

Revolutionary War pension files—an introduction

Revolutionary War pension files can be a gold mine of information about the veterans and their families.

Pensioners and widows

The Revolutionary War pension application files were primarily created as a result of legislation enacted by Congress between 1818 and 1855. An act of Congress of 18 March 1818 (3 Stat. 410) allowed a pension to naval and continental army veterans who had served a minimum of nine months. Because of the large number of veterans who applied and the scandals that ensued, an act established 1 May 1820 (3 Stat. 569) required pensioners to submit property schedules proving that they were needy. The act approved 7 June 1832 (4 Stat. 529) liberalized the pension program to allow any veteran with six months service to be granted a pension without showing need. Widows of veterans were first allowed a pension under an act of 4 July 1836 (5 Stat. 127), so long as marriage to the veteran had occurred before the end of his military service. The act of 29 July 1848 (9 Stat. 265) allowed pensions to widows of veterans who were married before 2 January 1800, and all restrictions relating to the date of marriage were removed by legislation enacted in 1853 and 1855.

Revolutionary War pension files average thirty pages, but some have as many as two hundred pages. There

are five basic types of files:

1 “Survivor” (S) file—A file relating to a successful application made by the veteran himself that provides evidence of his military service and, if required, his disability or need.

2 “Widow” (W) file—A file relating to a successful application made by the veteran’s widow, typically between 1836 and the late 1840s, that provides evidence of her marriage to the veteran and evidence of his military service. If the veteran himself had applied for a pension, papers relating to his claims are also in the “widow” file.

3 “Rejected” (R) file—A file relating to the *latest* application made by a veteran, widow, or other heir that was rejected. However, “rejected” files may contain papers relating to *previously approved* pension applications relating to the same veteran. For example, a veteran might have successfully applied for a pension, but perhaps his widow’s claim was rejected if she was unable to prove the marriage occurred before the required date.

4 “No papers” file—A file for a disability pension application claim destroyed by the War Department fire of 1800 or the British burning of Washington in 1814. The “pre-1800” files contain one or more small cards with information copied from the *American State Papers, Class 9, Claims* (Washington, 1834) for all

affected veterans. Data relating to the “pre-1814” files were copied from the 1835 *Report from the Secretary of War ... in Relation to the Pension Establishment of the United States* (23rd Cong., 1st. sess., S. Doc. 514) by the Veterans Administration but apparently only in response to inquiries about specific veterans before the mid-1930s. (The National Archives was established in 1934; Revolutionary War records were transferred to it before 1942).

5 “Bounty Land Warrant” (BLW) file—A file relating to a successful application for a bounty land warrant, which allowed rights to free land in the public domain. Most BLW recipients chose to sell their warrant instead of taking up the arduous task of settling on and starting a new farm in their old age. This file is normally combined with the Survivor’s, Widow’s, or Rejected files for the same veteran.

Indexes

There are two published indexes worth consulting. The first is an index to the name of every pensioner (veteran and widow) who applied. Often called “Hoyt’s index,” its full title is *Index of Revolutionary War Pension Applications in the National Archives* (Washington, D.C.: National Genealogical Society, 1976.)

A second more powerful published resource gives a brief synopsis of the contents of the pension files and, most importantly, helps research-

ers discover clues to relationships between Revolutionary era families due to the testimony given by relatives and neighbors on behalf of a veteran's claim. This publication, by Virgil D. White, is *Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files, A-Z, and Index*, 5 vols. (Waynesboro, Tenn.: National Historical Publishing Co., 1990), which is available in many libraries. It is primarily based on microfilm publication M805, discussed below.

M804 (Complete) versus M805 (Selected) versions

Have you seen your ancestor's complete pension file? Maybe yes, maybe no.

One of the most important things researchers need to understand about Revolutionary War pension files is that the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) filmed these records twice:

M804. Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files. 2,670 rolls.

and

M805. Selected Records From Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files. 898 rolls.

