

From Local Militia to the Continental Line
Bryna O'Sullivan
Charter Oak Genealogy
bryna@charteroakgenealogy.com

Which ancestors likely served in the Army during the American Revolution?

With exceptions, the profile of a soldier mirrored the age regulation established for the local militia. Militia service had been a requirement for American colonists well before the Revolution.¹ Connecticut required all “male persons from sixteen years of Age, to Sixty” to serve.²

While states may have restricted the participation of people of color in the militia, there was no restriction on race or ethnicity in the Army by the end of the war.³ (This is a larger topic, as there was much debate.)

How was the militia different from the Continental Line?

The militia were conceived as a defensive force, amateurs with limited military training.⁴ Once the Continental Army came into existence, they would be called out for short periods to support the Continental Line.⁵ The Continental Army was formed 14 June 1775 to provide a professional army.⁶ By 1776, enlistments were set for at least three years.⁷ By 1778, enlistment was generally for three years or the duration of the War.⁸

Why would you join the Continental Line?

While participation in the militia was required by law, that wasn't true of the Continental Line. Money – and perhaps adventure and patriotism - were viable motivators to join the Continental Line. In addition to bounty land and pensions, states offered enlistment bounties. Virginia promised money or an enslaved person.⁹

¹ “The Fighting Man of the Continental Army: Daily Life as a Soldier,” *American Battlefield Trust*, 26 Jan 2017 (<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/fighting-man-continental-army>: accessed 18 March 2024).

² *Acts and Laws of His Majesties Colony of Connecticut in New England* (Hartford, CT: The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1901), 76; digital images, *HathiTrust* (<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.35112105064069?urlappend=%3Bseq=96%3Bownerid=13510798901909985-106>: accessed 27 April 2024).

³ “10 Facts: The Continental Army,” *American Battlefield Trust*, 07 July 2021.

⁴ Thomas Fleming, “Militia and Continentals,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, 30 December 2013 (<https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/12/militia-continentals/>: accessed 27 April 2024).

⁵ Rob Orrison, “Militia, Minutemen, and Continentals: The American Military Force in the American Revolution,” *Americana Corner* (<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/militia-minutemen-and-continentals-american-military-force-american-revolution>: accessed 27 April 2024).

⁶ Christopher Geist, “A Common American Soldier,” *Colonial Williamsburg* (<https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/Foundation/journal/Autumn04/soldier.cfm>: accessed 27 April 2024).

⁷ Geist. “A Common American Soldier.”

⁸ “The Fighting Man of the Continental Army: Daily Life as a Soldier,” *American Battlefield Trust*, 26 Jan 2017.

⁹ William M. Ferraro, “Interpreting Silence: George Washington and Slaves as a Recruiting Bounty,” *Washington Papers*, 29 January 2021 (<https://washingtonpapers.org/interpreting-silence-george-washington-and-slaves-as-a-recruiting-bounty/>: accessed 28 April 2024).

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Who was most likely to join the Continental Line?

As Continental service required a long enlistment, anyone who was needed at home or to closely manage a business was unlikely to join. Men in the Continental Line were typically aged 15 to 30.¹⁰ Many of these men would have been too young to need to support a family. It may have attracted those who otherwise faced difficulty in earning a living, particularly men of color.

Who was most likely to serve in the militia?

There were legal requirements for militia service, but not every member of the militia was expected to serve in the same way. Connecticut exempted anyone over 50 from being required to leave the state.¹¹ State laws may help clarify where your ancestor was sent and why.

Records of Continental Line Service:

What are compiled military service records?

Compiled Military Service Records are a product of the Civil War pension system.¹² They are index cards created so that the pension officers did not have to review the original records.¹³ They were later created for earlier wars and can provide a summary of the service of ancestors who served on the Continental Line.¹⁴ Compiled Military Service Records for the Revolutionary War have been digitized by *Fold3*. While the records used to create these cards are not open to the public, some may have been digitized by *Fold3*.

Records of Militia Service:

State Level Publications:

In the late 1800s, many states attempted to compile a roster of those who had served in the Revolution and to make that information available in a publication. Debbie Duay's "Sources of Revolutionary Service" page available at <http://www.learnwebskills.com/patriot/revservice.htm> can help locate the appropriate publication.

Bounty Land:

What is bounty land?

¹⁰ "The Fighting Man of the Continental Army: Daily Life as a Soldier," *American Battlefield Trust*, 26 Jan 2017.

