

Revolutionary War Research: Tracing Patriots and Loyalist ancestors

Class 4: Using Revolutionary War Land Grants

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Background

Rewarding soldiers with bounty land has a long and ancient history. Typically, a ruler would promise land in exchange for service, especially when the land was newly conquered. One of the earliest examples of bounty land in America occurred during King Philip's War where soldiers were eligible for land. The townships were in an arc and were considered to be frontier military outposts. The conditions of the grant included having a minimum of 30 settlers and a minister within 4 years. However, it took 40 years before the grants were awarded in a handful of northern New England communities. The Town Reports at the Massachusetts State Archives detail the history of these communities.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress offered land grants to officers and soldiers who would fight in the Continental Army. There were at least two problems with the promise, made in 1776. First, the Continental Congress had zero authority at that time to issue land, and more importantly, they did not have any land to give.

After the Revolutionary War, the new Congress of the United States had to make good on their promise. They had to find the land and devise a process to award the land to eligible soldiers. The original 13 colonies had been generous in their interpretation of what was theirs and their land claims frequently overlapped each other's territory.

The key to making bounty land a reality was the opening of the Northwest Territory which includes modern day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan and a portion of Minnesota.

During the time period that bounty land was awarded, there were numerous legislative acts spelling out the criteria for an award and other parameters circumscribing the process.

Eligibility and Process

The eligibility for bounty land varied in small ways between states. The basic criteria were that if a soldier served in the Continental Line for a minimum of three years, or until the end of the War if they enlisted towards the end of the conflict, they were eligible for bounty land.

Initially the federal government did not allow a soldier to assign their award to someone else, but as time dragged on, it became clear that soldiers were becoming too old to start afresh on new land and the law was changed in 1788 to allow assignment. The law also allowed a soldier to claim bounty land from both the federal government and a state government. The amount of land to be granted was to be dependent on the soldier's rank at the end of the War. States also varied in whether they permitted assignment.

For federal bounty-land, initially the Secretary of War reviewed applications and issued warrants, and the Treasury Department supervised the selection of land and issued the final patent. First, a soldier had to apply for a land grant. If they met the criteria, they were issued a warrant which they took to the War Department and requested a survey of the land. After the survey was returned, a patent was issued and in theory, the soldier took possession of the land.

The process for state bounty-land was similar: application, warrant, survey, patent. There were of course differences in the governmental agencies involved.

Finding the paper trail is sometimes challenging. The War Department suffered two fires in 1800 and in 1814 that destroyed many of the Revolutionary War warrants in its possession. So pre-1800 federal applications are gone. They have been replaced by cards that are filed with Revolutionary War Pension files and filmed on M804. The warrants for the Ohio Bounty Land are shown on NARA microfilm publication M829.

Federal Land

The land given by the federal government was located in the present-day state of Ohio and in the counties of Noble, Guernsey, Tuscarawas, Muskingum, Coshocton, Holmes, Licking, Knox, Franklin, Delaware, Morrow and Marion. Of the over 1 million acres claimed by warrant, only about half were finally patented.

State Specific Land

Generally, the first place to look is in Bockstruck's book *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants: Awarded by State Governments*. Some states have online archives which may also be used to start your search. Once you have confirmed that your ancestor was eligible for bounty land, you may start looking for the land and whether or not your ancestor took possession. Full names of sites along with URLs are in the Resources Section below.

Massachusetts did not authorize bounty land for its soldiers until 1801. The location of the land was in present day Aroostook County, in the township of Mars Hill on the Canadian border. Once you've located your soldier you can find his land by first using the *FamilySearch* database "Massachusetts, land deeds, 1791-1884," and looking in the film "Land deeds, revolutionary war soldiers, Massachusetts, Mars

Hill, book 1, 1829-1884” to see if the land was patented and then using the *Digital Maine Repository* to find the precise location in Mars Hill. See links below.

