

War of 1812 Discharge Certificates

The War of 1812 is often called America's Second War for Independence. The immediate causes of the war were the seizure of U.S. ships and seamen by the British Navy, as well as rapid expansion of the frontier, where British intrigue was blamed for American settlers' troubles with Indians. For Britain, the war was a burdensome adjunct to its greater struggle against Napoleonic France. For genealogists today, the records created as a result of military service may help document the identities of ancestors. The discharge records discussed in this article may provide evidence of age, place of residence, and even place of birth, in addition to military service information.

During the early years of the Republic, the Regular Army was a relatively small fighting force supplemented as needed by regiments of volunteers or state militia units. When war was declared on 18 June 1812, the Regular Army consisted of about 10,000 men, half of whom were new recruits. To increase its strength, an Act of Congress of 26 June 1812 (2 Stat. 764) mandated that the Regular Army was to consist of 25 regiments of infantry, four of artillery, two of dragoons, one of riflemen, plus engineers and artificers, for a total authorized strength of 36,700 men. The Regular Army was enlarged again by an Act of Con-

gress of 29 January 1813 (2 Stat. 794-797), which authorized the army to have 52 regiments of cavalry, artillery, dragoons, and infantry. In addition to these troops, volunteer regiments and state militia also took part in the conflict.

Each Regular Army infantry regiment was recruited from a particular state (or states). Rifle, artillery, and dragoons were recruited at large. Enlistment was normally for five years but, as the war went on, the term was shortened to "for the duration of the war."

The young Republic was unready for the complexities of administering a large military. As one historian described it:

The system for paying the troops broke down from the beginning. At the start of the war privates were paid \$5 a month, non-commissioned officers \$7 to \$9, and officers \$20 to \$200. To stimulate enlistments, Congress in late 1812 raised the pay of privates and non-commissioned officers by \$4. At \$8 a month, privates still earned less than the \$10 to \$12 that unskilled laborers normally made, but as the bounty increased, army wages soared well above the civilian average.

By law army pay could not be more than two months in

arrears "unless the circumstances of the case should render it unavoidable." But even in the first year of the war, when the government had ample resources, administrative inefficiency and slow communication kept many troops from receiving their pay on time. In October 1812, men who had enlisted five months earlier "absolutely refused to march until they had recd. their pay," and other troops also mutinied for want of pay. As the war progressed, the problem of paying the troops became almost unmanageable. By the fall of 1814, army pay was frequently six to 12 months in arrears, and in some cases even more.¹

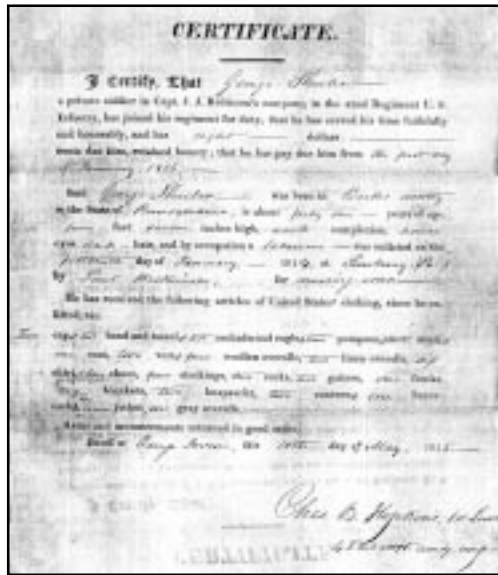
The government's failure to pay soldiers on time has helped to preserve records that would normally not be available. During the nineteenth century, soldiers discharged from the regular or volunteer armies received a discharge certificate that became their personal property; the War Department did not keep a copy. However, if the soldier was owed pay upon his discharge, he presented the discharge to the paymaster in order to collect the pay, and, as a result, the discharge became part of the War Department's records.

Thus, discharge certificates for about 2,000 soldiers who served in the Regular Army during the War

of 1812 have been preserved and have been reproduced in National Archives Microfilm Publication M1856, *Discharge Certificates and Miscellaneous Records Relating to the Discharge of Soldiers from the Regular Army, 1792–1815* (six rolls). As the title indicates, it includes both discharge certificates as well as other records that served a similar function. A small number of records pre-date the war. A complete description of M1856, including lists of the soldiers by name and by regiment, is accessible online at http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/military/1812_discharge_certificates.html.

Certificate of discharge

Most of the records in M1856 are certificates of discharge. They typically include the dates of the soldier's enlistment and discharge, the company and regiment in which he served, the amount and kinds of clothing provided to him, and the period for which he was due pay upon discharge. The discharge may also provide his place of birth, age, physical description, and occupation, so that the discharge could not be used for improper purposes in the event it was lost or stolen from the veteran. For example, the discharge of John Buntin (Capt. Samuel G. Hopkins's Troop, 2nd Light Dragoons) indicates the reason for detailing his physical description as follows: "To prevent imposition or an improper use being made of this discharge . . . be it known that the sd. John Buntin is of the following description. . . ." As an example of



Certificate of discharge for George Schuler, private, Capt. John J. Robinson's Co., 42d Infantry. M1856, Roll 5.

the complete text of a discharge certificate, here is Samuel Dawson's, a private in Capt. Samuel G. Hopkins's Troop, 2nd Light Dragoons, which states:

*Camp Near Sackets Harbor
7th December 1813*

The Bearer hereof Samuel Dawson a private in Captain Samuel G. Hopkins Troop 2nd Regiment United States Light Dragoons has served for and

during eighteen months; his term of service having expired on the 7th day of December 1813, he is entitled to an honorable discharge.

