

# Strategies for Tracing Revolutionary War Veterans

by David Allen Lambert

UNCOVERING THE STORY OF YOUR ANCESTOR'S REVOLUTIONARY WAR SERVICE CAN ADD INTERESTING chapters to your family history and provide you with a tangible connection to a critical period in American history. Sources for Revolutionary War service and pensions can be researched online, as well as in reliable published sources.

## Identifying your Revolutionary War ancestor

Begin your search with Virgil D. White's *Index to Revolutionary War Service Records*, 4 vols. (Waynesboro, Tenn.: The National Historical Publishing Company, 1995), a major reference compiled from both state and federal records. The *DAR Patriot Index — National Society Daughters of the American Revolution* (Baltimore, Md.: Gateway Press, 2003) contains information on Revolutionary ancestors submitted by DAR members; however, not all entries relate to military service and not all Revolutionary War veterans are listed. [See pages 25–26 for more on the Patriot Index and DAR's holdings.]

Many original Revolutionary War records — muster rolls, diary entries, and biographical sketches of veterans — were transcribed in past issues of the *Register*. These articles can be searched on the NEHGS website, along with a variety of items from our manuscript collections, including Massachusetts Revolutionary War Pensioners' Receipts, 1799–1807 and 1829–1837, and Revolutionary War Naval Pensioners' Payment Receipts, 1829–1832. Other NEHGS databases from this era include sketches of members of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, open to officers in Continental service, and *Divided Hearts, Massachusetts Loyalists, 1765–1790*, a biographical directory.

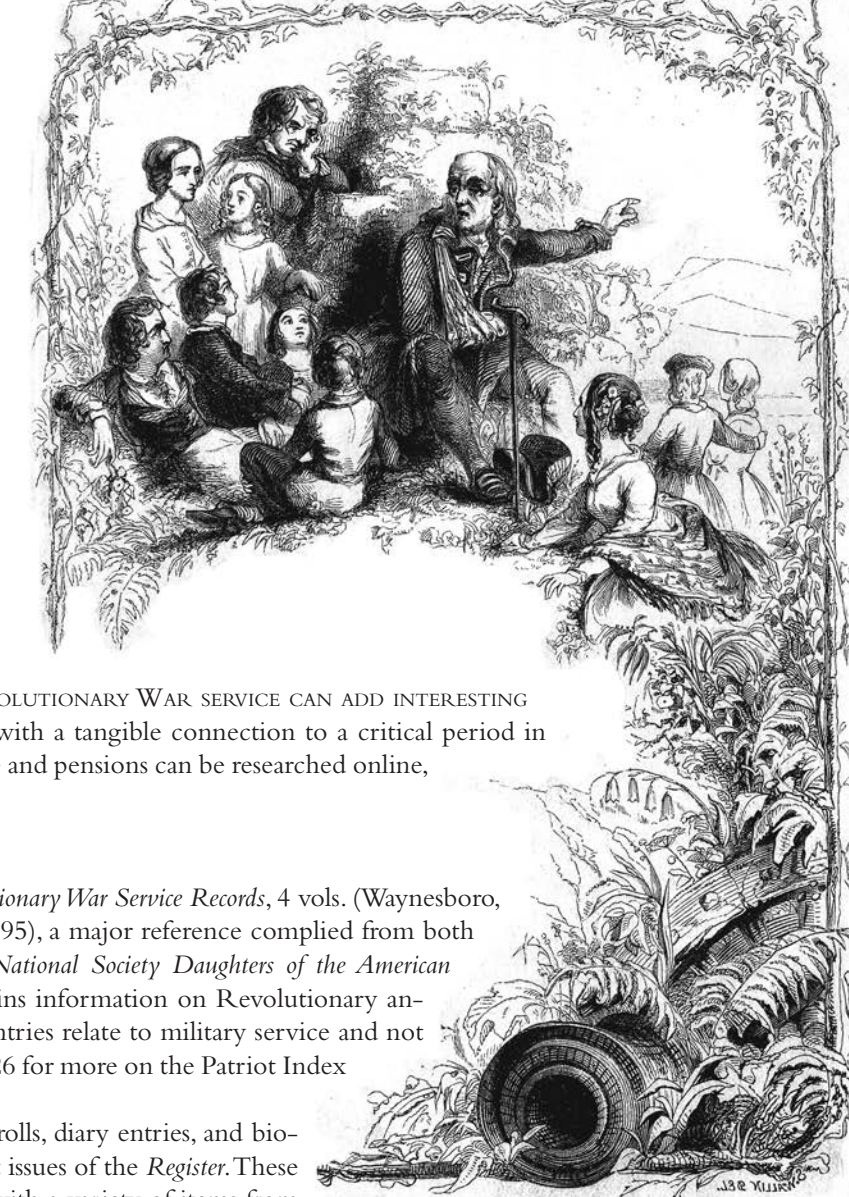
The following publications can place your ancestor in a particular state and, often, provide additional details about his service.