¹¹ Charles J. Hoadley, *The Public Records of the State of Connecticut From October, 1776, to February, 1778, inclusive* (Hartford: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1894), 96; digital images, *HathiTrust* (<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89067359620?urlappend=%3Bseq=112%3Bownerid=13510798901415210-118>; accessed 28 April 2024).

¹² "Compiled Military Service Records," *National Archives* (<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/army/compiled-military-service-records>; accessed 28 April 2024).

¹³ "Compiled Military Service Records," *National Archives*.

¹⁴ "Compiled Military Service Records," *National Archives*.

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Bounty land was granted by the government as an inducement to enlist in the military or as a reward for service.¹⁵ To receive the land, applicants had to demonstrate that they had earned it. Applications may include references to military service, family relationships, and more.

Who issued bounty land?

- Federal Bounty Land: Bounty Land was authorized for Revolutionary War service under acts in 1788, 1803, 1806, and 1855.¹⁶ From 1796 to 1830, all claims would have been issued land in the Military District of Ohio.¹⁷ Records have been digitized by *Fold3*.
- Connecticut issued land as repayment for damages, rather than military service.¹⁸
- Georgia allowed bounty land for all service; amounts varied by rank.¹⁹ Land east of the Oconee River was distributed between 1783 and 1909.²⁰ Documents are available on *FamilySearch* at <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1914217>.
- Maryland: Maryland allocated plots west of Fort Cumberland for Continental Line service.²¹ More information is available at <https://guide.msa.maryland.gov/pages/series.aspx?ID=s451> and <https://guide.msa.maryland.gov/pages/series.aspx?ID=S4>.
- Massachusetts: Massachusetts passed its first bounty land law in 1801, allowing for payment of \$20 or 200 acres to Continental Army service of three years or the duration of the War.²² Land was in Maine, which continued to issue grants after becoming a state.²³ Those grants are available on *FamilySearch* at <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1881491>. A more complete collection including grants from both states is also available on *FamilySearch* at <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1881492>.

¹⁵ Christine Rose, *Military Bounty Land 1776-1855* (San Jose, CA: CR Publications, 2011), xvii.

¹⁶ "Bounty-Land Warrants for Military Service, 1775-1855," *National Archives and Records Administration* (<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/bounty-land-1775-1855.pdf>: accessed 24 April 2024).

¹⁷ *Military Bounty Land 1776-1855*, 8-9.

¹⁸ "Where were the Firelands?" *CT State Library* (<https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/maps/firelands>: accessed 23 April 2024).

¹⁹ "Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants," *Georgia Archives* (https://www.georgiaarchives.org/research/bounty_land_grants: accessed 23 April 2024).

²⁰ "Headright and Bounty Grants," *Georgia Archives* (https://www.georgiaarchives.org/research/headright_and_bounty_grants: accessed 23 April 2024).

²¹ "Information on S451 - (Military Lot Plats)," *Maryland State Archives* (<https://guide.msa.maryland.gov/pages/series.aspx?ID=s451>: accessed 24 April 2024). "Information on S4- (Military Lots Ledger)," *Maryland State Archives* (<https://guide.msa.maryland.gov/pages/series.aspx?ID=S4>: accessed 24 April 2024).

²² Massachusetts Office of the Secretary of State, "Certificate of Land Bounties Granted to Revolutionary War Soldiers, 1801-1828," *Archivegrid* (<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/collection/data/658218057>: accessed 23 April 2024).

²³ Massachusetts Office of the Secretary of State, "Certificate of Land Bounties Granted to Revolutionary War Soldiers, 1801-1828," *Archivegrid*.

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- **New York:** Acts promising bounty land began as early as 1783.²⁴ Lands were in the area known as the military tract.²⁵ Records were stored in the “Balloting Book” (digitized by *FamilySearch* at <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/61263?availability=Family%20History%20Library>.)²⁶ An index to patents is available at <https://www.archives.nysed.gov/research/name-index-by-series/A0447/H>.
- **North Carolina:** North Carolina’s bounty land (District 1 in TN) was reserved to Continental Line soldiers.²⁷ Microfilmed images of the records may be held in North Carolina or Tennessee.²⁸ Warrants are also available on *Ancestry* in the “North Carolina and Tennessee, U.S., Revolutionary War Land Warrants, 1783-1843” collection.
- **Pennsylvania:** Bounty land is referred to as “donation land” and was allocated to Continental Line veterans based on rank.²⁹ Digital images appear on the Pennsylvania State Archives website.³⁰
- **South Carolina:** South Carolina offered a limited number of grants to Continental Line veterans.³¹ The State Archives places the number as “several hundred” “out of many thousands.”³² An index and digital images are available at <https://scdah.sc.gov/news/2021-06/state-plats-land-grants-1784-1868-now-available-online>.
- **Virginia:** Virginia passed a law in 1779 which allowed for the issuance of bounty land for three years Continental Line service.³³ Certificates were issued from 1782 to 1876 for land

