5 Military Favorites

Created by:
Amy Johnson Crow, CG
Anne Gillespie Mitchell
Paul Rawlins
Juliana Szucs Smith

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U.S. National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, 1866-1938

Browsing through the collection of records from **U.S. National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, 1866-1938,** you can't help but be struck by the human toll that comes of war. Browsing through the Civil War-era entries, you'll find many admissions citing gunshot wounds and missing limbs, and in the WWI entries, tuberculosis and lung-related diseases were very common.

Because these records are so detailed, we can also see the impact on families. Widower **John Duall** was admitted to the North-Western Branch National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1867 with hemiplegia (paralysis). He lists his daughter, Anna, as his nearest relative. Her address is listed as "Catholic Orphan Asylum, Milwaukee."

WHAT'S IN THE RECORDS?

While the forms can vary from place to place and time to time, they generally contain sections on military history, personal (domestic) history, home history, as well as remarks. Military history includes dates and places of enlistment and discharges, the type of discharge, company and regiment, and rank. Domestic history provides a physical description (height, complexion, eye and hair color), age and birthplace, occupation, marital status, religion, and in many cases, the name and location of the nearest relative (sometimes just a town, and other times a complete address).

They also include the soldier's history with the home. You can find the name of the home, dates of admission, dates of discharge (or sometimes expulsion) and the reason. If the veteran died in the home, death and burial information was included, as was sometimes an accounting of personal affects and to whom money was disbursed. Some of the records also provided pension numbers, like this one for William H. Dennis.

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U.S. Navy Cruise Books, 1918-2009

Not all sailors have cruise books, but all cruise books have sailors. U.S. Navy cruise books, also called souvenir books, date back to the late 19th or early 20th century. Cruise books are yearbook-style books put together by volunteers on board ship to commemorate a noteworthy deployment or cruise. They became even more popular during WWII.

Cruise books include pictures of sailors, officers, and other personnel, often accompanied by the individual's surname and sometimes rate. Like a yearbook, cruise books usually have plenty of candid photographs of crew members at work and recreation as well, from gunnery practice and swabbing the deck to holiday celebrations or boxing matches. Along with photos, you may also find details and history of the ship, short biographies of prominent officers, battle footage, VIPs, or even a copy of a ship's menu—like the one from the *Leviathan*, the ship Humphrey Bogart served on.

You can search the books by ship name, crew member's name, and year. But don't stop there. Your sailor might appear in candid or group shots. If you find a ship they served on and the dates look like a good match, browse through. At the very least you'll get a good introduction to the ship and its story.

Here are some other tips for locating your seafaring ancestors in **U.S. Navy Cruise Books, 1918-2009**:

- Can you learn anything about what they did on the ship? Group photographs were often taken according to division, department, or some other classification.
- Use the slider to blow up the picture to get a better look at the faces.
- Look for another picture of your ancestor near that age. Some faces change dramatically.
- Try searching for your ancestor in WWII Navy Muster rolls to track down their ship.
- Try searching with initials rather than a first name. Also, because the Rosetta indexing process is done by machine, some names may be missed.

Even if you don't find a cruise book for your ancestor, look for a similar ship (battleship, tender, aircraft carrier, etc.) serving during the same time. You'll still get some insight into what life was like for your ancestor—from an insider's point of view.

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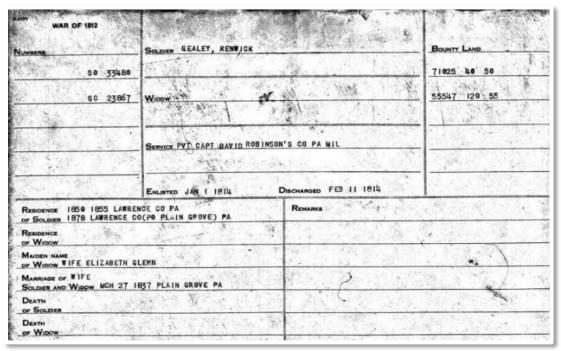*Juliana Szucs Smith*

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War of 1812 Pension Application Files Index, 1812-1815

The **War of 1812 Pension Application Files Index, 1812-1815,** contains the fronts of the envelopes containing the actual pension applications. These envelopes are arranged alphabetically according to surname of applicant. The amount of information shown on the front of the envelope varies, but this index is richer in detail than those for some other conflicts.

