

How to Use Military Service Records for Genealogy

By Shelley K. Bishop Premium

Have you heard stories about a Revolutionary War or Civil War soldier in your family, but lack documents about him? Or maybe you don't have stories, but you wonder about your military heritage. Military service can be an important part of your family's story. Yet how do you determine whether an ancestor served in an 18th -or 19th- century war, if any records of his service exist, and where to find them?

Fortunately, the US government realized long ago that it needed a way to keep track of an individual's service—especially when it came time to pay veterans benefits. The resulting compiled military service records, or CMSRs, offer a window of opportunity to genealogists looking for information about men who served in wars prior to 1902.

This workbook will explain what information you might find in a CMSR and how to get copies. Our examples and handy worksheet will keep your search organized and help you interpret what you find. We'll also look at ways to use this new evidence to probe into other records and resources.

What's a CMSR?

A CMSR is an envelope (called a jacket) containing a set of cards that provide an overview of an individual's service in a military company. The jacket is labeled with the soldier's name, rank, military unit and a list of card numbers. The information on each card was taken from some type of original record in which the soldier's name appears, such as an enlistment book, muster roll, hospital roll, descriptive book, prison record, payment voucher or discharge. Some CMSRs, especially those of officers, also may contain personal papers.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, War Department Record and Pension Office clerks painstakingly copied information from original records onto the cards to expedite the processing of pension claims. Rather than sift through more than 500,000 rolls and books to verify a man's service, pension officials could now find what they needed in minutes. Family historians reap the same benefits today.

Once the Pension Office completed Union Civil War CMSRs, clerks did the same thing for men who'd served in the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, 19th-century Indian wars and Mexican-American War. Service records for Confederate soldiers, the Spanish-American War, and the Philippine Insurrection were created a bit later. By the time the CMSR record-keeping system was discontinued before World War I, clerks had created about 58 million cards.

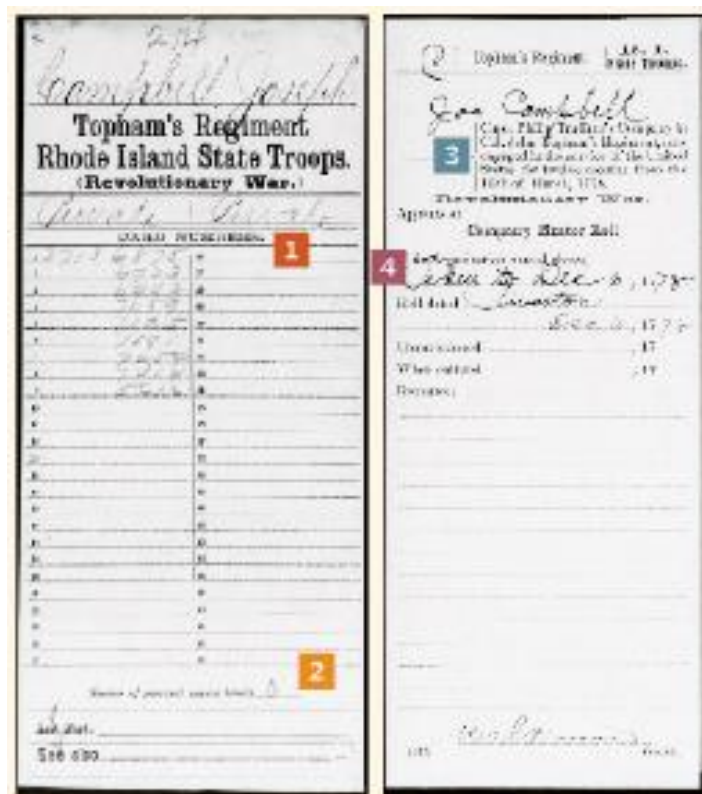
Note that this massive collection primarily covers those who served in volunteer military units, which were typically raised at the local or state level in times of war. During the Civil War, these units included men who were drafted as well as those who enlisted voluntarily. With the exception of the Revolutionary War, few CMSRs exist for men who served in the regular Army (career soldiers). All these pre-WWI service records are now held at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <[archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov)> in Washington, D.C.

How trustworthy are these records, many of which were created long after the wars were over? CMSRs are derivative sources transcribed from original rolls or books. But their information is highly reliable, because accuracy was vital to the government. Clerks took great care with the transcriptions, and original rolls rarely contain any more details about a soldier than what you'll find on CMSR cards.