### Connecticut

Adjutant General's Office, *Record of Service of Connecticut Men in the War of the Revolution, War of 1812, and Mexican War*, 3 vols. (Hartford: Lockwood & Brainard, 1889).

### Delaware

Bellas, Henry H., *A History of the Delaware State Society of the Cincinnati . . . to which is Appended a Brief Account of the Delaware Regiments in the War of Revolution*.



Above: Title page of Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution, vol. 1 (1851)*.

*Also Personal Memoirs of Officers, Rolls of Same . . .* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1895).

Whiteley, William Gustavus, *The Revolutionary Soldiers of Delaware* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1896).

### Georgia

Knight, Lucian Lamar, *Georgia's Roster of the Revolution* (Atlanta: Index Printing Co., 1920).

### Maine (also see Massachusetts)

Fisher, Carleton E. and Sue G. Fisher, *Soldiers, Sailors and Patriots of the Revolutionary War, Maine* (Louisville, Ky.: National Society Sons of the American Revolution, 1982).

### **Maryland**

Clements, S. Eugene and F. Edward Wright, *The Maryland Militia in the Revolutionary War* (Silver Spring, Md.: Family Line Publications, 1987).

### **Massachusetts**

*Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War: A Compilation from the Archives*, 17 vols. (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1896–1908)

### **New Hampshire**

*Rolls of the Soldiers in the Revolutionary War, 1775–1782*. New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers, vols. 14–17 (Concord: 1885–89).

### **New Jersey**

New Jersey Adjutant General's Office, *Official Register of the Officers and Men of New Jersey in the Revolutionary War* (Trenton: W.T. Nicholson & Co., 1872)

### **New York**

Roberts, James A. and Frederic G. Mather, *New York in the Revolution as Colony and State* (1897, 1901; repr., Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1996).

### **North Carolina**

Clark, Walter, *The State Records of North Carolina*, 26 vols. (Raleigh: A. Williams & Co., 1880).

### **Pennsylvania**

*Pennsylvania Archives*, 138 vols. (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1852–1914). Muster rolls were published in various volumes in this set. For a detailed list, see Neagles, James C., *U. S. Military Records – A Guide to Federal & State Sources* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry Inc., 1994), 329.

### **Rhode Island**

Smith, Joseph J., *Civil and Military List of Rhode Island, Vol. 1 1647–1800* (Providence: Preston and Rounds Co., 1900–1)

### **South Carolina**

Salley, Alexander Samuel, *Records of the Regiments of the South Carolina Line in the Revolutionary War* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1977).

### **Vermont**

Fisher, Carleton E., *Soldiers, Sailors, and Patriots of the Revolutionary War – Vermont* (Camden, Me.: Picton Press, 1992).

Goodrich, John E., *The State of Vermont – Rolls of the Soldiers in the Revolutionary War 1775 to 1783* (Rutland, Vt.: The Tuttle Co., 1904).

### **Virginia**

Virginia State Library – Archives Division, *List of the Revolutionary Soldiers of Virginia* (Richmond: 1912).

### **West Virginia (also see Virginia)**

Johnston, Ross B., *West Virginians in the American Revolution* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1977).

### **Researching your ancestor's service**

As you research, be aware of the limits of eighteenth-century records. Men who served appear on military muster rolls, which usually only include name, town served from, and amount of time with the regiment. This lack of detail can cause difficulty in distinguishing between men of the same name.

If a company served longer than a few days, weeks, or months a more detailed muster roll may have been compiled. These records, known as descriptive muster rolls, provide statistics such as age, height, complexion, and hair and eye color. Descriptive muster rolls are more commonly found for Continental forces rather than state militia. These rolls are available in various published sources and in microfilm series M246 (Revolutionary War Muster Rolls, 1775–1783) at the National Archives and on [www.footnote.com](http://www.footnote.com).

Researchers are generally interested in the details of their ancestors' service: battles, skirmishes, postings, and marches. Civil War researchers can consult many published regimental histories, which often provide a day-by-day account of the campaign. For Revolutionary War service, this type of comprehensive resource is not available. However, you may be able to piece together your Revolutionary War ancestor's story by using the following techniques that have worked successfully for me.

