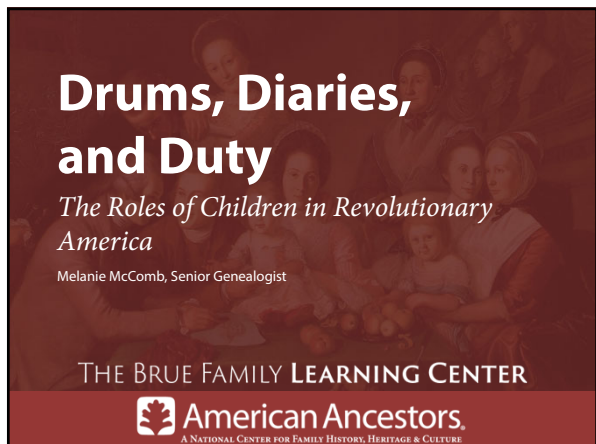




Drums, Diaries, and Duty

The Roles of Children in Revolutionary America

Melanie McComb, Senior Genealogist

THE BRUE FAMILY LEARNING CENTER

 **American Ancestors.**
A NATIONAL CENTER FOR FAMILY HISTORY, HERITAGE & CULTURE



Meet today's presenter



Melanie McComb
Senior Genealogist



OVERVIEW

- **Presentation** (50 mins.)
 - Historical Background
 - Military Service (including spies)
 - Boycotts and Mob Enforcement
 - Online Resources
 - Published Resources (including diaries)
 - Notable Children of the Revolution
- **Q&A** (10-15 mins.)

Historical Background

English Common Law

- Based on case law and precedent instead of a codified set of laws
- Anyone under 21 years old was considered a minor

Apprentices and Indentured Servants

- 12 years old - typical age when a child would start an apprenticeship.
- Boys had opportunities to learn many different trades, although over 40% were bound out to learn husbandry (farming).
- Girls were overwhelmingly indentured for only one occupation: domestic servitude.
- Records are decentralized and may be found in town records and court records

Apprentices and Indentured Servants (Cont'd)

- Children could be "bound out" to local individuals until they reached adulthood
 - 18 for girls
 - 21 for boys
- Under an indenture contract, the child was provided with food, clothing, shelter, and training in a trade
- There was a fixed end date for the contract
- The Boston Overseers of the Poor records show that between 1756 and 1806 over 1,100 children were bound out.

Newspaper Advertisements

W A N T E D.
ONE or TWO likely *spy* BOYS, about 12 or 14 Years of Age, to learn the Art and Business of Paper-Manufacture. Also wanted, two or three likely YOUNG WOMEN, who understand Country Work, and will work at the cleaning and sorting of Rags, and cleaning of Paper; where good Encouragement will be given by the Subscriber, at the Paper-Mill in Norwich.
May 27, 1776. ELISHA LEFFINGWELL.

Source: Norwich Packet, 10 June 1776, Accessed via Early American Newspaper Series I

Military Service

Fifers and Drummers

- Young boys – sometimes as young as 10 years old, served as musicians and accompanied troops into battle.
- They translated complex commands (March, Load, Fire, or Retreat) into distinct rhythms
- They served as the "alarm clock" to signal when to wake up, eat meals, do chores, and end work for the day



Newspaper Advertisement

Philadelphia, June 23, 1777.
WANTED immediately, to serve in a particular corps in the Continental army, two good DRUMMERS and one FIFER. Any such, that can be properly recommended, will meet with suitable encouragement by applying to MEASE and CALDWELL.

Source: *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 24 June 1777.
 Accessed via Early American Newspaper Series I.

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Not all fifers and drummers were teenagers or young children. Adults also held these roles.

Recruitment

- Military recruiters rarely asked for proof of age
- The minimum age for militia service pre-Revolutionary War was 16 years old in all North American colonies except Pennsylvania and Delaware (where it was 18 years old)

Recruitment Cont'd

- Serving in the Continental Army opened up opportunities for poorer teenagers, including indentured servants and apprentices
- "Boys with little property, no marital ties, and visions of military glory were considered 'very proper for service'"
 - *In Pursuit of Liberty: Coming of Age in the American Revolution* by Emmy E. Werner

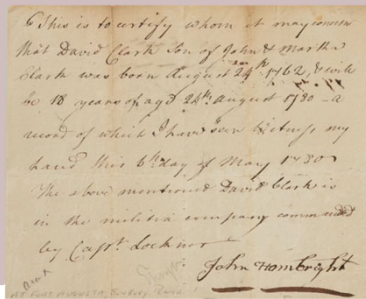
Grace Period

- In January 1776, the Continental Congress resolved that a soldier under 21 years old could discharge from the Continental Army within 24 hours after enlistment.
- The soldier would return any bounty money and equipment received.
- By November 1776, Congress set guidelines that recruiters should enlist "able-bodied men, not under sixteen years of age". The grace period was abandoned.