Revolutionary War CMSR

1. Joseph Campbell's CMSR jacket identifies his unit and his rank of private when he entered and left. Card numbers aren't significant, but do indicate nine cards are inside.
2. No personal papers are in this file. Files of officers are more likely to contain additional papers, such as enlistment forms or casualty reports.
3. This muster roll card shows the company formed March 16, 1778, and the term of service was 12 months. We might learn more about Joseph's experiences by researching his officers.
4. Joseph was present at the muster roll taken Dec. 6, 1778, in Tiverton, RI. Researching place names can also shed light on wartime events.

Citation for this record: "Revolutionary War Service Records," digital images, Fold3 (<http://www.fold3.com>: accessed 7 Jan 2016), compiled service record of Joseph Campbell, Pvt., Topham's Reg., Rhode Island; citing NARA microfilm publication M881, roll 874.



Clues in a CMSR

The number and type of cards included in a CMSR varies from war to war and soldier to soldier. Civil War and later folders tend to be more robust than those from earlier wars. If your ancestor re-enlisted or served in two different companies during a war, he'll probably have two separate CMSRs.

In addition to soldier's rank and military unit, you might discover some or all of the following in CMSR:

- date and place enlisted
- age at enlistment
- place of birth
- physical description
- occupation
- term of enlistment
- date, location mustered into (joined) unit
- name of commanding officer
- presence at regular musters
- notations about illness, wounds, or desertion
- date mustered out (left) company or died

These bits of data can tell you a good deal about your ancestor's wartime experiences. You might find he stayed in a field hospital due to illness, or learn when he was wounded. If a man was captured by the enemy, deserted or died while in service, his file should have a reference to it. Any personal papers (documents that pertain to only one individual) tucked into the jacket will give you even more details. While service records don't generally name a soldier's parents, you may find hints to help in your search for their identities.

One note about age: A man's age when he enlisted remained his age in military records created throughout his term of enlistment. This gets confusing when someone was 23 years old when he joined up, and was still 23 when he was discharged two or three years later. Using a consistent age gave the army another means of identifying a particular man—a tactic you can use to your advantage as well.

Finding CMSRs

Depending on the war, your soldier's CMSR may be on microfilm and/or digitized online. If it's not online, you'll need to look up the name in a service records index, then find the record on microfilm or order a copy from NARA (we'll tell you how in a few minutes). Start with these steps:

Revolutionary War (1775-1783): There's good and bad news for researchers hunting for ancestors who served in this war. A century after the war ended, service records were compiled for men who served in the Continental Army, various state and local militia units, and the American naval forces. The bad news is that many records were destroyed when the British burned Washington, D.C., in 1814, and others deteriorated or were lost over the years, so not every man who served has a CMSR. The good news is that all the surviving records have been indexed, microfilmed, and digitized.

You can search the complete collection of Revolutionary War Service Records on Fold3 <www.fold3.com>. This database contains actual images of soldiers' service record jackets and cards, digitized from NARA microfilm publication M881. Revolutionary War Service Records-Navy, from NARA M880, provides the same access to sailors. For best results, be flexible with name spellings, and try using an asterisk (*) to substitute for one or more letters in question.

War of 1812 (1812-1815): During this war, many men enlisted in local or state militias for short stints (three to nine months), and some served in more than one company. The resulting CMSRs are generally thin, sometimes holding only a few cards. They're fascinating nonetheless.

Get started with the full index to War of 1812 service records, derived from NARA microfilm number M602, on Ancestry.com <ancestry.com>. To get to this or any other specific collection, go to the Card Catalog search.ancestry.com/search/cardcatalog.aspx and type the main words in the collection title into the keyword search box. Once you're in the database, enter your ancestor's name to learn his rank, company or regiment, and "roll box" where the CMSR is located at the National Archives. This war's CMSRs haven't been microfilmed or digitized. Use the information from the index to order a copy of your ancestor's file from NARA.

Indian Wars and Mexican-American War (1816-1858): With the frontier expanding rapidly, skirmishes erupted between settlers and native Indian tribes in several areas. Volunteer armies were raised for the Florida Seminole Wars, Black Hawk War, Creek Wars and other conflicts. Fold3 has digitized the index to service records for these military engagements (from NARA M694), as the Indian Wars Service Record Index. To find it, select Mexican American and Early Indian Wars on the Fold3 home page, click the Browse All link and select the index from the database list. Use the box at the top of the page to search for your ancestor, and then order his service record from the National Archives.

Fold3 has also digitized the Mexican War Service Record Index, from NARA M616. Ancestry.com's database, Compiled Military Service Records for American Volunteer Soldiers, Mexican War, 1845-1848, is another version of this same index. In addition, Fold3 has the full CMSRs for Arkansas, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas and the Mormon Battalion in its collection of Mexican War Service Records. If your relative served from another state, you'll still need to request his record from NARA.

