancestor served, you need to determine his correct service. What regiment(s) did he serve in?

Knowing the regiment will help you in two ways:

- Differentiating between men of the same name
- Finding more records, as many records are arranged by regiment
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Records that can help you determine the correct regiment include:

- Tombstones
- Obituaries
- Local newspaper reports of the injured, missing, and dead

Also, 1890 Special Schedule of Union Veterans and Widows was taken at the same time as the 1890 Federal census. About half of it survives (half of Kentucky through Wyoming, with a few additional pages from other states). Note: Some Confederates were mistakenly included. Although they were crossed off, their entries are still legible. This census is available on Ancestry and FamilySearch.

Records and Resources

Here are some of the records and resources that you'll want to explore.

Pension Records

The Civil War marked the first time that a majority of veterans applied for and received a pension. Union pensions were handled by the federal government. There are two different indices that we should use: the general index (which often lists the name of the widow) and the regimental index (which often includes the date and place of death of the veteran). Used together, they can help differentiate men of the same name. (General index on Ancestry. The regimental index is on Fold3.)

Confederate pensions were handled by individual states (the former Confederate states plus Kentucky, Missouri, and Oklahoma.) It's important to note that Confederate pensions were based on where the veteran lived when he applied rather than on the state he served from. Most Confederate pensions have been digitized and put online. Use your favorite search engine using the phrase: *<state>* confederate pensions (e.g., Florida confederate pensions).

Discharge Records

Union veterans were supposed to record their discharge at their home courthouse. Which office was responsible for recording them varies by state; check with the genealogy society in the area to see where those records can be found.

State and Local Veterans Censuses

By the 1880s, more states and counties saw a need to provide services to veterans. Many took censuses to gauge the extent of the need. Again, check with the genealogy society in the area to see if any were taken. Also consult the FamilySearch Research Wiki — familysearch.org/wiki — for the state and the counties in which your ancestor lived.

Veterans Organizations

Veterans formed their own organizations soon after the war ended but didn't gain a lot of momentum until the late 1870s. These organizations provided a means of support (financial and mental), networking, socialization, and advocacy. It was because of the advocacy of veterans organizations (especially the Grand Army of the Republic) that pension laws were relaxed and veterans homes were created. The largest organization for Union veterans was the Grand Army of the Republic; the largest Confederate organization was United Confederate Veterans.

Regimental Reunions

As veterans began dying off, the desire to have regimental reunions grew. Many of these published booklets or "proceedings," which often included a roster of those in attendance, a list of those who had died since the last reunion, and remembrances of the regiment's service.

Soldiers Homes

The federal government opened the first national home in 1865. Veterans could choose which home they lived in; it wasn't uncommon for them to choose a home near where one of his children was living. Registers of the national homes can be found on FamilySearch.

In addition to the federal (national) homes, many states had their own veterans homes. Some of these records can be found in state archives and historical societies. Also look for the annual reports, which can contain lists of the veterans (and sometimes wives and widows) living there at the time, deaths in the preceding year, as well as conditions at the home. These reports can be found in state libraries and state archives; some have been digitized.

Finding the Records

For original records, consider who created them. Those created by the Federal government (such as pension records and service records) will be at the National Archives. Those created by a state government could be at a state archive, state historical society, or state library. Those created by individuals or private groups could be in any number of places, including state historical societies, and local libraries, archives, and museums.

For published records, including reunion booklets and unit histories, look at the local public library where the regiment was raised or the reunion was held. Look also at state libraries, state historical societies, etc.

Online resources:

Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) — dp.la — is like a catalog for finding digitized, freely available materials from libraries across the nation. Photographs, published materials, and original materials.

FamilySearch Research Wiki — familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page — indispensable for learning about the records available in a specific location. Also, many county pages have lists of the regiments raised in that county.

Genealogy Center > Our Military Heritage — genealogycenter.info/military — Check out the Civil War section for reunion booklets, unit histories, narratives, and even some pension files.

Google Books — books.google.com — good especially for published rosters and unit histories.

Internet Archive — archive.org — is a great place to look for digitized rosters, reunion booklets, and unit histories.

Linkpendium — linkpendium.com — more than 10 million genealogy-related links. Go into the specific state and county pages to uncover all kinds of wonderful resources.

WorldCat — worldcat.org — is a catalog of more than 10,000 libraries and other institutions around the world. If a library can catalog it, it could appear in WorldCat. Great for discovering material in unexpected places.

Note: When searching, be sure to search for the regiment both as a numeral and spelled out. (Ex.: *1st Ohio Heavy Artillery* and again as *First Ohio Heavy Artillery*.) When searching by battle, look for it under all of its names. (Ex.: *Bull Run* and *Manassas*.)

You can find more family history tips and resources at AmyJohnsonCrow.com and on the Generations Café podcast.