Parental Permission

- Teenagers under the age of 16 years old were required to obtain parental consent to serve in the army
- Many boy soldiers served with their fathers or other male relatives, some as substitutes
- They were usually between the ages of 13 and 15 years old. However, there are some examples of boys serving as young as 8 to 10 years old.

Age Certification Letter



Credit: Museum
of the American
Revolution,
2012.18.01

Contents of a Service Record

- Name
- Unit
- Period of service
- Muster rolls
- Pay rolls
- Hospitalization and prisoner of war rolls (if applicable)

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United States, Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775-1783

Service record cards of approximately 80,000 individual soldiers who served in the Revolutionary War. The cards are arranged under the designation "Continental Troops" or under a state name, then by organization, and then alphabetically by soldier's surname. Corresponds to NARA Publication M881: Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served in the American Army During the Revolutionary War, 1775-1783. Index courtesy of Fold3.

HOW TO USE THIS COLLECTION

First Names: Edmund Last Names: Baker Birth Place: City, County, State, Province, or Country Birth Year: Search More Options

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Historical Record Filtered Search Results (20)

Select: Military, United States, Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775-1783

Name	Events	Relationships
Edmund Morris Baker Principal United States, Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775-1783	Military Service from 1775 to 1783 Massachusetts, United States	
Edmund Baker Principal United States, Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775-1783	Military Service from 1775 to 1783 Massachusetts, United States	
Edmund Baker Principal United States, Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775-1783	Military Service from 1775 to 1783 New York, United States	

Search Add Ancestor Information Add Life Event Add Family Member Add Record Options

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Edmund Morris Baker

Military - United States, Revolutionary War Compiled Service Records, 1775-1783

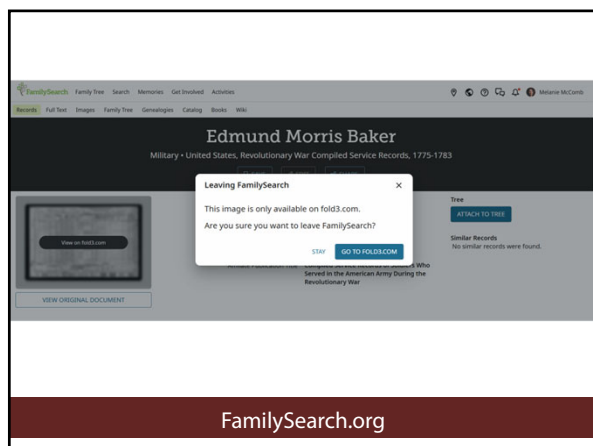
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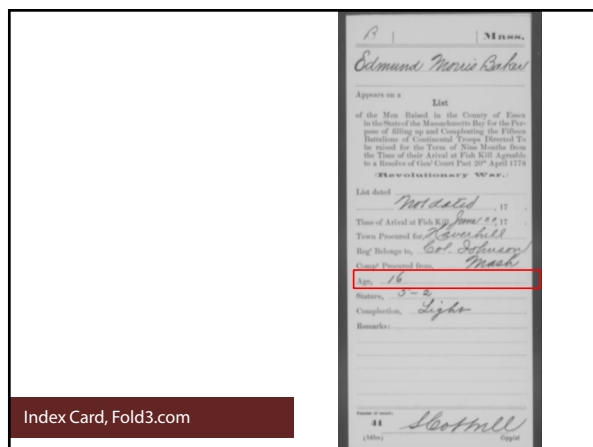
Tree ATTACH TO TREE

Similar Records No similar records were found.