He has been paid up to the 31st day of May 1813, has returned his arms & accoutrements in good order and has received his full allowance of clothing.

He is entitled to pay from the 31st day of May 1813, together with three months pay as his allowance upon being honorably discharged and pay and rations from this place to Frankfort in the State of Kentucky being his place of residence.

*To prevent imposition here follows a description of the said Samuel Dawson he is five feet five inches and half blue eyes fair complexion dark hair born in Amherst County in the State of Virginia and by Profession a Farmer.
[signed] Samuel Goode
Hopkins
Capt. 2nd Reg. U.S. Light Dragoons*

Description of Person	Height	Complexion	Hair	Eyes	Build	Age	Place of Birth	Remarks
5' 4" fair the height that	5' 4"	fair	black	blue	slender	25	Virginia	has served 18 months
17 1/2 inch light hair	17 1/2"	light	black	blue	slender	25	Virginia	has served 18 months

I certify that the above is a correct copy, and statement taken from the Company Book and that he has pay due him from November 30, 1813, and that he has faithfully and honestly discharged the duties of a soldier in the Regiment to which my Company is attached.
July 20th 1814
Samuel Goode

Descriptive list of Private William T. Smith, Capt. John Machesney's Co., 16th Infantry. M156, roll 2.

The discharge certificate may either be a printed “fill in the blank” form or entirely handwritten.

Descriptive List

The Descriptive List provides a description of the man and may indicate the clothing and other supplies furnished him. Some are in chart form while others are in narrative form. Both types sometimes indicate the information was taken from the company’s record book. The Descriptive List of William T. Smith (Capt. John Machnesney’s Co., 16th Infantry) indicates his age; physical description (height, color of eyes and hair, and complexion); place of birth; date, place, and term of enlistment and the name of the officer who enlisted him; occupation; amount of bounty paid and amount due; amount of pay due; and the number and type of each item of clothing issued to him. Finally, the officer’s certification indicates the information was “taken from the Company Book.”

Certificate of death

The certificate of death usually indicates the soldier’s date of death and unit in which he served. For example, the certificate of death for Henry Carman (2nd Artillery) states:

I hereby certify that Henry Carman of the 2d Regt. Artillery U.S. Army, died in the Genl. Hospl. in this City, February 28th 1814. (signed) Wm. E. Horner, H.S.M., Philadelphia April 1st 1814

Pay voucher

The pay voucher usually indicates the amount of pay due and/or the period of time for which pay was owed. For example, a pay voucher for Henry Carman (2nd Artillery) states:

I Certify on Honor that there is pay Due to Henry Carman from the 31st day of October 1813 until the 28 day of Feby 1814 the day of his Death and eight Dollars bounty[.] he was enlisted for 18 months[.] he having Served faithfully untill his Death is entitled to three months extra Pay. [signed] Benjn S. Ogden, Lat[e] Capt U.S. artillery, Philad[elphi]a, 3d Novr 1815

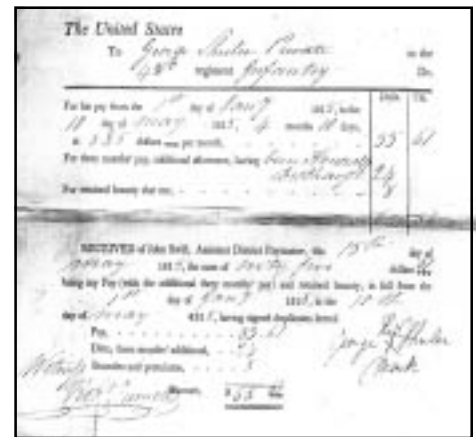
Both a discharge certificate and pay voucher have survived for some men.

For more information

For a discussion of the War of 1812, see “The War of 1812,” Chapter 6 from *American Military History* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1989) online at <<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/amh/amh-06.htm>>.

For more information about the discharge certificates, see “War of 1812 Discharge Certificates” at <http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/military/1812_discharge_certificates.html>. Researchers can use M1856 at the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.; NARA’s 13 Regional Archives; Ohio Genealogical Society, Mansfield, Ohio; and possibly other libraries.

To request a copy of a dis-



The certificate of discharge and pay voucher have both survived for some, but not all, men.

charge certificate from M1856, write a letter to Old Military and Civil Branch, National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20408, or e-mail through <http://www.archives.gov/global_pages/inquire_form.html>. In either case, be sure to include your name and mailing address, the soldier’s name and unit, and note that discharge has been reproduced in M1856. If you use the online inquiry form, you can put the information about the soldier and the M1856 citation in the “I have a question about research and records at NARA” block. Do not send money until you are instructed to do so.

Note

1. Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 76–77. Hickey’s footnotes have been omitted.

Claire Prechtel-Klusdens, a microfilm projects archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C., served as NGS registrar (1996–98) and director (1998–2000).