

Billy Yank: Researching Your Union Ancestor in the Civil War

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The Civil War is the deadliest military engagement in United States history. From April 12, 1861-May 13, 1865 over 2.2 million Union (1 million Confederate) soldiers served in the war and over 620,000 men perished. The war created billions of pages of paperwork on the local, state, and federal level. For generations after the end of the war records were still being created and maintained by health care facilities, local service organizations, and government agencies.

Local Resources

Start locally for records pertaining to your Union ancestor. Local libraries and historical societies will often have books, newspapers, letters and diaries from soldiers and photographs. University and college special collections usually have Civil War collections, many have a digital component.

County Histories circa 1876-1880 are a vital resource in researching and understanding the scope and impact of the Civil War on your ancestors. Many county and state histories are digitized and available through a number of online book collections:

- Digital Public Library of America www.dp.la
- Familysearch www.familysearch.org/library/books
- Google Books www.books.google.com
- Hathi Trust www.hathitrust.org
- Internet Archives www.archive.org
- Project Gutenberg www.gutenberg.org



Online Civil War Newspaper Collections

- Chronicling America (Library of Congress) www.chroniclingamerica.loc.gov
- Google News Archive Newspaper List: <http://news.google.com/newspapers>
- Elephind: www.elephind.com
- Newspapers.com www.newspapers.com
- Newspaper Archive www.newspaperarchive.com
- GenealogyBank www.genealogybank.com

- Illinois Civil War Newspapers: <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/cwnewspapers>
- Pennsylvania State University Digital Newspapers:
<http://digitalnewspapers.libraries.psu.edu/default/client.asp?skin=civilwar>
- Virginia Tech University Civil War Newspapers:
<https://dcr.emd.vt.edu/vital/access/manager/Index>
- Son of the South (Harper's Weekly): www.sonofthesouth.net

County Courthouses have military records such as enlistment and discharge papers, occasionally bonus books and pension records were also collected.

Library of Congress is a public library with millions of pages of Civil War resources available to researchers. A valid U.S. photo I.D. is all that is required to obtain a research card.

- www.loc.gov/rr/main/uscw_rec_links/civilwarlinks.html
- Civil War Map Collection www.loc.gov/maps/?fa=subject%3Acivil+war
- Civil War Teacher Resources www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/civil-war
- Civil War Photos: www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/civwar
- Chronicling America <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>

State Government Records

State Adjutant General's offices collected wartime data on soldiers and units within their state. Digital copies of annual reports are widely available online and can provide insight into individual units, and the military engagements in which they participated.

State records include military censuses, enlistment and draft books, muster rolls, monthly regimental rosters and after-action reports, bonus and pension applications, burials and more. The Illinois State Military Census for 1862 is available on microfilm. The Plainfield Public Library has the complete 26 reel set. A searchable index is available for Illinois Civil War soldier Muster Rolls through www.ilsos.gov/departments/archives/databases.html

Record Group 301 *Records of the Military Department*, in the Illinois State Archives, include service information for Illinois soldiers and other out-of-state soldiers transferred/temporarily assigned to Illinois units.

State Military Records Examples:

Missouri Digital Heritage Civil War Collection www.sos.mo.gov/mdh/CivilWar

Michiganology: <https://michiganology.org/stories/michigan-experiences-civil-war/>

N.Y. Civil War Units: <https://museum.dmna.ny.gov/unit-history/conflict/us-civil-war-1861-1865>

Additional Places for Illinois Civil War Records:

- CARLI <http://collections.carli.illinois.edu>
- Illinois Digital Archives www.idaillinois.org
- Illinois Boys in Blue <https://bit.ly/2WnOuAA>
- Illinois During the Civil War <http://civilwar.lib.niu.edu>
- Illinois State Archives Online Catalog <http://ilsos.libraryhost.com>

National Archives and Records Administration

NARA has numerous files related to the Civil War. The bulk of their records pertain to the Union military. Few records exist at the National Archives for Confederate States as they were no longer a part of the United States of America. Records include muster rolls, military censuses, compiled service records and official unit reports & histories. Records pertaining to pensions and Land Bounty Warrants are separate from enlistment papers and other military service records.

Not all military service records for Union soldiers have been microfilmed! Even fewer have been digitized. For those records that have been microfilmed/digitized, the indexed records include soldiers name, rank, unit/s in which he served. If the records have not been microfilmed or digitized you can request the original record at the National Archives I in Washington DC or you can request copies using form NATF 86. NARA recommends consulting state archives for records pertaining to state or local militias or National Guard units that were not federalized.