Document Information

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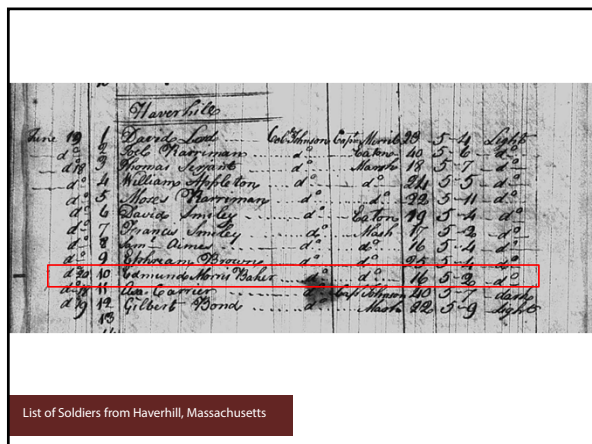
Muster Rolls

- 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, taken prisoner, or died).

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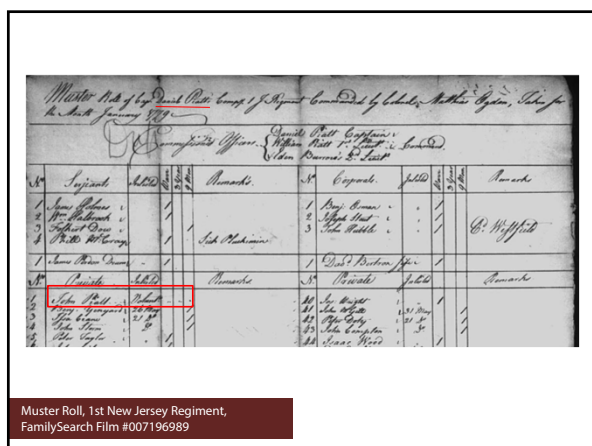
A handwritten list of soldiers from Haverhill, Massachusetts, with columns for name, rank, age, and service status. The entry for Edmund Morris Baker is highlighted with a red box.

Haverhill			
1	David Lee	Col. 20	5-4 light
2	John Harriman	1st Lt. 18	5-6 d°
3	Thomas Legrand	1st Lt. 18	5-7 d°
4	William Appleton	1st Lt. 18	5-5 d°
5	John Harriman	1st Lt. 18	5-11 d°
6	David Smiley	1st Lt. 18	5-4 d°
7	Francis Smiley	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
8	John Ames	1st Lt. 18	5-4 d°
9	William Thorne	1st Lt. 18	5-4 d°
10	Edmund Morris Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
11	Samuel Carrier	1st Lt. 18	5-7 dark
12	Gilbert Bond	1st Lt. 18	5-9 light

List of Soldiers from Haverhill, Massachusetts

[e]

Not all Revolutionary War rolls contain age. Additional research is needed to verify their age.



A handwritten muster roll for the 1st New Jersey Regiment, showing columns for name, rank, age, and service status. The entry for John Baker is highlighted with a red box.

Muster Roll, 1st New Jersey Regiment			
1	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
2	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
3	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
4	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
5	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
6	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
7	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
8	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
9	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°
10	John Baker	1st Lt. 18	5-3 d°

Muster Roll, 1st New Jersey Regiment, FamilySearch Film #007196989

Revolutionary War Pension History

- **1776:** Half pay for officers and men disabled in the service and were incapable of earning a living
- **1780:** Half pay for 7 yrs. to widows and orphans of officers
- **1806:** Pensions allowed for 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

Revolutionary War Pension History (Cont'd)

- **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.

Revolutionary War Pension History (Cont'd)

- **1853:** All widow restrictions were eliminated.
- **1878:** Widows authorized pensions for life if the veteran served a minimum of two weeks.

Types of Pensions

Survivor Pensions (Veteran)

- Indicated by an "S" on the envelope
- Could be a disability or invalid pension OR a service pension

Widow Pensions (Spouse of Veteran)