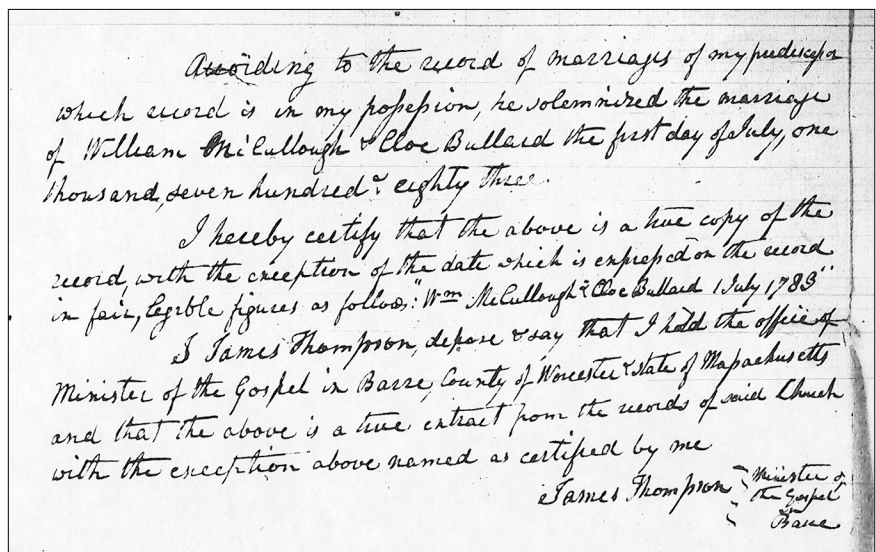
Notice that M805 is titled "Selected Records...." from the pension files and that it is only 898 rolls, while M804 is 2,670 rolls. Researchers need to understand that M804 has

everything from the files while M805 only has selected records from the files, up to a maximum of 10 substantive pages per file. The "selected" were those deemed by National Archives employees decades ago to be "the more significant genealogical documents," including pension and bounty land warrant applications, old jackets (envelopes) showing the act under which pension payments were made or the bounty land warrant number, property lists, family records from Bibles or other books, copies of marriage records, and final payment vouchers. The "nonselected" records were everything else.

The "nonselected" records clearly also have excellent genealogical information and must not be missed. The file of Edward Halstead of New York is a perfect example. The "selected" file in M805 is only five pages, including the front of the jacket in which the original records are held. In contrast, the complete file in M804

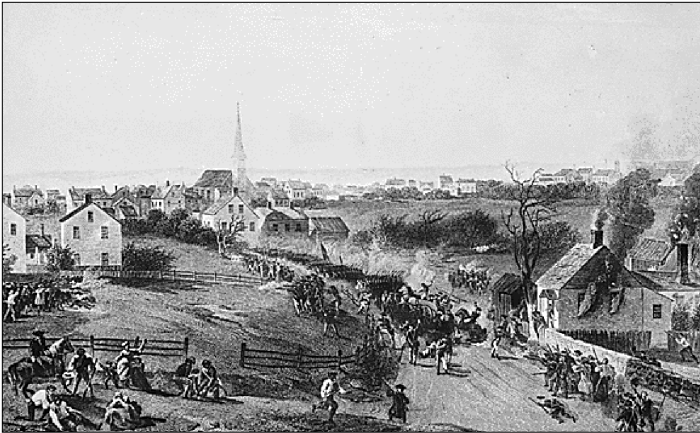
is three times as large. (M804, Roll 1168, File S2,633, Edward Halstead). Among the additional pages in the complete file in M804 is a letter from Edward Halstead's son Jacob (*sic*), dated 8 March 1857, which is full of misspellings but wonderful in content. Jacob Halstead, of Ionia, Michigan, identifies himself as the youngest son of Edward. He said that Edward lived at "the Palts" (*sic*, New Paltz, New York) during the war, then moved to Ontario County, New York, and then to "Laik" (*sic*, Lake) County, Ohio, where he drew his pension. Jacob said that Edward married his wife in New York State, and the wife died in Ontario County, New York, in January 1814, and that Edward died in February 1837.¹ Good stuff—but Jacob's letter is only in M804.

Now that you see that M804 is superior to M805, you need to make sure you're consulting M804. It is regrettable that there are two versions



Widow Chloe Bullard McCullar proved her marriage to Revolutionary War veteran William McCullar through a copy of the marriage record found in the Barre,

Massachusetts, town record book. (M804, Roll 1674, William McCullar/McCuller; widow Chloe, W5363).



"Retreat from Concord." ARC Identifier 518209, RG 66, Records of the Commission of Fine Arts, 18931981; Still Pictures Branch, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

since (1) most libraries purchased the *incomplete* M805 and (2) most researchers don't understand the difference. Pay attention to which version you are using online or in your favorite genealogical library.

