
Researching Your Civil War Ancestor

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Over three million Americans were in uniform during the Civil War. It's becoming easier to find the facts of our ancestors' service, but how do we reconstruct their experiences? This presentation will show you how to fill in the blanks between the facts, allowing you to tell your ancestors' stories.

We'll briefly review the rank structure, unit organization and some basic military vocabulary of the period. Then we'll concentrate on what resources we can use to bring our Civil War ancestor's service experience to life and to tell his story.

Background

The American Civil War began April 12, 1861, when Confederate soldiers fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. Four years later, an estimated 620,000 Americans had lost their lives in the line of duty. Another 476,000 were wounded. Many men returned home with missing limbs or lingering health conditions, leaving them unable to work. Because recruiting was local, if a unit suffered significant casualties, whole communities could be disastrously affected.

Rank Structure

Officer ranks, lowest to highest: lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, colonel, brigadier general, major general, lieutenant general, general.

Enlisted ranks, lowest to highest: private, corporal, sergeant, first sergeant, sergeant major.

There were various specialty ranks and ranks that depended on the kind of unit a soldier was in or what job he held.

Companies were traditionally commanded by captains, regiments by colonels, and brigades by brigadier generals. Casualties could result in units being commanded by lower ranks.

Unit Organization

Unit organization could be a bit fluid during the war, but in general soldiers were organized as follows:

A **company** was made up of anywhere from 30 to 100 men. Roughly 10 companies made up a **regiment**. A **brigade** consisted of two or more regiments. Two or more brigades

constituted a **division**. A **corps** was made up of two or more divisions. Multiple corps constituted an **army**.

For more information, see “Civil War Army Organization and Rank”

<http://www.townofelbridge.com/Organization%20and%20Rank.pdf>

Civil War Terms

If you come across unfamiliar terms when researching, this website has an extensive glossary:

Civil War Trust, “A Glossary of Civil War Terms”

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/glossary/glossary.html>

Civil War battles often have two names. This is because Union commanders tended to name battles after the nearest river or creek, while Confederate commanders tended to use the name of the nearest town.

Unit Histories

Unit histories vary in quality and depth, depending upon who wrote them, but will generally contain rosters of the men who served, often including enlistment and discharge or death dates. They will usually contain descriptions of battles the unit participated in.

U.S. Civil War Regimental Histories in the Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/uscivilwar/>

“In addition to published unit histories, this finding aid includes materials such as personal narratives (letters, diaries, and reminiscences), unit rosters, reunion proceedings, and some other materials which include unit information.” You can use this site to discover information on published unit histories, and then look for them in WorldCat (<https://www.worldcat.org/>) to find them in a library near you or get them through inter-library loan.

HathiTrust <http://www.hathitrust.org/>

Search for Civil War unit histories in general or for a specific regiment.

Battle Histories

Once you know what regiment your ancestor served in and what battles the unit participated in, you can learn more detail by looking at histories of specific battles.

HathiTrust <http://www.hathitrust.org/>

Search for Civil War battle histories or for a specific battle.

Shaara, Michael. *The Killer Angels*. New York: McKay, 1974.

The story of the battle of Gettysburg. NOTE: Many books have been written about specific Civil War battles. This one is just an example.

Maps

Use maps to see the terrain where regiments fought or learn how far they marched to reach a battle.

Library of Congress, “Civil War Maps” <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-maps/about-this-collection/>

Social History

Social history is the history of ordinary people and how they lived their everyday lives. Social histories don't have to mention your ancestor in order to be helpful in filling in details of his war experience.

Morelli, Jill. “A Day in the Life of Jens Dahle.” Series of blog posts.

<https://genealogycertification.wordpress.com/2014/08/27/dahle-27-aug-1864/>

Goodheart, Adam. *1861: The Civil War Awakening*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

The memoirs, diary, and life of Private Jefferson Moses, Company G, 93rd Illinois Volunteers <http://www.ioweb.com/civilwar/>

A Civil War Diary <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mogenweb/cwdiary.htm>

Iowa Digital Library. “Civil War Diaries and Letters.” <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cwd/>

Newspapers

Newspapers are wonderful sources because the stories were written very close to the time that events occurred. You may very well find your ancestor mentioned in articles in his hometown paper, but even articles that don't mention him can provide valuable background.

Search online for the name of a state and the term historic newspapers.

“*Harper's Weekly* Original Civil War Newspapers”

<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/the-civil-war.htm>

Library of Congress. *Chronicling America* <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Some additional online resources

Accessible Archives – Civil War Collection <http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/the-civil-war/>

Newspapers and memoirs give the war an immediate feel in this collection.

American Battlefield Trust, “Civil War” <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war>

Extensive collection of a variety of resources.

History.com <http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war>

Videos, images and short articles on a variety of Civil War topics.

History.net, “The Civil War” <http://www.historynet.com/civil-war>

A concise history of the war and links to articles on a variety of topics of interest.

Department of Veteran’s Affairs, National Cemetery Administration. “Nationwide Gravesite Locator.” <http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/>

“You may search for burial locations of veterans and their family members in VA National Cemeteries, state veterans cemeteries, various other military and Department of Interior cemeteries, and for veterans buried in private cemeteries when the grave is marked with a government grave marker.” This site also includes Confederate graves.

National Park Service, “The Civil War” <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/index.htm>

Links to stories, people, places, and collections about every aspect of the war, including a database of soldiers and sailors who served (<https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>).

Library of Congress Civil War photos <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/>

Some Additional Books

Catton, Bruce. *A Stillness at Appomattox*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953.

Eggleston, Larry G. *Women in the Civil War: extraordinary stories of soldiers, spies, nurses, doctors, crusaders, and others*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003.

Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative*. New York: Random House, 1974.

McPherson, James. *The Battle Cry of Freedom*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Watkins, Sam. *Company Aytch*. Nashville: Turner, 2011.

TO FIND THE RECORDS

FamilySearch. “Confederate Service Records.”

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Confederate_Service_Records

FamilySearch. “Union Service Records.”

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Union_Service_Records

NOTE: The two pages above in the FamilySearch Research Wiki also contain links to information on many other collections of records for both Union and Confederate soldiers and sailors.

National Archives. “Research in Military Records: Civil War.”

<http://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/>

Fold3. “U.S. Civil War.” <https://www.fold3.com/collection/us-civil-war>

Ancestry. “The Civil War—a house divided.” <https://www.ancestry.com/cs/civilwarrecords>

A search in the Ancestry card catalog for “civil war” filtered by North America and then further filtered by USA returns 504 collections, including some Confederate collections.