- Indicated by a "W" on the envelope

Rejected Pensions

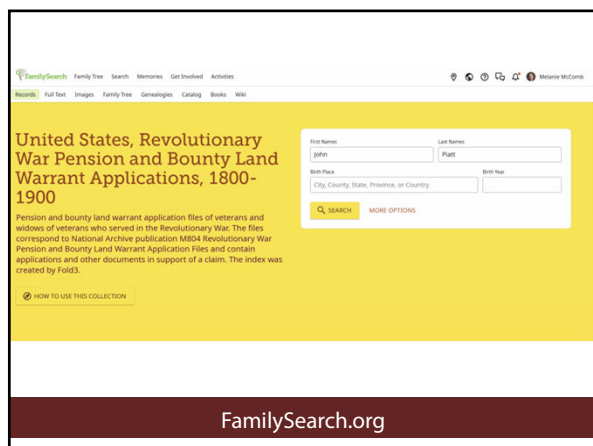
- Indicated by a "R" on the envelope

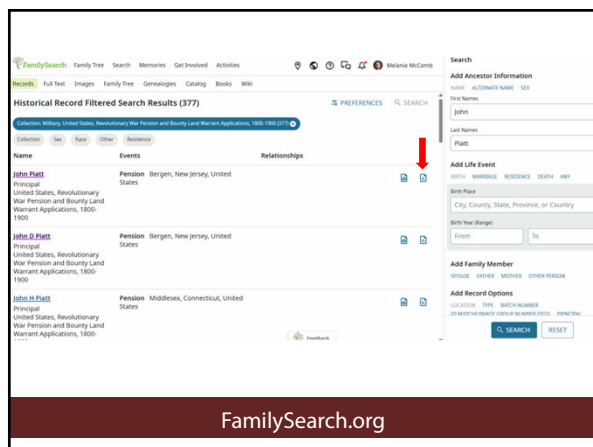
Survivor's Pension Information Collected

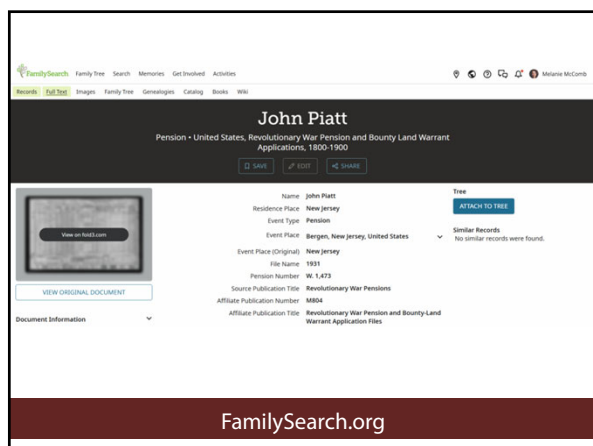
- Name
- Age
- Residence
- Letter from veteran soldier
- Affidavits from those that served with the soldier

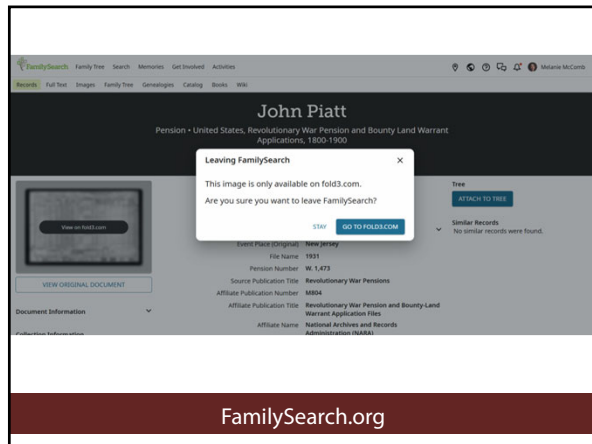
Widow's Pension Information Collected

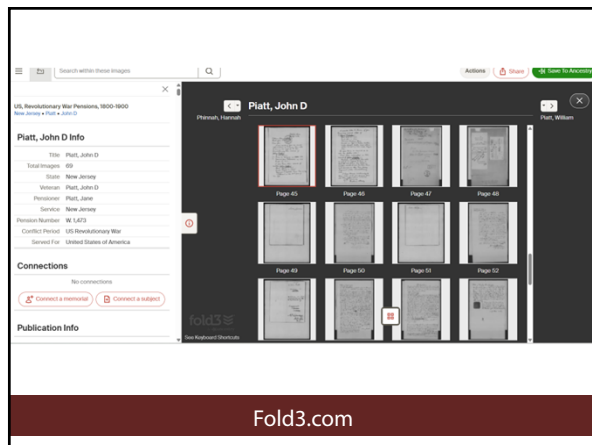
- Name (including maiden name)
- Age
- Residence
- Date and place of marriage
- Date and place of spouse's death
- Letter from widow and surviving family, including court testimony
- Affidavits from those that served with the deceased soldier