²⁴ John Wertis, “The Balloting Book, and Other Documents Relating to the Military Bounty Lands,” *The History Center Blog*, 23 January 2021 (<https://thehistorycenter.net/Blog/9971059>; accessed 23 April 2024).

²⁵ Wertis, “The Balloting Book, and Other Documents Relating to the Military Bounty Lands,” *The History Center Blog*, 23 January 2021.

²⁶ Wertis, “The Balloting Book, and Other Documents Relating to the Military Bounty Lands,” *The History Center Blog*, 23 January 2021.

²⁷ “Early North Carolina/Tennessee Land Grants at the Tennessee State Library and Archives,” *Tennessee Secretary of State* (<https://sos.tn.gov/tsla/guides/early-north-carolina-tennessee-land-grants-at-the-tennessee-state-library-and-archives>; accessed 23 April 2024)

²⁸ “Early North Carolina/Tennessee Land Grants at the Tennessee State Library and Archives,” *Tennessee Secretary of State* (<https://sos.tn.gov/tsla/guides/early-north-carolina-tennessee-land-grants-at-the-tennessee-state-library-and-archives>; accessed 23 April 2024)

²⁹ “RG-17, Records of the Land Office, Donation Land Series,” *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission: Pennsylvania State Archives* (<https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17DonationLandSeries/DonationLandMainInterface.htm>; accessed 23 April 2024).

³⁰ “RG-17, Records of the Land Office, Donation Land Series,” *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission: Pennsylvania State Archives*.

³¹ Wade Dorsey, “State Plats for Land Grants 1784-1868 Now Available Online,” *The Silver Crescent Standard*, 02 June 2021 (<https://scdah.sc.gov/news/2021-06/state-plats-land-grants-1784-1868-now-available-online>; accessed 24 April 2024).

³² Dorsey, “State Plats for Land Grants 1784-1868 Now Available Online.”

³³ “Revolutionary War Bounty Land Claims,” *Library of Virginia* (<https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/bounty-claims>; accessed 23 April 2024.)

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in Ohio and Kentucky.³⁴ Information can be found at <https://va-virginia.libguides.com/bounty-claims>.

Pensions:

What is a pension?

Author Jean Nudd describes a pension as a method to encourage staying in the military during the War and as a reward for service after the War.³⁵ On a basic level, they are payments resulting from military service.

Why do we look at pensions?

The contents of a pension application will vary depending on the law in force at the time the application was made. An application may contain discussions of military service, family relationships, assets, and more.

How do I access my ancestor's pension?

The majority of federal Revolutionary War pension files have been digitized by *Fold3* as part of the "US, Revolutionary War Pensions, 1800-1900" collection.

What federal pension laws existed?

- August 1776:
“ Whereas, in the course of the present war, some commissioned and non-commissioned officers of the army and navy, as also private soldiers, marines, and seamen, may lose a limb, or be otherwise so disabled as to prevent their serving in the army and navy, or getting their livelihood, and may stand in need of relief:
Resolved, That every commissioned officer, non-commissioned officer, and private soldier, who shall lose a limb in any engagement, or be so disabled in the service of the United States of America as to render him incapable afterwards of getting a livelihood, shall receive, during his life, or the continuance of such disability, the one half of his monthly pay from and after the time that his pay as an officer or soldier ceases; to be paid by the committee as hereafter mentioned [...]”³⁶
- 15 May 1778: “[...] That all military officers commissioned by Congress, who now are, or hereafter may be, in the service of the United States, and shall continue therein during the war, and shall not hold any office of profit under these states, or any of them, shall, after the conclusion of the war, be entitled to receive annually, for the term of seven years, if they live

³⁴ “Revolutionary War Bounty Land Claims,” *Library of Virginia*.

³⁵ Jean Nudd, “Using Revolutionary War Pension Files to Find Family Information,” *Prologue Magazine*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer 2015); transcription, *National Archives* (<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2015/summer/rev-war-pensions.html>: accessed 27 April 2024).

