

# ***Discover Your Revolutionary Roots: Researching Your Patriot Ancestors***

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There are many resources for researching Revolutionary War soldiers and their families. This lecture and handout will review many resources to aid in learning about the life of a soldier during the war for independence. Using vital records, military records, and countless other records, we will explore the different paths and methods of uncovering your ancestor's stories.

## ***Events leading to the Revolution***

Debts incurred by the British Crown after the Seven Years' War and the French and Indian War prompted the British to raise revenue from their colonies. In turn, the British government taxed the thirteen colonies, e.g., Revenue or Sugar Act of 1764, Stamp Act of 1765, Townshend Acts of 1767. Met with wide disapproval in the colonies, these forms of taxation helped to sow the seeds for independence. The Tea Act of 1773 was passed to subdue financial difficulties of the East India Company, which allowed the company to avoid a tax and to sell the tea at a reduced rate in the colonies. Outrage led to the Boston Tea Party. To punish Massachusetts, Coercive Acts were passed, which closed the port of Boston and revoked the Massachusetts charter. A quartering act was also included, which required colonists to provide food and housing for British troops.

The First Continental Congress met in September 1774, where the Articles of Association were adopted, as well as the ban on the importation and consumption of British goods. Many local committees were established to enforce the Association and ban. Those found guilty of subversion were publicly slandered and renounced. The Articles of Association were seen as a catalyst in the formation of two groups: those supporting the patriot cause and those against, or Whigs versus Tories.

## ***The Revolution by the Numbers***

- About 231,000 soldiers served in the Continental Army
- About 145,000 soldiers served in the Colonial Militia
- Over 22,000 British soldiers were dispatched to North America for use in the British War Effort
- About 25,000 Loyalists Soldiers served in the conflict
- Roughly 12,000 French soldiers and sailors fought alongside the colonial army
- Nearly 30,000 Hessian soldiers fought alongside the British Army

## **Step #1 – Determine if he fought**

Perhaps you have a family story that an ancestor fought in the Revolutionary War. How do you know this is true? First, consider the age of your ancestor. If he was born between 1735 and 1760 and living in 1775–1776, he may have served. Typically, a Revolutionary War soldier was between the ages of 18 to 35, although a few were younger and a few were older.

If you have an ancestor of the right age living during the Revolutionary War, note his colony of residence, and, if he survived the war, which state he lived in after the war. Then take the next step and consult the records. Use Vital records and other primary and secondary sources to compile what you already know. In addition to oral traditions or family relics you may have, local cemeteries can be a great place to find clues that might indicate Revolutionary War Service. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is there a gravestone for your ancestor?
- Is there a flag marker?
- Is there an SAR marker on the right grave? The first SAR grave marker was placed in 1923. Since then, the Sons of the American Revolution have been placing markers on the graves of known veterans of the American Revolution.

*TIP: Markers and flags can be moved by mistake! Verify any clues with records and other documentation.*

## **Step # 2 – Research**

A surprising number of options exist for researching your Revolutionary War ancestor. You may find information in published compilations and accounts, as well as original records.

A helpful resource to get started with locating your Revolutionary War ancestor is [Locating your Revolutionary War Ancestor: A Guide to the Military Records](#) by James C. Neagles and Lila L. Neagles, online at FamilySearch.org. This guide opens with descriptions of the War's military organizations, the Militia, the Continental Line, the Navy, and the Marines. It then lists the battles of the war and moves into a detailed discussion of key military records.

1. Start with Eric Grundset's state-by-state source guide compilations (*see Resources below*).
2. Review go-to sources (*see below for more information*):
  - Muster Rolls
  - Quartermaster Rolls
  - Pension Files
  - Journals & Diaries
  - 1840 Census of Pensioners
  - Correspondence
  - Published genealogies and town histories
  - State Compilations
  - Newspapers
  - Maps

### 3. Going from Published Accounts to Primary Sources

- Published Accounts to Muster Rolls
- Go beyond abstracts and dissecting Pension Files
- Other State Compilations, such as *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors in the Revolution* or *Record of service of Connecticut Men* (see below under Resources). These volumes list rolls of soldiers.