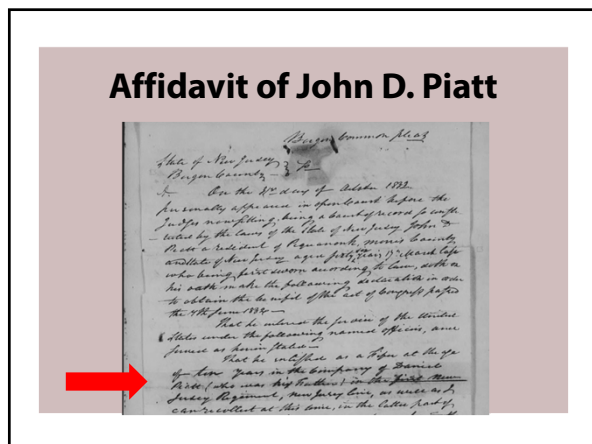












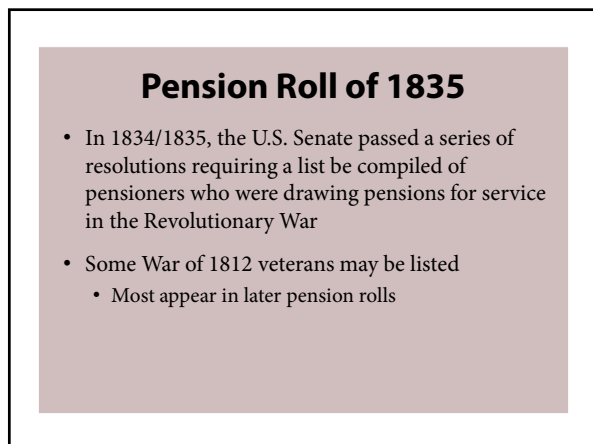




Archives.gov



Archives.gov



Pension Roll of 1835

- In 1834/1835, the U.S. Senate passed a series of resolutions requiring a list be compiled of pensioners who were drawing pensions for service in the Revolutionary War
- Some War of 1812 veterans may be listed
 - Most appear in later pension rolls

- 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

[illegible]

- During the occupation of the city of Philadelphia in 1777, William Darragh, a schoolteacher, wrote messages that his wife Lydia sewed into their son John's coat buttons
- John was only 14 years old. He wasn't stopped by the sentries while passing and re-passing through the city.
- He met his older brother Charles outside of the occupied city to deliver the messages.



Boycotts and Mob Enforcement

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

- Gatherings of women and young girls spinning yarn
- The amount of thread and yarn produced at the spinning bees was published in the newspapers



Abigail (Morse) Belcher

An Old Lady.
Mrs. Abigail Belcher, widow of the late Atherton Belcher, now residing with her son-in-law, Mr. S. Willard Wild, in Canton, near the Stoughton line, will, on the 13th of this month, have reached her one-hundredth year. Her children, three in number, are now all living, their aggregate ages being 210 years. She has contributed aid, by knitting socks, for the soldiers of the Revolution, war of 1812, and those now engaged in the war against the rebellion. A patriotic old lady! May she live to see our country again united and happy.



Courtesy of Stoughton Historical Society

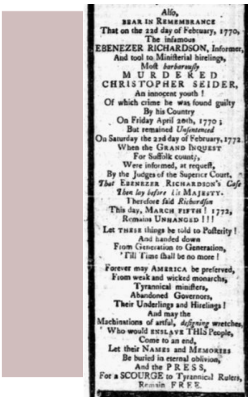
Source: *The Stoughton Sentinel*, 9 Jan. 1864

"Liberty Boys"

- Often organized by the Sons of Liberty
- Teenagers often intimidated merchants and customs officials, including throwing snowballs and other items, engaging in tarring and feathering Loyalists, etc.

Christopher Seider/Snider

- In 1770, Christopher Seider/Snider (age 11) joined a gang of boys with harassing a Loyalist merchant
- A customs official fired into the crowd and killed Christopher.
- His funeral was widely attended.