The application files indexed in this collection relate to claims of military service between 1812 and 1815. Most of the applications were filed as a result of acts instated in 1871 and 1878 making it possible for veterans and their survivors to receive pensions based on service alone. Earlier acts provided pensions only for service-related deaths or disabilities.

The following information is usually provided: name of veteran, name of widow, if she applied, pension claim or file number, service type or organization. In this example you find residences for Renwick Gealey, the maiden name of his wife and when they were married. Also on the right, the numbers for his bounty land applications.

Some of the envelopes also contain personal identifying data about the veteran and/or widow and information written in the upper right-hand corner relating to bounty land applications.

Copies of some actual pension application files can be found **on Fold3**. These images are **free**, part of the *War of 1812 Pension Digitization Project,* through the partnership of the Federation of Genealogical Societies, the National Archives, Ancestry.com, and Fold3.com. If the pension you're looking for is not yet available, it can be ordered from the **National Archives and Records Administration**.

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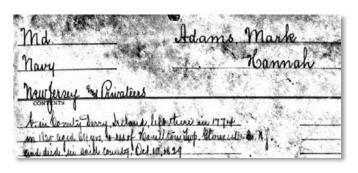*Juliana Szucs Smith*

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U.S., Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800-1900

Pension records can include so much more than just details about a veteran's military service. Because pensioners were required to prove service, prove relationships, and entitlement to the pension, they had to provide affidavits and depositions from family and friends, as well as any records they had that could prove various aspects of their claim. Ancestry.com is home to **Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800-1900**.
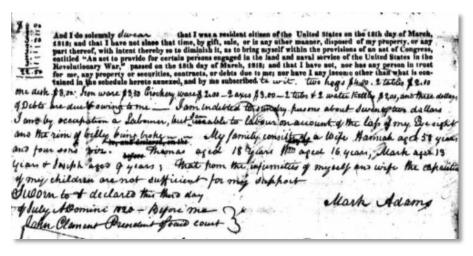
Some of these files can be more than 100 pages long and include a treasure trove of detail for a period when early American census records were leaner in detail and the number of other surviving records is fewer.

TIPS FOR USING PENSION FILES

- The details mentioned above are just a sampling of what is in this file. With so many details in so many documents, it's easy to lose track. Research extracts allow you to pull pertinent facts from each document and summarize findings in a more readable format. Include references to the location of the record and the file name, if you've saved the information electronically, so that you can relocate it easily. **Click here** to download free Research Extract Forms on Ancestry.com.

- Witnesses in pension files were often relatives or neighbors who had known the petitioner for many years. Compiling a list of witnesses and how and where they were referenced in the pension file can be very helpful in later research. If a relationship isn't stated, you might want to do a little investigating on those individuals to see if you can find a connection.

Keep in mind that testimonies and many of the details found in pension files were recorded years after the actual events and are secondary sources. Keep a to-do list handy and as you go along, make notes to follow up on information in the file by locating other records that include supporting information.

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Records of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)

The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was the largest organization of Union veterans. It was open to all honorably discharged veterans who had never borne arms against the United States. Founded in Illinois in 1866, its membership reached nearly 500,000 by 1890. The GAR was politically active. It was largely due to the group's advocacy that pension requirements were changed from being based on disability and financial hardship to being based on service. In addition, local GAR posts provided financial aid and burial benefits for its members.

Local GAR posts kept different types of records**,** including description books, which detailed the member**'**s service, birthplace, residence, occupation, and injuries sustained during the war. Some entries include information about the veteran's death. GAR muster rolls contain similar information. This can be valuable information to help fill in the gap created by the missing 1890 census.

There are three large collections of GAR records on Ancestry.com: **New York, Grand Army of the Republic Records, 1866-1931**; **Kansas, Grand Army of the Republic Post Reports, 1880-1940** ; and **Kansas, Grand Army of the Republic Bound Post Records, 1866-1931**. Below are examples from New York's Frank Head Post No. 16 Descriptive Books. They noted both personal and service details, membership dates with the GAR, whether wounded in service, and remarks. Several entries also noted death dates, and the entry for Michael Mulvaney also noted that he was at the soldiers' home in Hampton, Virginia. (See **U.S. National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, 1866-1938**.)

Not every Union veteran joined the GAR. However, you should explore GAR records if your ancestor served. It could give you another glimpse into his life.