³⁶ *Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789, Vol. V 1776 June 5 – October 8* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906), 702; digital images, *HathiTrust* (<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t9668qx4z?urlappend=%3Bseq=295>: accessed 27 April 2024).

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so long, one half of the present pay of such officers; provided, that no general officer of the cavalry, artillery or infantry shall be entitled to receive more than the one half part of the pay of a colonel of such corps respectively; and provided, that this resolution shall not extend to any officer in the service of the United States, unless he shall have taken an oath of allegiance to, and shall actually reside within some one of the United States.³⁷

- 1 August 1780: "That the widows of officers who have died or shall hereafter die in the service shall be entitled to the amount of the half pay such office after the war if living would have been entitled to by the resolution of the [...] day of [...] 1778, or if he leave no widow his orphan children, if he leave any, shall be entitled to the same."³⁸
- 1818: "That every commissioned officer, non-commissioned officer, musician, and private soldier, and all officers of the hospital department and medical staff, who served in the war of the revolution until the end there of, or for the term of nine months, or longer, at any period of the war [...]"³⁹ This law was amended in 1820 and 1822.⁴⁰
- 1832: "and that any such officer, non-commissioned officer, musician, or private, as aforesaid, who shall have served in the continental line, state troops, volunteers or militia, a term or terms in the whole less than the above period, but not less than six months [...] and, in case of the death of any person embraced by the provisions of this act, or of the act to which it is supplementary, during the period intervening between the semi-annual payments directed to be made by said acts, the proportionate amount of pay which shall accrue between the last preceding semi-annual payment, and the death of such person, shall be paid to his widow, or, if he leave no widow, to his children."⁴¹
- 1836: "That if any person who served in the war of the revolution, in the manner specified in the act passed the seventh day of June, eighteen hundred and thirty-two, entitled "An act supplementary to the act for the relief of certain surviving officers and soldiers of the revolution," have died, leaving a widow whose marriage took place before the expiration of the last period of his service, such widow shall be entitled to receive, during the time she

³⁷ Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789 Vol. XI 1778 May 2 – September 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1908), 502; digital images, HathiTrust (<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433091241004?urlappend=%3Bseq=94%3Bownerid=115427949-98>: accessed 27 April 2024).

³⁸ *Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789, Volume XVII. 1780, May 8 – September 6* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910), 726; digital images, HathiTrust (<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433091009070?urlappend=%3Bseq=318%3Bownerid=115428125-336>: accessed 27 April 2024).

³⁹ Richard Peters, *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, Vol. III (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), 410; digital images, Library of Congress (https://www.loc.gov/resource/llsalvol.llsal_003/?sp=453&st=image&r=-0.565,-0.017,2.131,1.879,0: accessed 27 April 2024).

⁴⁰ Jean Nudd, "Using Revolutionary War Pension Files to Find Family Information," *Prologue Magazine*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer 2015).

⁴¹ Richard Peters, *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, Vol. IV (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), 530; digital images, Library of Congress (https://www.loc.gov/resource/llsalvol.llsal_004/?sp=578&st=image&r=-0.516,0.045,2.032,1.792,0 accessed 8 April 2024).

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may remain unmarried, the annuity or pension which might have been allowed to her husband, by virtue of the act aforesaid, if living at the time it was passed.”⁴²

Why are records missing?

There was a fire in the War Department in 1800 that destroyed many early records. An effort to rebuild what was lost can be found at *Papers of the War Department, 1784-1800* (<https://wardepartmentpapers.org/s/home/page/home>).

Is there a central list of who was pensioned?

Pensions are searchable on Fold3. The census department did compile a list of pensioners still alive in 1840.⁴³ The publication is available at <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1841/dec/1840d.html>.

Did any states offer pensions?

Yes. During the War, states acted as administrators for federal pensions.⁴⁴ Virginia also offered support for soldiers disabled during the War and for the widows of those killed.⁴⁵ Records of those pensions are available at <https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/revolutionary-pensions>.

Additional Resources

Bounty Land:

- Federal:
 - Bockstruck, Lloyd DeWitt. *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants: Awarded by State Governments*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub., 2006.
 - “Bounty-Land Warrants for Military Service, 1775-1855.” *National Archives and Records Administration* (<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/bounty-land-1775-1855.pdf>: accessed 24 April 2024).
 - Rose, Christine. *Military Bounty Land, 1776-1855*. San Jose, CA: CR Publications, 2011.
- Georgia:

⁴² Richard Peters, *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, Vol. V (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1856), 128; digital images, *Library of Congress* (https://www.loc.gov/resource/lisalvol.lisal_005/?sp=166&st=image&r=-0.48,0.152,1.955,1.724,0: accessed 27 April 2024).