Civil War (1861-1865): Civil War service files generally contain more information than those from earlier wars. You might see a long list of numbers on your ancestor's file jacket. Those numbers don't mean anything in research terms, but do indicate there's a lot of good stuff inside. Types of cards you'll commonly find include:

- Company muster-in roll identifies rank, age, date and place of enlistment, term of enlistment, and date and place of mustering in
- Company descriptive book gives enlistment information; color of eyes, hair and complexion; birthplace and occupation
- Company muster rolls tell whether the soldier was present for the period of time specified on the card (generally two months), along with any remarks
- Company muster-out roll identifies rank, age, date and place of the roll, date of mustering out, date last paid, and balances owed or due for clothing, equipment and bounties.
- Depending on the soldier's experiences, you also could find cards regarding hospitalization, special returns, desertion or other events. Some files contain additional papers, such as enlistment forms or casualty reports. The cards inside the jacket usually aren't in any particular order.

Union Civil War CMSRs are indexed by state, and the files for more than 20 states have been microfilmed and/or digitized. All Confederate CMSRs have been digitized. Whether your ancestor hailed from the North or the South, start with Fold3 <go.fold3.com/civilwar_records>. Scroll to the bottom of the page and click the link for Confederate or Union service records. Select Browse and choose the state where your relative lived at enlistment. Enter the name in the search box, using a middle initial if necessary to narrow the results. If the file is digitized, you'll be able to download it. If only the index card is available, order the file from the National Archives.

Civil War CMSR

1. The Company Descriptive Book shows Newel was 23 when he enlisted Aug. 6, 1862. This gives an approximate birth year of 1839. The card also states his place of birth: Gallia County, Ohio. These clues could lead to his parents' names.
2. The jacket contains several company muster roll cards. This one, for September and October 1864, reports Newel was absent from the company because he'd been hospitalized for illness since June 10. If he later applied for a pension file, it might provide more details.
3. The company muster-out roll shows Newel was discharged June 24, 1865, in Cumberland, Md. Note that his age was still 23 years. The military used the same age throughout a man's term of service as a means of identification.



Citation for this record: Compiled service record, Newel King, Pvt., Co. B, 91st Ohio Infantry; Carded Records, Volunteer Organizations, Civil War; Record Group 94: Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1782-1917, National Archives, Washington, DC.

Spanish-American and Philippine Wars (1898-1902): Service records for men in these two brief conflicts were created similarly to Civil War CMSRs. A card index for men who served in the Spanish-

American War in 1898 is on microfilm (NARA M871) and online. You'll find it at FamilySearch as the United States Index to Service Records, War with Spain, 1898 <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919583>. Unless your ancestor hailed from Florida, you'll need to order a copy of his file from NARA. Digital images of Florida Spanish-American War CMSRs are on Fold3.

The Philippine Insurrection developed in the wake of the Spanish-American War and lasted until 1902. The index to these service records, NARA M872, is not available online, nor are the records themselves. If you think your ancestor served in the Philippines, consider making a trip to the National Archives or hiring a professional researcher.

Ordering a CMSR

NARA has an online order form you can use to request a copy of your ancestor's CMSR from any of the wars listed here. Go to <archives.gov/forms> and scroll down to (Pre-WWI) Military Service Records (NATF Form 86). Select whether you want to order online or mail in the form. There's a fee of \$30, and you can choose to receive the file electronically as a PDF emailed to you, or in print via postal mail.

Follow these easy steps to order online:

1. create a NARA account, or log in if you already have one
2. enter the veteran's name (birth and death are optional)
3. for Kind of Service, select Volunteer
4. select the war he served in
5. select the state he served from
6. if you know his company or regiment, indicate it
7. provide payment and delivery information
8. expect your file to take two to three months to arrive

If you don't want to wait that long, you have a complex request, or you don't know exactly which file you need, consider hiring a professional genealogist in the Washington, D.C., area. He or she may be able to get records faster or determine which of two George Smiths is your ancestor. You can find a researcher through the Association of Professional Genealogists <www.apgen.org> or its Washington, D.C., chapter <www.ncac-apg.org> or the Board for Certification of Genealogists <bcgcertification.org>

Then again, perhaps you want to visit NARA to retrieve your ancestor's file in person. Plan ahead for your trip using the resources at <archives.gov/research>

Using CMSRs and Indexes

Indexes to service records often show more than one man of the same name from the same state. Particularly if the name is common, it can be a challenge to determine which one is your ancestor. It might be helpful to first identify the veteran in military pension records, which also name wives or other family members. The pension record will show the man's military unit, making it easy to spot his service record. Keep in mind, though, that not every man who served (or his widow) went on to receive a pension. See our pension records workbook at <shopfamilytree.com/workbook-military-pension-records>

Compare details in a service record index with your other genealogical information. Does his age in the CMSR correspond with his age in censuses? What about his location? Men typically joined units that formed close to home, often with neighbors. To find the names of units raised in a county, check local histories and consolidated state lists, such as the Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865 (online at <ehistory.osu.edu/books/official-records>). A web search on the company name or number also can help you find out where its members lived.

