

From Tyranny to Freedom: Irish Contributions to the American Revolution

Melanie McComb, Senior Genealogist, melanie.mccomb@americanancestors.org

Historical Context

- Early historical scholarship on the American revolution painted the average soldier as of British descent, or Anglo-Saxon, and a yeoman (small-scale farmer who owned their own land)
- The Irish were viewed by many historians as mercenaries, like the Hessians. This was mostly due to their previous participation in foreign armies and the Napoleonic Wars.
- Intelligence gained from General Lee of the Continental Army, who shared with Major General Robertson of the British Army that “half the rebel army were from Ireland.”
- Historians like Thomas J. Fleming helped share the research that the Irish made up nearly half of the Continental Army, with a heavy concentration in colonies like New Jersey and Pennsylvania.
- The Irish consisted of the Catholics who were largely illiterate and indentured servants, and the Scots Irish, who enjoyed a higher social status and literacy levels. The Scots Irish were Presbyterians.
- Hundreds of years of tyranny contributed to many Irish voluntarily enlisting against England. These included several bloody campaigns like Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Oliver Cromwell’s conquest of Ireland in 1649, persecution against Catholics as seen with the Penal Laws, and risking being impressed (forcibly recruited) into the Royal Naval service.

Recruitment in the British Army

- Recruiters targeted poor Irish laborers, unemployed, and Catholics in Ireland and within the American colonies
- Areas like Limerick were heavily targeted
- 62nd Regiment of Foot was stationed in Ireland before the war. They were heavily recruited from Ireland in 1776
- Benefits of joining the British Army included the following:
 - Cash bounties
 - Regular Pay
 - Food
 - Clothing
 - Opportunities for promotion
 - Education within regiments
 - Eligibility for pension
 - Relief from legal action for criminals and deserters
 - Post-war land grants in Canada

- Two specific regiments were raised consisting solely of Irish soldiers:
 - Roman Catholic Volunteers (1777-1778) - guarded the British Army's baggage trains. Eighty members were merged with the Volunteers of Ireland when the regiment was disbanded.
 - Volunteers of Ireland – AKA 2nd American Regiment or 105th Regiment of Foot. They primarily fought in Southern Theater at battles such as Siege of Charleston (1780), Battle of Camden (1780), the Battle of Hobkirk's Hill (1781), and the Battle of Eutaw Springs (1781).
 - Both regiments were raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and were sent to New York.

Recruitment in the Continental Army

- Benefits of joining the Continental Army included the following:
 - Cash bounties
 - Regular Pay
 - Food
 - Clothing
 - Bounty land
- Irish Regiments
 - Pennsylvania Line “Line of Ireland” - included multiple regiments such as 1st Pennsylvania Regiment, 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment
 - 3rd New York Regiment “The Ulster Regiment”
 - Many of the soldiers were composed of Scots Irish men from the Province of Ulster in Ireland

Military Records of the Patriots

Compiled Military Service Records – contains abstracted details from the original muster rolls, pay rolls, etc. Contents included the following:

- Name
- Unit
- Period of Service
- Muster rolls
- Pay rolls
- Hospitalization and prisoner of war rolls (if applicable)
- Index available at <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1849623>
- Images available on Fold3.com
- TIP: The volume and page # on the muster roll index cards can be used to help you find the original muster rolls.

Muster Rolls

- A list or return of all troops, including officers and soldiers, present or accounted for on muster day.
- Soldiers would respond at roll call when their names were read aloud.