The Massachusetts Spy, 5 Mar. 1772.
Accessed via Early American
Newspaper Series I

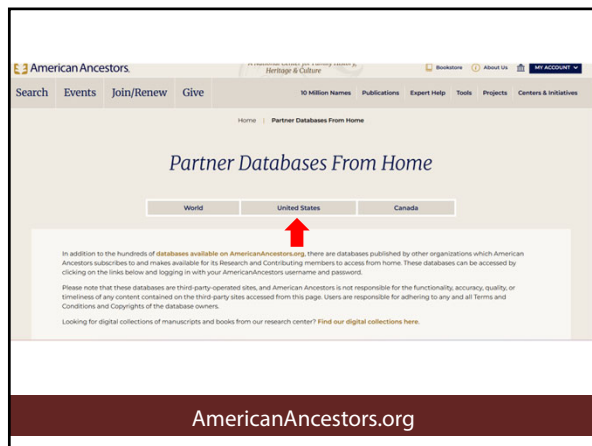
Christopher Seider/Snider (Cont'd)

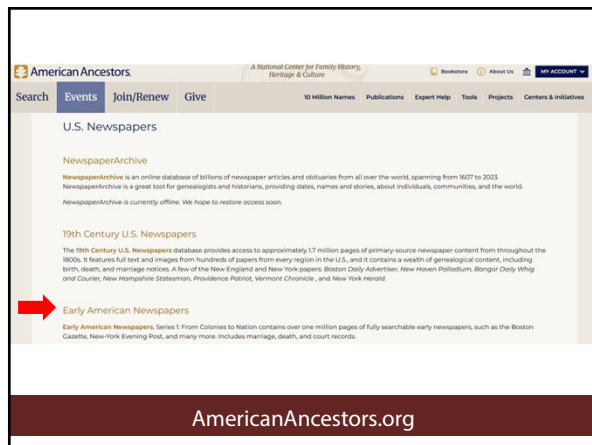
- 1st casualty of the American Revolution
- Buried in Granary Burying Ground with the victims of the Boston Massacre.



Online Resources at AmericanAncestors.org

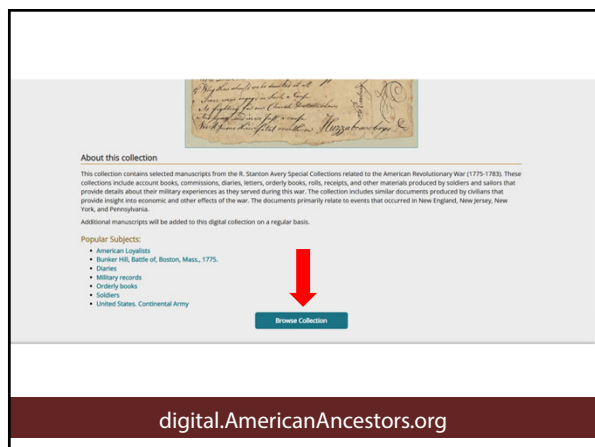








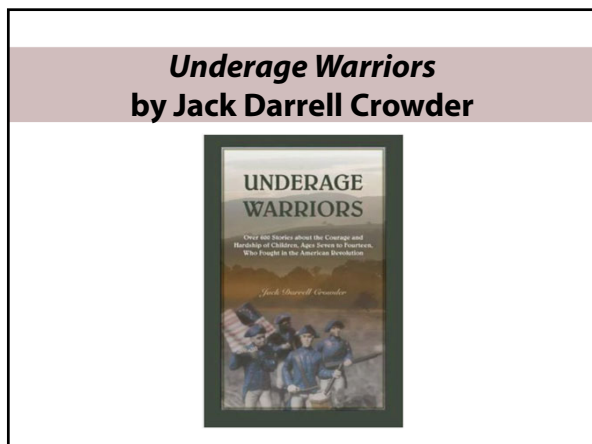












Affidavit of John Collinsworth

"In the year 1776 my brother Edmond Collinsworth went to muster in the County of Culpepper state of Virginia where there was a Lieutenant Wescot who was a recruiting officer enlisting soldiers for the term of two years in the continental volunteer companies The said Edmond enlisted and took the bounty. When he returned home and thought of what he had done he did not like it. I stated to my father that I would take his place and I did so. When the company was made up it was put under the command of Capt John Lee from Culpepper County Virginia."

Affidavit of Gaius Hitchcock

"In the spring of 1778 being then very young I believe about the 1st day of April 1778 I entered for one and half months as a waiter to Captain Bryant then stationed at Springfield Ms. I served out my full term of enlistment and was discharged. Was employed when not waiting upon Captain Bryant in preparing cartridges & ammunition & in carrying them from place where aforesaid to the armory."

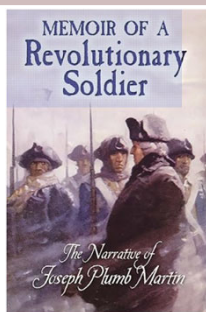
Affidavit of Horatio Jones

"I entered the service of the United States in character of a Musician being a fifer in the autumn of the year 1776...at Princeton where I remained till in the winter when being attacked by the small pox. I was removed to a Pox hospital some two miles from the college where I remained long confined with that disease."