Muster and Descriptive Rolls (1861-1865):

Information includes: Name, rank, regiment number, company letter, age, height, eye and hair colors, complexion, occupation, marital status, birthplace and residence, date and place where mustered in, name of mustering officer, date and place of mustering out, name of mustering out officer, remarks concerning transfers, promotions and special duty, and any indications of injury or death. Some of these have been digitized and are available online through Ancestry.

Military censuses 1861-1863: These are roughly arranged by county then township. These censuses were conducted by township assessors and recorded men eligible for service between the ages of 18-45. There were two lists. The first list was comprised of volunteers who organized themselves into units. The information includes: Name, residence, age, birthplace, occupation and date and term of service. The second list included men who did not volunteer, but were eligible to be drafted. This list usually lists the man's name, nativity (typically state only) and age. Copies of these records are also kept in most state archives.



Index to Compiled Service Records of Union Army Veterans (1861-1865) Name index includes: Name, regiment number, company letter, rank, mustered in date and mustered out date. This is an index only. Official records would need to be requested from the National Archives. National Parks Service Civil War Veterans: www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-soldiers.htm

Official Records of the War of Rebellion and Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion: Information includes official reports, correspondences, orders, returns and maps. (Microfilm) a general index provides series and volume listings to the names of all persons included in these papers.

National Archives Website and Links:

- National Archives Access to Archival Databases <http://aad.archives.gov/aad>
- Military Service Forms www.archives.gov/veterans/evetreecs/index.html
- National Archives Archival Research Catalog www.archives.gov/research/arc
- National Archives Blog XC Civil War Pension Files
<https://narations.blogs.archives.gov/2010/05/14/c-and-xc-pension-files-for-the-civil-war>

Grand Army of the Republic

The G.A.R. was organized in Illinois in 1866 by General John A. Logan. The first official Decoration Day celebration was held May 30, 1868. G.A.R. meeting halls were called post, each responsible for electing officers & collecting dues. Interest waned in the late 1870s and many posts closed. A resurgence of interest in the 1880s led to the renumbering of many U.S. posts.

- Grand Army of the Republic Records www.garrecords.org
- Library of Congress Grand Army of the Republic and Kindred Societies:
www.loc.gov/rr/main/gar/garintro.html
- New York State Archives GAR Collections:
www.archives.nysed.gov/research/res_tips_010_gar.shtml

Online Resources

- Ancestry www.ancestry.com
 - American Civil War Soldiers
 - Civil War Service Records
 - Civil War Widow's Pension Applications U.S. Civil War Soldiers Database
 - American Civil War Soldiers & Sailor's Homes (federal)
 - U.S. Civil War Draft Registration Records 1863-1865
- Family Search www.familySearch.org
 - Union soldier indexes

- State service and pension records
- fold3: <http://go.fold3.com/civilwar>
 - Widow's Pension Files
 - Civil War Soldiers Service Records
 - Southern Claims Commission
 - Maps & Photos

The information provided in these databases varies and can include: Name of soldier, rank, enlistment date, mustered out date and the state and unit of service. The pension indexes include: Name, state and unit served, date pension claim was made, application number, certificate number and for widows' pensions, name of the widow and state claim was filed.

Additional Online Resources

- HeritageQuest Freedman's Bank Records
- Civil War Photo Sleuth www.civilwarphotosleuth.com
- Civil War Soldier & Sailor System www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm
- Civil War Trust www.civilwar.org
- Coast Guard Maps <https://historicalcharts.noaa.gov/CivilWar>
- Cyndi's List Civil War links www.cyndislist.com/us/civil-war
- National Parks Service-The Civil War: www.nps.gov/civilwar/index.htm

Online Letters, Diaries and Newspaper Collections:

- Family Tree Magazine Civil War Toolkit <https://bit.ly/2GUszue>
- Civil War Diaries and Letters University of Iowa <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cwd/index.php>
- Illinois in the Civil War <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/illinois/civilwar>
- Indiana University: Civil War in Indiana <https://libraries.indiana.edu/guide-civil-war-indiana>

Military Lineage Societies

- Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War: www.suvcw.org
- National Daughters of Union Veterans www.duvcw.org
- Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic <http://suvcw.org/LGAR/Home.html>
- Legion of Valor <https://legionofvalor.org>