Maine first authorized bounty land in 1835 for soldiers currently living in Maine who served from either Maine or Massachusetts. Once you have located the name, check the *FamilySearch* database “Maine Revolutionary War Bounty Land Applications, 1835-1838” to see if a warrant was issued. Explore the *Digital Maine Repository* for additional information about the warrant.

New York authorized bounty land in 1783. They allowed double dipping (state and federal), and the minimum award was generous: 500 acres. Land in the present-day counties of Cayuga, Cortland, Onondaga, Seneca, Oswego, Schuyler, Tompkins and Wayne was set aside for soldiers. The entire tract encompassed about 1.5 million acres. The 28 townships each had about 60,000 acres and were named for classical literary heroes. The land was distributed by a process known as the balloting box. Review the balloting box documents for your ancestor.

Pennsylvania passed legislation in 1780 to authorize the provision of bounty land for soldiers. The land tract selected was in northwestern Pennsylvania and was referred to as “Donation Lands.” It covered parts of the counties of Erie, Crawford, Warren, Mercer, Venango, and Lawrence Counties. Although the Bockstruck book includes Pennsylvania, you could start with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission to find your ancestor (see resources below). The PHMC site includes a surname index and a listing of the approximate location of each of the Donation Land Tracts. As other states did, the tracts were allocated by a lottery.

Maryland made provisions for bounty land beginning in 1777. The minimum grant to a soldier in Maryland was probably the smallest – only 50 acres. The land was located in present day Garrett and Allegany Counties. To find your ancestor, start with the Bockstruck book, then go to the Maryland Archives website. They have a listing (numerical order) of which soldier was awarded which lot in the Military District.

Virginia supplied bounty land in two states: Ohio and present-day Kentucky. The awarding of bounty land was first approved in 1779 and the first warrant issued in 1782. Soldiers had to obtain a certificate before a warrant for a survey was issued. See *FamilySearch* or the *Library of Virginia* for the certificates and warrants. If the land was awarded in Kentucky, go to the Kentucky Land Office page. It is a user-friendly set of pages to find the original warrant, survey and patent. If the land was awarded in Ohio, see *FamilySearch* – “Virginia Military District lands of Ohio; indexes.”

North Carolina issued its first warrant for bounty land in 1783. The Military District was in what is now the State of Tennessee. As was true of other states, the soldier first applied for land and when approved received a warrant which he could exchange for a survey. When the survey was approved, the Secretary of

State for North Carolina issued a grant for the land. A second series of warrants was issued beginning in 1799, but the land was located and patented by Tennessee. Once you identify your soldier, search the *Ancestry* database “North Carolina and Tennessee, U.S., Revolutionary War Land Warrants, 1783-1843,” for the warrant and the *Ancestry* database “Tennessee, U.S. Early Land Registers 1778-1927,” for the location of the land.

South Carolina authorized bounty land in 1778. The location of land was in the northwestern corner of the colony, in a region known as District Ninety-Six and within the District as Cherokee Lands. This district was in the mountains and sparsely settled. The Cherokee Lands were taken during the American Revolution and renamed as counties in 1785. To find your South Carolina ancestor, use the South Carolina Department of Archives and History website (see link to search page below). Type in your ancestor’s name (last name first, comma, first name) and his name should appear. The results page includes an image of the survey associated with him.

Georgia government first authorized bounty land in 1784. The Georgia strategy for giving land went well beyond enticing soldiers to fight on behalf of the colony. The Georgian government wanted to encourage settlement. In addition to granting land to soldiers of the Continental Line, Georgia rewarded militia and residents who served in the Carolinas. The final two categories of awardees were citizens who remained loyal to the cause for the entire War and British deserters.

Georgia’s bounty land for soldiers was located between the Apalachee and Oconee rivers in the area that is now Oconee, Oglethorpe and Green Counties. To find your Georgia patriot you could use Bockstruck book or the Georgia State Archives Virtual Vault. To locate the warrant, use the *FamilySearch* database noted below.