You'll find M805—the *incomplete* version—online at HeritageQuest, and on microfilm at Sutro Library, San Francisco; C. E. Brehm Memorial Public Library, Mt. Vernon, Illinois; Illinois State Library, Springfield, Illinois; Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana; Indiana State Library, Indianapolis; Shreve Memorial Library, Shreveport, Louisiana; Library of Michigan, Lansing; Clayton Library, Houston, Texas; and many other libraries.

You'll find M804—the *complete* version—on microfilm at the National Archives (NARA) Building, Washington, D.C.; NARA's Regional Archives in thirteen major cities; the Family History Library, Salt Lake City, and by loan to Family History Centers; Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham,

Alabama; Los Angeles Family History Center, Los Angeles; Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, IN; New-Albany-Floyd County Public Library, New Albany,

Indiana; Mid-Continent Public Library, St. Louis; New York Public Library, New York; North Carolina State Library, Raleigh, North Carolina; David Library of the American Revolution, Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania; Greenville County Public Library, Greenville, South Carolina; South Carolina State Archives, Columbia, South Carolina; and many other libraries.

Cull multiple files for information

After locating your ancestor's complete pension file, take the next step and cull related files for additional information. First, copy and study the files of the ancestor's relatives as they may contain useful information to help flesh out the family structure. Second, read the ancestor's file carefully and make note of affidavits by comrades-in-arms who served in his unit. Their testimony was often corroborating evidence that the veteran served in the unit at the time claimed. The comrades-in-arms usually have their own pension file, and affidavits in their files may shed additional light on the activities done in service by the ancestor. Your ancestor may have testified in support of his comrades as well. James

Western of Stockholm, St. Lawrence County, had served in a Vermont unit during the war. He not only testified about his service but also obtained supporting testimony from Isaac Buck of Potsdam, St. Lawrence County, New York, who served in the same company, and from James Corey of Madrid, St. Lawrence County, who served in a different company in the same regiment. Buck's and Corey's testimony in their own pension files add details that are not in Westurn's testimony. The testimony by these comrades-in-arms is only in M804. (M804, Roll 394, Isaac Buck, File S28,662; Roll 654, James Corey, File S10,460; and Roll 2540, James Westurn/Western, File S11,719).

Revolutionary War veterans and pensions in history

If you want to learn more about Revolutionary War pensions and our ancestors, an excellent book is John Phillips Resch, *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). In addition, Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1999), is an eye opening account of the public's memory and treatment of the Revolutionary War years in the first fifty years of American history.

Note

1. There was a county boundary change between Edward's death in 1837 and Jacob's letter in 1857; Edward lived in Chagrin Township, later renamed Willoughby Township, and this area was part of Cuyahoga County at the time of Edward's death; it became part of Lake County in 1840.

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cklusken@yahoo.com. Opinions expressed are her own and are not official statements of past or present NARA policies. She is indebted to several current and former NARA employees for their insights on M804 and M805.

Why did the National Archives microfilm the Revolutionary War pension files twice?

M804 and M805 were microfilmed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in anticipation of the bicentennial of the American Revolution. The decision was made to charge a flat fee for requests for copies of pension records, and to hold the cost down. For the low fee, the researcher received “selected records” from the pension file that were thought to have the most genealogical value. If the researcher wanted the “rest of the file” the researcher could request a price quote. M805 owes its existence to that selection process.

It may also be that M805 (898 rolls) was created to afford libraries more economical access to this research collection instead of the complete M804 (2,670 rolls). The new microfiche card technology being developed in the 1960s may have had an effect. There apparently was some thought to putting an individual veteran’s M805 “selected” records on fiche at very

low cost. Although that was never done with the Revolutionary War pension files, in subsequent years the National Archives did make microfiche instead of microfilm of certain other pension files and other records.

Most researchers probably never quite understood that there was much more and quite valuable information in “the rest of the file.” In late 2000, NARA changed its policy and now routinely provides *entire* pension files (Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Civil War, etc.) for a flat \$40 fee. You can Order Online! at <<http://www.archives.gov/research/order/orderonline.html>> or order by mail using NATF Form 85 (to get forms, go to <<http://www.archives.gov/contact/inquire-form.html>> or call 1-866-272-6272, or write to The National Archives and Records Administration, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001).

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