1) Look beyond your ancestor. He was part of a company of men serving in a regiment or on a vessel. His story may be told in the records of his fellow veterans.

2) Determine the unit's officers, especially the captain and colonel. Biographical material on officers may



“Usual Appearance of the King about 1776. From a Sketch by Gear.” Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*, vol. 1 (1851), 458.

provide details about the unit's campaigns and battles.

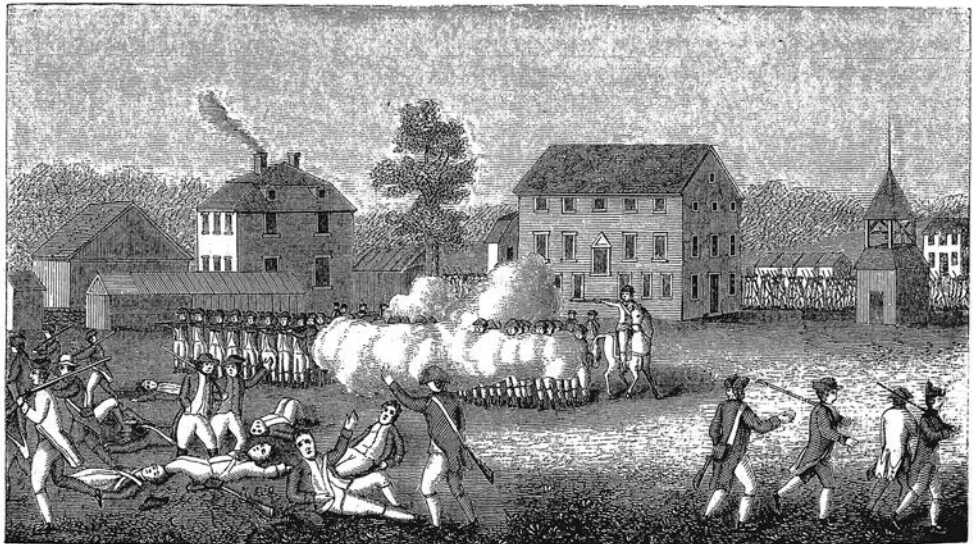
3) Examine the service records of the other soldiers/sailors from your ancestor's unit by consulting its muster rolls. Even if your ancestor's entry does not list a residence, information on his fellow soldiers/sailors may help identify your ancestor's place of origin or enlistment.

4) Search Revolutionary War pension files for veterans and officers who served in your ancestor's unit. These records often include accounts of battles as well as unit locations and movements. Letters or affidavits of service are often supplied by a fellow soldier or officer. (Note that most soldiers were not eligible for a veteran's pension until the Pension Act of 1818.)

#### Using pension records

Compiled service records and muster rolls usually offer little biographical information. Whenever possible, obtain pension files for your Revolutionary War ancestor. Pension records can contain correspondence from the veteran, a family member, or an attorney. Letters may address health or financial issues facing the veteran or widow. Pensions often summarize military service, and include all units and engagements. A widow's pension often includes proof of marriage and, occasionally, pages from family bibles sent to the Pension Office as proof. Final payment vouchers can also contain further information. The vouchers have not been microfilmed or digitized, and are only available from the National Archives, in RG217. An "Index to Final Pension Payment Vouchers, 1818–1864" can be found on [www.footnote.com](http://www.footnote.com).

Researchers may become discouraged when they cannot find a pension for their ancestor, but knowing how the pension system operated may make the lack of a file more understandable. The granting of a pension largely depended on the veteran's length of service and longevity. Beginning in late 1770s, some states used bounty land as an incentive for soldiers to remain in the service; Virginia offered bounty land in present day Ohio and Kentucky. This benefit was only available to state troops or Continental line soldiers who had served continuously for three years. Many bounty land records no longer exist because of a fire

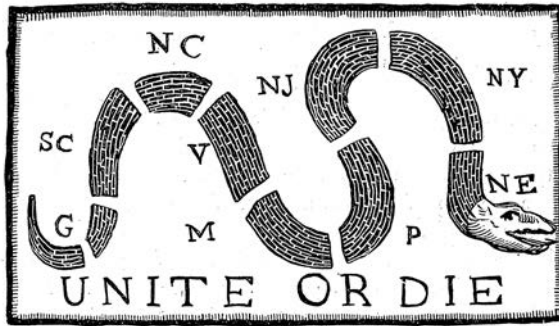


*"Skirmish at Lexington," drawn by Ralph Earl and engraved by Amos Doolittle, 1775. Benson J. Lossing, Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution, vol. 1 (1851), 524.*

in the War Department in 1800 and the British burning of government buildings during the War of 1812.