### Compiled Genealogies and Town Histories

Although rarely cited, published genealogies and town histories, popular during the 19th century, can provide clues to the service and stories of your veteran ancestors. Many are now out of copyright and available digitally at several sites, including:

- <https://www.hathitrust.org/>
- <https://books.google.com/>
- <https://archive.org/index.php>
- <https://books.familysearch.org>
- <http://library.si.edu/digital-library>

### Muster Rolls

During the American Revolution, muster rolls were prepared by the commanding officer of each company of a regiment for the express purpose of paying the officers and soldiers. These records give great insight into the dates a soldier served and the experiences they might have had. Many have been digitized and are available on FamilySearch.org.

### Compiled Service Records

Compiled Service Records record information about a soldier extracted by clerks in the War Department from muster rolls, regimental returns, hospital rolls, and other records. These are extracted from the original records and can give a great overview of a soldier's service during the American Revolution. They can provide:

- Name of soldier
- Rank, regiment, and commanding officer
- State from which served
- Date of commission or enlistment
- Term of enlistment, e.g., 3 months, 1 year
- Pay records

“United States Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775–1783” may be found at:

- [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org)
- [Fold3.com](https://www.fold3.com)
- [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

*TIP: Adopt the Regiment! Consider using the steps we have discussed to examine pension files, journals, and diaries of men who fought with your ancestor. The details in the letters, journals, diaries and pension files may add more detail to the story you already know from researching records.*

*TIP: Look for Diaries of fellow veterans at local repositories or online through Archive Grid:*

<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

## **Step #3 - Learn About Pensions**

1. Pension timeline
  - **1776:** Half pay for officers and men disabled in the service and incapable of earning a living.
  - **1780:** Half pay for 7 yrs. To widows and orphans of officers.
  - **1806:** Pensions allowed to veterans of State troops and militia for the first time.
  - **1818:** Pensions for life based on a period of 9 mos. or until the end of the war.
  - **1820:** Certified inventories of pensioner's estate and income were required.
  - **1832:** Pensions granted to those with service less than 6 mos.
  - **1838:** Widows were authorized pensions for 5 yrs. if they had married the veteran before 1794.
  - **1848:** Widows were authorized pensions for life if they had married the veteran before 1800.
  - **1853:** All widows restrictions were eliminated.
  - **1869:** Daniel F. Bakeman last pensioner dies.
  - **1878:** Widows authorized pensions for life if the veteran only served 2 weeks.
  - **1906:** Esther (Sumner) Damon the last widow to collect a pension dies in Vermont.
2. Review pension abstracts, online pension files (fold3.com), and final payment vouchers
3. 1840 Census of Pensioners (Ancestry.com)

## **Resources**

### Websites

ArchiveGrid: <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

AmericanAncestors.org-

- Digital Library & Archives: <https://digital.americanancestors.org/>
- Revolutionary Roots website: <https://revolutionaryroots.americanancestors.org/>

Ancestry.com

- Massachusetts, U.S. Soldiers and Sailors in the Revolutionary War: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7726/>
- Revolutionary War Pension Census, 1840: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7678/>

FamilySearch.org

- Muster Rolls of the Revolutionary War, 1767-1833 (Massachusetts): <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/746935?availability=Family%20History%20Library>
- Muster/payrolls, and various papers (1763-1808) of the Revolutionary War (Mass. and R.I.): <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/729681?availability=Family%20History%20Library>
- New Hampshire Revolutionary War Records: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1880940>
- FamilySearch Wiki: <https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en>
- Published state rosters under "[United States Rosters of Revolutionary War Soldiers and Sailors, 1775-1783.](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Rosters_of_Revolutionary_War_Soldiers_and_Sailors_1775-1783)"