- Muster rolls often contain the date when a soldier joined or left a military unit (including if a soldier deserted).
- United States Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783 - <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2068326>
- Also available on Fold3.com

Pension Records

- Three types of pension files:
 - Survivor Pensions (Veterans)
 - Widow Pensions (Spouse of Veteran)
 - Rejected Pensions
- United States, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Applications, 1800-1900 - <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1417475>
- Also available through National Archives catalog - Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Based on Revolutionary War Service, ca. 1800–ca. 1912 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/300022>
- Pension Roll of 1835 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60514/>
- Pension Census of 1840 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7678/>
- U.S., Revolutionary War Pensioners, 1801-1815, 1818-1872 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1116/>

Bounty Land

- To entice soldiers to fight, the Continental Congress in 1776 promised land in exchange for service
- After the war, states had to cede land to federal government
- Competing land claims among states
- Not all states awarded bounty land. The following did NOT:

○ New Hampshire	○ Delaware
○ Rhode Island	○ Connecticut
○ New Jersey	○ Republic of Vermont
- There were several bounty land acts passed to award land for military service, 1788, 1803, 1806, 1850, 1855
- In 1788, soldiers were allowed to sell/assign their award to someone else. These assignees are often seen through the Bureau of Land Management web site on the patents showing the original recipient and the person who holds the final patent.
- Information about land received under these acts is often combined in Revolutionary War pension files, if applicable.

- Eligibility:
 - Unit: Continental line
 - Rank: Soldier or non-commissioned officer
 - Duration: Minimum three years of service
 - Assignment Allowed: No (changed in 1788)
 - State Application Allowed: Yes
- Steps:
 - Application
 - Warrant
 - Survey
 - Patent
 - Possession
- Bureau of Land Management – <https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov>
- Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49315/>

British Military Records

- “C” Series, 1757-1899, Located at the National Archives of Canada – microfilmed copies of the original rolls at National Archives in Kew, England
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/397529>
- UK, Royal Hospital Chelsea Pensioner Admissions and Discharges, 1715-1925 -
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60917/>
- UK, Royal Hospital Chelsea Pensioner Soldier Service Records, 1760-1920 -
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61068/>

Strategies for Identifying Irish Origins

- “Military Records – look for pension affidavits from the soldier (patriot), and Chelsea pensioner service and disability records (British Army)
- Court records – testimony given in their place of residence may note their birthplace. Many records are held at the county level on FamilySearch.
- Crown land grants – petitions often state birthplace and prior residence in the American colonies.
- UELAC (United Empire Loyalists Association of Canada) Directory – alphabetical directory of Loyalists who settled in Canada before 1783 with details on their birthplace, prior residence in American colonies, known details about their family, and sources including references to military service, oath of allegiance, etc.
 - The directory can be accessed at <https://uelac.ca/loyalist-directory>
- FAN Club – research the extended family, associates, and neighbors
 - Many brothers served in the military together
- Cluster Research – research the community where they settled to identify origins. The name of the township may be a clue to origins back in Ireland.

- DNA testing – identify living male descendants to take a Y-DNA test. Many family history associations around specific surnames have projects where you can upload results to.

Published Sources

Fleming, Thomas J., *Washington's Secret War: The Hidden History of Valley Forge* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2005)

Greenwalt, Phillip S., "Soldier Pay in the American Revolution: How Much Money Did the Average Continental Army Soldier Earn During the Revolutionary War?" 1 June 2021, American Battlefield Trust, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/soldier-pay-american-revolution>

Haltigan, James, *The Irish in the American Revolution And Their Early Influence in the Colonies* (Washington, D.C.: Patrick J. Haltigan, 1908). Available online at <https://archive.org/details/irishinamericanr00halt>.

Neimeyer, Charles P., *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York, New York: University Press, 1996)

O'Connor, R.C., "The Irish Element in America," *American Irish Historical Society*, Vol. 9, 1910, pp. 451-462. Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015039328722&seq=1>.

Tucker, Philip Thomas, *How the Irish Won the American Revolution: A New Look at the Forgotten Heroes of America's War of Independence* (New York, New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2015)

Ward, Harry, *The War for Independence and the Transformation of American Society* (London: University College London Press, 1999)

Archived Education Programs

Faith and Family: Tracing the Religious Roots of Ireland's Past by Rhonda R. McClure - <https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/faith-and-family-tracing-religious-roots-irelands-past>

Clues of Service: Determining the Military Service of Your Ancestors by David Allen Lambert - <https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/clues-service-determining-military-service-your-ancestors>