What Was Written in a Diary?

- The weather
- Chores they completed
- People they met with
- Events that occurred in their local community
- Soldiers recorded their experiences during war including what battles, their time in camp, etc.

Joseph Plumb Martin



Joseph Plumb Martin Details

- Born in 1760 in Berkshire County, Massachusetts
- Ran away from his grandfather's home in Connecticut
- Joined the Continental Army
- Served for eight years

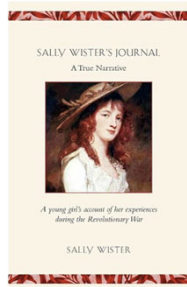
Joseph Martin's Enlistment

"So seating myself at the table, enlisting orders were immediately presented to me; I took up the pen, loaded it with the fatal charge, made several mimic imitations of writing my name, but took especial care not to touch the paper with the pen until an unlucky wight who was leaning over my should gave my hand a stroke, which caused the pen to make a woeful scratch on the paper. "O, he has enlisted," said he, he has made his mark, he is fast enough now." Well, thought I, I may as well go through with the business now as not; so I wrote my name fairly upon the indentures. And now I was a *soldier*, in name at least, if not in practice..."

Joseph Martin's Account of a Female Artillerist

"One little incident happened during the heat of the cannonade, which I was eyewitness to, and which I think would be unpardonable to mention. **A woman whose husband belonged to the artillery and who was then attached to a piece in the engagement, attended with her husband at the piece the whole time.** When in the act of reaching a cartridge and having one of her feet as far before the other as she could step, a cannon shot from the enemy passed directly between her legs without doing any other damage than carrying away all the lower part of her petticoat. Looking at it with apparent unconcern, she observed that it was lucky it did not pass a little higher, for in that case it might have carried away something else, and continued her occupation."

Sally Wister



Sally Wister Details

- 16 years old
- Quaker family
- Fled after the British occupation of Philadelphia in September 1777
- Kept a journal for her friend Deborah Norris
- Written over a nine-month period

Sally's Family Observing the Military Passing Through

"Yesterday, which was the 24th of September, two Virginia officers call'd at our house, and inform'd us that the British Army has cross'd the Schuylkill. Presently after, another person stopp'd, and confirm'd what they had said, and that Gen'l Washington and Anny were near Pottsgrove. Well, thee may be sure we were sufficiently scared; however, the road was very still till evening.

About seven o'clock we heard a great noise. To the door we all went. A large number of waggons, with about three hundred of the Philadelphia Militia. They begged for drink, and several push'd into the house. One of those that entered was a little tipsy, and had a mind to be saucy."

Sally's Family Observing the Military Passing Through Cont'd

"I then thought it time for me to retreat; so figure me (mightily scar'd, as not having presence of mind enough to face so many of the Military), running in at one door, and out another, all in a shake with fear; but after a while, seeing the officers appear gentlemanly, and the soldiers civil, I call'd reason to my aid. My fears were in some measure dispell'd tho' my teeth rattled, and my hand shook like an aspen leaf. They did not offer to take their quarters with us; so, with many blessings, and as many adieus, they marched off."

Review

1. Newspaper accounts and family stories may be a starting point for researching your family history.
2. Use published resources to locate the original documentation around a potential child soldier to verify their age, their residence, and other details.
3. Diaries can give you a window into a young person's thoughts on war and how it affected their family and community.

QUESTIONS?

Schedule a consultation
consultations@americanancestors.org

Hire Research Services
research@americanancestors.org

Upcoming Events






IN-PERSON OPEN HOUSE
August Adventures at American Ancestors
 August 4, 2026, 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM ET

AMERICAN INSPIRATION VIRTUAL AUTHOR EVENT
This Land Is Your Land: A Road Trip Through America
 Presented by Beverly Gage, Moderated by Edward L. Ayers
 August 5, 2026, 6:00 – 7:15 PM ET

ONLINE LECTURE
Conscience and Conflict: The Quaker Experience in the American Revolution
 Presented by Rhonda R. McClure
 August 15, 2026, 2:00 – 3:00 PM ET

IN-PERSON EXHIBIT
Patriots of Color
 April 23–December 31, 2026

AmericanAncestors.org/Events