Once you've obtained the right CMSR, squeeze every detail out of it. Begin by sorting the cards in rough chronological order: first the muster-in roll and descriptive book cards, then the muster cards in order, followed by the muster-out card. Transcribe the information into a word document or spreadsheet to get an overview of your soldier's service.

Look for clues this process reveals. You may now know his place of birth. Use his age and date of enlistment to estimate a birth year. With these hints, look for census, church, probate and land records for that surname, which just might lead to his parents' names. If others in the company have the same last name, investigate them as possible relatives.

You may also want to delve deeper into your ancestor's wartime experiences and the battles he fought in. Look for a history of the regiment or company on sites such as InternetArchive <archive.org/details/texts>, Google Books <books.google.com> or HathiTrust <www.hathitrust.org>. Use WorldCat <www.worldcat.org> to find books in libraries. Perhaps you've discovered he was wounded, fell sick or was captured. With the date of the incident, you can determine the battle or skirmish it corresponds to. You might even find the name of a hospital or prison camp you can research.

In addition to pension files, other military records can help you piece together your ancestor's story. These include cards and papers that, for one reason or another, weren't filed with his CMSR. An entry in the bookmark section of the CMSR jacket is a good indication more documents exist. Finding them at NARA can take some expertise, but select records for a few states have been microfilmed. For an overview of military records available for each state, see <www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/United_States_Military_Records>

Learning about your ancestor's military service is exciting and enlightening. With the availability of online indexes and databases, it's easier than ever to find this piece of your family history puzzle.

Fast Facts

Records begin: 1775

Records end: 1902

Key details: Soldier's name, age, rank, military unit, dates and places of enlistment and musters, date and place of discharge; sometimes place of birth, physical description, and occupation

Where to find: National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20408, (202) 357-5000, <archives.gov>

How to order from NARA: Use NATF Form 86, available at <archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records.html>

Online availability: Fold3, Ancestry.com, FamilySearch

Search terms: Military service records, name of war

Associated records: State rosters and adjutant generals' reports, unit histories, draft records, pension records, payrolls and ledgers, lineage society applications, bounty land grants, soldiers' home records, 1890 special census of veterans and widows

Military Records Resources

Websites

- Ancestry.com: Military Records <search.ancestry.com/search/category.aspx?cat=39>
- Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database <www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>
- Cyndi's List: US Military Records <cyndislist.com/us/military/records>
- FamilySearch Wiki: US Military Service Records <www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/US_Military_Service_Records>
- FamilySearch.org: US Military Records <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list?page=1®ion=UNITED_STATES&recordType=Military>
- Findmypast <www.findmypast.com>
- Fold3 <www.fold3.com>
- Mocavo: Military Records <www.mocavo.com/records/Military-Records>
- MyHeritage: Military Records <www.myheritage.com/research/category-3000/military?s=320531021>
- National Archives NARAtions blog: Volunteer vs. Regular Army Service <narations.blogs.archives.gov/2010/01/01/family-tree-friday-volunteer-vs-regular-army-service-was-documented-differently>
- National Archives: Research Military Records <archives.gov/research/military>
- Online Military Databases and Records <www.militaryindexes.com>

Publications

- *Genealogical Resources of the Civil War Era: Online and Published Military or Civilian Name Lists, 1861-1869, and Post-War Veteran Lists* by William Dollarhide (Family Roots Publishing)
- *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives of the United States*, 3rd Ed., by Anne Eales and Robert Kvasnicka (NARA)
- *Index to Revolutionary War Service Records* by Virgil D. White (National Historical Publishing)
- *Military Service Records at the National Archives* by Trevor Plante (NARA)
- *Military Service Records: A Select Catalog of Microfilm Publications* (NARA)
- *US Military Records: A Guide to Federal & State Sources, Colonial America to the Present* by James Neagles (Ancestry, Inc.)

Tip: If you find a date your ancestor was wounded or captured, look for a history of the war to see what battle or skirmish the date corresponds to.

Tip: Look for a company raised in the county where your ancestor lived in the 1860 census to help you select which Civil War CMSR to order.

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