References

General

Bockstruck, Lloyd Dewitt, *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants: Awarded by State Governments* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co, 1996). Online at *Ancestry* under the title “Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants.”

Bockstruck, Lloyd Dewitt, *Bounty and Donation Land Grants in British Colonial America* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007)

Knepper, George W., *The Official Ohio Lands Book* (Ohio Auditor of State, 2002). Digitally available at <https://ohioauditor.gov/publications/docs/OhioLandsBook.pdf>

Rose, Christine, *Military Bounty Land 1776-1855* (San Jose, CA: CR Publications 2011).

Federal Bounty-Land

Smith, Clifford Neale, *Federal Land Series; A Calendar of Archival Materials on the Land Patents Issued by the United States, Volume 2: Federal Bounty Land Warrants of the American Revolution, 1799-1835* (Chicago, American Library Association, 1972)

National Archives, "Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, ca. 1800 - ca. 1900," Record Group 15, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/567388>. Online at *FamilySearch*, *Ancestry* and *Fold3*.

National Archives, "U.S. Revolutionary War Bounty Land Warrants Used in the U.S. Military District of Ohio and Relating Papers (Acts of 1788, 1803, and 1806), 1788-1806," Record Group 49. Online at *Ancestry* under the title "U.S., War Bounty Land Warrants, 1789-1858."

National Archives, *Research in the Land Entry Files of the General Land Office*, revised ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Records Administration, 2009). Digitally available at <https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/ref-info-papers/rip114.pdf>.

State Specific Bounty Land

Background

Massachusetts Historical Commission, "Town Reconnaissance Survey Reports" (<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/mhc/preservation/survey/town-reports.htm>).

Massachusetts

Use the *FamilySearch* database "Land deeds, revolutionary war soldiers, Massachusetts, Mars Hill, book 1, 1829-1884" FHL 5656090.

(<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/1881411?availability=Family%20History%20Library>).

See also *Digital Maine Repository* for location of land- (<https://digitalmaine.com/>).

Maine

Maine Land Office, "Certificate Receipts" (2017). Maine Land Office. 1017.

https://digitalmaine.com/revolutionary_war_me_land_office/1017/

Revolutionary War Land Grant and Pension Applications. https://digitalmaine.com/revolutionary_war/

New York

Pierce, Grace M. "The Military Tract of New York State," *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Jan. 1909):15-22. Digital versions at [Internet Archive](https://www.archive.org/details/newyorkgenealog040newy/page/21/mode/1up?view=theater) – free

<http://archive.org/details/newyorkgenealog040newy/page/21/mode/1up?view=theater>

The balloting book, and other documents relating to military bounty lands, in the State of New York, Tompkins Public Library <https://www.tcpl.org/node/5244>

Pennsylvania

Archives site <https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Revolutionary-War.aspx>

Record Group 17 Records of the Land Office Donation Land Register

<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17DonationLandSeries/r17-174DonationLandRegister/r17-174MainInterface.htm>

Maryland

List of awards to Revolutionary Soldiers – Lots Westward of Fort Cumberland, 1793-1903

<https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/stagsere/se1/se1/000000/000001/html/020745-0001.html> Not searchable – page by page only, however, it is alphabetical.

Map of military tracts <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3843g.ct000794/?r=0.603,0.069,0.479,0.352,0>

Virginia

Wilson, Samuel, *Catalogue of Revolutionary soldiers and sailors of the Commonwealth of Virginia to whom land bounty warrants were granted by Virginia for military services in the War for Independence* (Baltimore: Southern Book Company, 1953) for Kentucky warrants.

Warrants, certificates and applications: *Library of Virginia* – search by name. Or see *FamilySearch* Virginia Bounty Warrants 1779-1860

(<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/414179?availability=Family%20History%20Library>) for clearer copies of the same material.

Kentucky Secretary of State for searchable database <https://web.sos.ky.gov/land/revwar.aspx>.