For two decades after the war, pensions were granted only to those with sufficient rank and length of service in the Continental forces; state troops became eligible only in 1806. (State troops and militias were units from a specific colony or state. The Continental Army, raised June 14, 1775, included combined units from all thirteen colonies. The initial Continental Army consisted of 22,000 troops at Boston, and 5,000 troops in New York.) In 1818, pensions were authorized for veterans with as little as nine months' service, and many veterans applied under these new rules. In 1820 pensioners were requested to supply an inventory of their estate and a report of income. The information collected demonstrated that many veterans did not require a pension, while others were destitute. Some veterans who did not supply the requested information were dropped from the pension rolls; some were restored in 1823.

Widows also were subject to scrutiny. In 1836, a widow was authorized to receive a pension providing she was married to a soldier or sailor at the time of the Revolutionary War. In 1838 this ruling was relaxed to include widows married before January 1, 1794; a decade later the cutoff was extended to January 2, 1800. In 1853, all widows of Revolutionary War veterans were allowed a pension, no matter when they married. Late in life many elderly veterans married women significantly younger. In 1878, a century after the conflict's first battles, widows were eligible even if their soldier saw only two weeks' service or had taken part in any engagement.



Variations of this cartoon were published throughout the American colonies in the years leading up to the Revolution. Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*, vol. 1 (1851), 508.

In 1840 a special schedule of the U.S. Census first enumerated other household members who were pensioners (including widows). Unlike other non-heads of household, these individuals were enumerated by name and exact age, not a tabulated range. [*A Census of Pensioners for Revolutionary or Military Services with Their Names, Ages, and Places of Residence . . .* (Washington: U.S. Secretary of State, 1841).]

Virgil D. White and associates produced four volumes of genealogical data abstracted from surviving pension files in National Archives series M804 (Revolutionary War Pensions and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications). [*Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files*, 4 vols. (Waynesboro, Tenn.: National Historical Publishing Co., 1990–92).] This helpful work indexes family members mentioned in each pension. HeritageQuest (available through subscribing libraries) and Footnote (available by subscription) have scanned images of the actual pension records and placed them online; I have found the images from *Footnote.com* to be more complete and of a higher quality. Footnote has also scanned National Archives series M881 (Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served in the American Army During the Revolutionary War, 1775–1783) and M246 (Revolutionary War Muster Rolls, 1775–1783). These databases are user-friendly, and can also be searched at the NEHGS Library in Boston.

#### Revolutionary War lineage societies

Once you have established lineage from a Revolutionary War soldier, you may wish to join an hereditary society that honors his service. Many of these societies, founded in the nineteenth century, are still active.

- General Society, Sons of the Revolution (1883), [www.sr1776.org](http://www.sr1776.org)

- National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (1890), [www.dar.org](http://www.dar.org)
- National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution (1889), [www.sar.org](http://www.sar.org)
- The National Society of the Children of the American Revolution (1895), [www.nscar.org](http://www.nscar.org)
- Society of the Descendants of Washington's Army at Valley Forge (1976), [www.valleyforgesociety.org/Pages/Home.html](http://www.valleyforgesociety.org/Pages/Home.html)

The Society of the Cincinnati (1783) and Daughters of the Cincinnati (1894) extend membership by invitation only.

#### Making connections with Revolutionary ancestors

At age ten I first visited the gravestone of my ancestor Capt. Jonathan Poor (1737–1807), a wealthy tavern keeper in Newbury, Massachusetts. I was intrigued by Capt. Poor's service, and reading the muster rolls and pension files of those who served with him added additional detail. When I located Capt. Poor's small 1775 journal at the Phillips Library of the Essex Institute, I could read his words and share his observations from a crucial time and place in American history.

I found the final payment voucher for another relative, Joshua Whitney of Buxton, Maine. This record revealed that in the years after the war, he was a very poor farmer with a large family. Although original pension files can no longer be handled at the National Archives, the Final Payment Vouchers can. When I opened Joshua's Whitney's docket, I found his original pension certificate issued in 1818 and signed by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. The file also contained a letter — authorizing Whitney's grandson to collect his last pension check in Portland, Maine — signed by all of Whitney's daughters with their married surnames. This docket provided me with information I had not found in many years of research.

In addition to these two examples from my own research, I've heard countless other success stories from genealogists seeking to know more about their ancestors' service. Devoting research time to investigate Revolutionary War ancestors will surely prove rewarding — and perhaps also surprising. ♦

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DAVID ALLEN LAMBERT is the NEHGS online genealogist.