RESEARCH GUIDE

Planting your family tree in the American Revolution

Ready to find your family's revolutionary roots? Even if you know the name of an ancestor who fought in the American Revolution, you'll still want to march back through history to be sure you have the right man—and the right family.

Ready: 1900s

Records created in the 20th century are the best place to start a search for family members. Focus your initial searches on family members you know were around for the 1940 and 1930 censuses.

Clues in census records, including residence, names of siblings and children, ages, birthplaces, and occupations, can be used to search older censuses and other records so you can continue going back in time.

Populate census search forms with the information, or add the details to people in your family tree at Ancestry and let the tree do the searching for you.
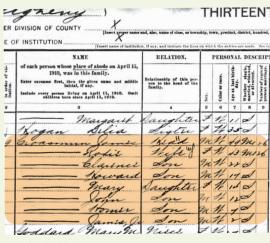
Tip: Birth, marriage, and death records are another great way to follow a family back through time. Marriage indexes can include a wife's maiden name, birth records can include parents, and even a modern obituary could include the name of a spouse, cousin, or grandparents as well as hometowns. Use what you discover to start or build your online family tree. That way you'll stay organized while your tree helps you search further back in time.

Names, ages, and birth locations from the 1920 census help you locate the family 10 years earlier, too.

1920 U.S. Federal Census

1910 U.S. Federal Census

Set: 1800s

Where's the 1890 census? While a scant few records from 1890 remain, nearly all of the 1890 U.S. Federal Census was destroyed by fire or subsequent water damage. Use city directories to help you fill in the gap.

Note that early in the 19th century, you'll only find heads of households listed in census records. Maps, court documents, and Civil War-related records, including the 1890 Veterans Schedule, may provide additional information. Also pay attention to special census schedules created during the late 19th century. The government collected these unique details about everything from farming (agricultural schedules) to manufacturing (industrial schedules) and even deaths (mortality schedules), all of which can provide details you'll need to find family members from earlier times.
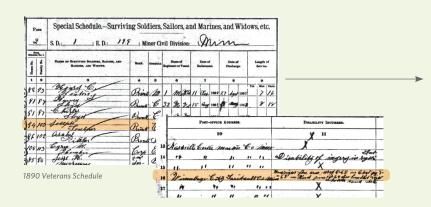
The 1910 census shows James was a molder; that same occupation in an 1890 city directory helps you know you're on the right trail.

1910 U.S. Federal Census

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Directory, 1890

1890 Veterans Schedule

Information in the 1890 Veterans Schedule provides details about Joseph's Civil War injuries as well as a place of residence, which leads to a previous land grant. The land grant contains the information needed to locate an agricultural schedule from 1870.

Tip: Create a timeline of family members and events so you'll know when you've found the right family and who to search for next. Include vital details (births, marriages, and deaths), migrations, and other facts you uncover and add information from history, which can help explain your family's actions and point to the whereabouts of family members you're missing.

U.S. General Land Office Record

1870 Agriculture Schedule

Go: 1700s

It wasn't until 1790 that a newly formed America took its first census. You can use this early census as well as other information you've uncovered to link back to the Revolutionary War.

You can find clues to Revolutionary War connections in the Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications on Ancestry. They document the lineage of the person who applied for membership to the society (possibly as late as 1970) all the way back to someone who served the Revolutionary cause. (See Using Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications on the next page for additional how-to info.)

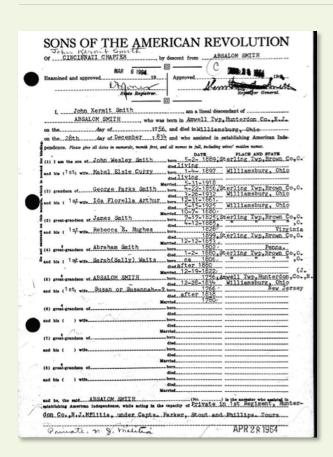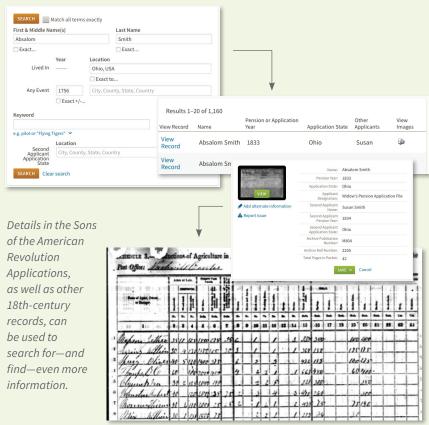Find a connection to someone listed in the application, and then use names, dates, and other details in the application to search for additional information about your Revolutionary War link. Check pension applications of Revolutionary War veterans and military service records. Also search for family in Revolutionary War rolls, Daughters of the American Revolution Lineage Books, officers' records, and military records from the original colonies.

Search all of the Revolutionary War records on Ancestry here.

Names, dates, and relationships in this collection can provide great clues to advance your family history, but as with any derivative source of information, you should verify the details with independent and, wherever possible, original sources. You may find some source information within the applications that will help.

Details in the Sons of the American Revolution Applications, as well as other 18th-century records, can be used to search for—and find—even more information.

Tip: *It's fine to use information you found in 19th-century documents to start searching for 18th-century records. But check dates and relationships carefully whenever possible—the same given name may have been used through multiple generations of a family. Approximate birth years may help you decide if you're looking at the Revolutionist named A. Smith or if you're really reviewing a record for his son.*

Using Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications

1 Input the name of the person you're searching for: applicant, Revolutionist, or someone in between.

2 Review search results carefully. Click on the image to see the original application, and follow the names back in time.

3 Compare the information in the Sons of the American Revolution packet to the details you've documented in your own family tree on Ancestry.

4 While Sons of the American Revolution lineage charts are well researched and documented, you should still take steps to ensure all names and relationships in the packet are connected to your family. To do this, input information — relationships and dates included — for each person in the application into your online family tree so Ancestry can search for you. You can also use the application information to populate your own searches at Ancestry.

Keep going — work with census records; birth, marriage, and death records; family trees; and other details you find at Ancestry to document your direct connection back to your Revolutionary War ancestor.