Virginia Military District lands of Ohio ; indices,

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/758280?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

North Carolina

Warrants: *Ancestry* database “North Carolina and Tennessee, U.S., Revolutionary War Land Warrants, 1783-1843”

Location: *Ancestry* database “Tennessee, U.S. Early Land Registers 1778-1927,” for the location of the land.

South Carolina

South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Record and Image Search see <https://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/>

Georgia

Georgia Archives Virtual Vault - <https://vault.georgiaarchives.org/>

“Georgia, Headright and Bounty Land Records, 1783-1909,” searchable database at *FamilySearch* <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1914217>

Crown Land

The British government distributed land in Canada as a reward for military service as well as refugees fleeing from the American colonies.

The Process

- Petitions were submitted that stated whether the Loyalist was a soldier or supported the British in some other way.
- Petitions could be submitted by the children of the Loyalist, including married daughters. If the applicant’s petition was approved, the claimant was provided with a ticket with the township and lot # of the land they were awarded.

Where to Find the Records?

- Land grant petitions for Lower Canada (Quebec) and Upper Canada (Ontario) can be found on the Library and Archives Canada website.
- Land records for New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island are held at the provincial level. Various indexes can be found online:
 - New Brunswick
 - Land Petitions (1783-1918) and Land Grants (1784-1997) is available on the New Brunswick archives website
 - Nova Scotia
 - Nova Scotia Land Papers 1765-1800 is digitized and available on the Nova Scotia archives website
 - Prince Edward Island
 - Master Name Index is located on the Prince Edward Island Genealogical Society website as a searchable database. Entries include references to crown land grants.

Canada

General

_____. *The Loyalist Gazette* (Toronto, Ontario: United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada, 1963-Present)

Allen, Robert S., *The Loyal Americans: The Military Role of the Loyalist Provincial Corps and Their Settlement in British North America, 1775-1784* (Ottawa, Ontario: National Museums of Canada, 1983).

Bunnell, Paul J., *Research Guide to Loyalist Ancestors: A Directory to Archives, Manuscripts, and Published Sources* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1990).

Fitzgerald, Keith E., *Loyalist Lists: Over 2000 Loyalist Names and Families from the Haldimand Papers* (Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Genealogical Society, 1984).

New Brunswick

Index to Land Petitions: Original Series 1783-1918 -

<https://archives.gnb.ca/Search/RS108/default.aspx?culture=en-CA&letter=A>

Index to New Brunswick Land Grants, 1784-1997 - <https://archives.gnb.ca/Search/RS686/?culture=en-CA>

Loyalist Collection at the University of New Brunswick - <https://loyalist.lib.unb.ca/>

Provincial Archives of New Brunswick - <https://archives.gnb.ca/Archives/?culture=en-CA>

Wright, Esther Clark, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Wolfville, Nova Scotia: E.C. Wright, 1955).

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia Land Papers 1765-1800 - <https://archives.novascotia.ca/land-papers/>

Nova Scotia Archives - <https://archives.novascotia.ca/>

Ontario

Land Petitions of Upper Canada - <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/land/land-petitions-upper-canada-1763-1865>

Merriman, Brenda Dougall *United Empire Loyalists: A Guide to Tracing Loyalist Ancestors in Upper Canada* (Campbellville, Ontario: Global Heritage Press, 2006).

Upper Canada Petitions for Land Grants and Leases, 1791-1867 -

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2186363>

Prince Edward Island

Master Name Index (hosted by Prince Edward Island Genealogical Society) - <https://peigs.ca/search-records/>

Public Archives and Records Office (Prince Edward Island) - <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/service/search-public-archives-material-online>

Quebec

Land Petitions of Lower Canada - <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/land/land-petitions-lower-canada-1764-1841>

Lower Canada Land Petitions and Related Records, 1637-1842 - <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/500672>

Watt, Gavin K., *Loyalist Refugees: Non-Military Refugees in Quebec 1776-1784* (Milton, Ontario: Global Heritage Press, 2014).