

Drums, Diaries, and Duty: The Role of Children in Revolutionary America

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Historical Context

- English common law, which was based on case law and precedent, considered anyone under the age of 21 years old to be a minor.
- Children in colonial America started apprenticeships in a trade as young as 12 years old. Boys were afforded more opportunities, though at least 40% became farmers. Girls trained to be domestic servants.
- Children were “bound out” when they were impoverished and/or orphaned and stayed in service to someone until the age of 21 for boys and 18 for girls.
- Indentured servants had a fixed contract with a set of rules they had to obey.
- These records may be found in town records and court records. There is not one centralized place to find indentured servant agreements.
- Newspaper advertisements were used to spread the word about local opportunities to learn a specific trade.

Recruitment in the Military

- Young boys, as young as 10 years old, served as military musicians with their regiments. They translated complex commands by distinct rhythms and served as the “alarm clock” for the regiment to wake up, do chores, eat meals, and end work for the day.
- Newspaper advertisements were also used to find good drummers and fifers.
- Military recruiters rarely asked for proof of age. Before the Revolutionary War, boys needed to be at least 16 years old to serve in the local militia (except Pennsylvania and Delaware where it was 18 years old).
- Serving in the Continental Army afforded opportunities for boys with no land, who were single, and had visions of military glory. This was very appealing for poorer teenagers who were apprentices and indentured servants.
- The Continental Congress instituted a 24 hour grace period in January 1776 to allow a soldier under 21 years old to discharge from the army. They would be required to return any bounty money and equipment.
- By November 1776, Congress set guidelines that recruiters should enlist men who were at least 16 years old. The grace period was abandoned.

- Teenagers under the age of 16 years old required parental permission. It was a common practice for teenagers to serve with their fathers, older brothers, or other older male relatives. The Continental Army issued age certification letters for underage boys.

Military Records

- 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 - <https://www.fold3.com/publication/470/us-revolutionary-war-service-records-1775-1783>
- 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 muster roll is 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).
- TIP: Not all Revolutionary War rolls of soldiers contain age. Additional research is needed to verify you have the correct person, including pension records, vital records, etc.
- United States Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783 - <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2068326>
- Available on Fold3.com - <https://www.fold3.com/publication/469/us-revolutionary-war-rolls-1775-1783>

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/>

Spies

- Children were used as couriers to send messages through British lines
- They used codes, invisible ink, and hid messages
- They gathered intelligence on British troop movements and counted their weapons
- Spy Letters of the American Revolution hosted by the William L. Clements Library at University of Michigan - <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution>

Boycotts

- Children joined their parents in boycotting British goods, including tea and textiles
- They pledged to wear homespun clothes and brewed herbal teas.
- Spinning bees were held as social gatherings, consisting of women and young girls, spinning yarn for long hours. The amount of thread and yarn produced was published in the newspapers.
- The “Liberty Boys,” organized by the Sons of Liberty participated in mob enforcement by intimidating merchants (who were known Loyalists) and customs officials by throwing items at them and harassing them in the streets.

Online Resources at AmericanAncestors.org

Early American Newspaper Series I – available through partner databases with American Ancestors membership - <https://www.americanancestors.org/search/partner-databases>

Digital Library and Archives Revolutionary War Manuscripts collection - <https://digital.americanancestors.org/digital/collection/p15869coll22>

Revolutionary Roots – <https://revolutionaryroots.americanancestors.org>

Archived webinar: “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>

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