⁴³ “1840 Census: A Census of Pensioners for Revolutionary or Military Services,” *United States Census Bureau* (<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1841/dec/1840d.html>: accessed 27 April 2024).

⁴⁴ Massachusetts Office of the Secretary of State, “Certificate Book for Revolutionary War Disability Pensions, 1786-1792,” *ArchiveGrid* (<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/collection/data/658216828>: accessed 27 April 2024).

⁴⁵ “Revolutionary War Virginia State Pensions,” *Library of Virginia* (<https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/revolutionary-pensions>: accessed 27 April 2024).

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- “Georgia, Headright and Bounty Land Records, 1783-1909.” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1914217>: accessed 23 April 2024).
- Maryland:
 - “Information on S451 - (Military Lot Plats).” *Maryland State Archives* (<https://guide.msa.maryland.gov/pages/series.aspx?ID=s451>: accessed 24 April 2024).
 - “Information on S4- (Military Lots Ledger).” *Maryland State Archives* (<https://guide.msa.maryland.gov/pages/series.aspx?ID=S4>: accessed 24 April 2024).
- Massachusetts:
 - “Maine Revolutionary War Bounty Land Applications, 1835-1838.” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1881491>: accessed 23 April 2024).
 - “Massachusetts Revolutionary War Bounty Land Applications, 1805-1845.” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1881492>: accessed 23 April 2024).
 - Massachusetts Office of the Secretary of State. “Certificate of Land Bounties Granted to Revolutionary War Soldiers, 1801-1828.” *Archivegrid* (<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/collection/data/658218057>: accessed 23 April 2024).
- New York:
 - “Index to the New York State Department of State military patents.” *New York State Archives* (<https://www.archives.nysed.gov/research/name-index-by-series/A0447/H>: accessed 23 April 2024).
 - Wertis, John. “The Balloting Book, and Other Documents Relating to the Military Bounty Lands.” *The History Center Blog*, 23 January 2021 (<https://thehistorycenter.net/Blog/9971059>: accessed 23 April 2024).
- North Carolina:
 - “Early North Carolina/Tennessee Land Grants at the Tennessee State Library and Archives.” *Tennessee Secretary of State* (<https://sos.tn.gov/tsla/guides/early-north-carolina-tennessee-land-grants-at-the-tennessee-state-library-and-archives>: accessed 23 April 2024).
 - “North Carolina and Tennessee, U.S., Revolutionary War Land Warrants, 1783-1843.” *Ancestry.com* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 23 April 2024).
- Pennsylvania:
 - “RG-17, Records of the Land Office, Donation Land Series.” *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission: Pennsylvania State Archives* (<https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17DonationLandSeries/DonationLandMainInterface.htm>: accessed 23 April 2024).
- South Carolina:
 - Dorsey, Wade. “State Plats for Land Grants 1784-1868 Now Available Online.” *The Silver Crescent Standard*. 02 June 2021 (<https://scdah.sc.gov/news/2021-06/state-plats-land-grants-1784-1868-now-available-online>: accessed 24 April 2024).

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- Virginia:

- “Land Law 1779 (A).” *Kentucky.gov* ([https://www.sos.ky.gov/land/resources/legislation/Documents/Land%20Law%201779%20\(A\).pdf](https://www.sos.ky.gov/land/resources/legislation/Documents/Land%20Law%201779%20(A).pdf): accessed 22 April 2024).
- “Revolutionary War Bounty Land Claims.” *Library of Virginia* (<https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/bounty-claims>: accessed 23 April 2024.)
- “Research Notes Number 20: The Virginia Land Office.” *Library of Virginia* (https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/research_notes_20.pdf: accessed 22 April 2024).

Pensions:

- Federal: “Revolutionary War Pension Files: Tips and a Guide for the Curious,” *National Park Service* (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/what-might-you-find-in-the-revolutionary-war-pension-files.htm>: accessed 27 April 2024).
- Virginia: “Revolutionary War Virginia State Pensions,” *Library of Virginia* (<https://lva-virginia.libguides.com/revolutionary-pensions>: accessed 27 April 2024).