Findagrave: <https://www.findagrave.com/>

Fold3: <https://www.fold3.com>

Genealogybank Newspapers: <https://www.GenealogyBank.com>

Library of Congress: Revolutionary War Maps:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/armhtml/armhome.html>

Valley Forge Muster Roll Project: <http://valleyforagemusterroll.org/>

Various websites for Revolutionary War History: <http://www.americanrevolution.org>

### Hereditary Societies

- National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) <https://www.dar.org/>
- National Society Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) <https://www.sar.org/>
- National Society Children of the American Revolution (CAR) <https://www.nscar.org/>
- General Society of the Sons of the Revolution (SR) <https://sr1776.org/>
- Society of the Cincinnati <https://www.societyofthecincinnati.org/>
- Daughters of the Cincinnati <https://daughters1894.org/>

Watch an archived webinar: Applying to Revolutionary War Lineage Societies

<https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/applying-revolutionary-war-lineage-societies>

### Suggested Books

Grundset, Eric G., *Connecticut in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).

Grundset, Eric G., et al. *Forgotten Patriots – African American and American Indian Patriots of the Revolutionary War: A Guide to Service, Sources, and Studies* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.). Available as a free download here:

[https://www.dar.org/sites/default/files/media/library/DARpublications/Forgotten\\_Patriots\\_ISBN-978-1-892237-10-1.pdf](https://www.dar.org/sites/default/files/media/library/DARpublications/Forgotten_Patriots_ISBN-978-1-892237-10-1.pdf)

Supplement:

[https://www.dar.org/sites/default/files/media/library/DARpublications/Forgotten\\_Patriots\\_Supplement\\_2008-2001\\_ISBN-978-1-892237-13-2.pdf](https://www.dar.org/sites/default/files/media/library/DARpublications/Forgotten_Patriots_Supplement_2008-2001_ISBN-978-1-892237-13-2.pdf)

Grundset, Eric G., *Georgia in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).

Grundset, Eric G., *New York in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).

Grundset, Eric G., *North Carolina in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).

Grundset, Eric G., *Pennsylvania in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).

- Grundset, Eric G., *Rhode Island in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).
- Grundset, Eric G., *South Carolina in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).
- Grundset, Eric G., *Virginia in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).
- Grundset, Eric G., *America's Women in the Revolutionary Era 1760-1790: A History Through Bibliography* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution: Washington, D.C.).

More info about the above at: <https://www.dar.org/library/research-guides/dar-publications>

### ***Bibliography of Additional Sources:***

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- Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History* (New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Company, 1903).
- Francis Bernard Heitman, *Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army During the War of the Revolution, April 1775 to December 1783* (Washington, D.C.: Rare Book Shop Publishing Co., 1914).
- Charles H. Lewis, *Cut Off: Colonel Jedediah Huntington's 17<sup>th</sup> Continental (Conn.) Regiment at the Battle of Long Island August 27, 1776* (Westminster, Md.: Heritage Books, 2009)
- Louis F. Middlebrook, *History of Maritime Connecticut During the American Revolution, 1775-1783, 2 Vols.* (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1925).
- Mary Beth Norton, *1774: The Long Year of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 2020).
- Henry Phelps Johnston, *Record of Service of Connecticut Men in the I. War of the Revolution, II. War of 1812, III. Mexican War* (Hartford, Conn.: Connecticut Adjutant-General's Office, Conn. General Assembly, 1889).
- Henry Phelps Johnston, *Yale and Her Honor Roll in the American Revolution* (New York, N.Y.: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1888).
- J. Michael Phelps, Ed., *Biographies of Original Members and Qualifying Officers: Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Connecticut, 3 Volumes* (Boston, Mass.: Newbury Street Press, 2023).
- Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates, Vol. SIV, 1756-1760, Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes of 1756-1760* (Boston, Mass.: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1968).
- Charles R. Smith, *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1975).