

U.S. Military Records A Beginner's Guide

Military records not only provide proof that an ancestor served their country, but also contain useful genealogical information.

Where do I start?

There are a few things to keep in mind when beginning your research:

- If you are uncertain whether or not an ancestor served in the military, consider which conflicts took place during their lifetime. This [Ages of Servicemen chart](#)¹ shows enlistment ages by birth year.
- Where did your ancestor live? Soldiers served in local, state and federal units. For a successful search, you'll need to start with your ancestor's name and location.
- If your ancestor did not serve in the military, a parent or sibling may have. The paper trail they created can lead to information about your ancestor's family.

U.S Military Records

[Service Records](#)² document soldiers who served in the military. These records can include when and where a soldiers served, as well as enlistment/draft registration, residence, rank, unit, muster dates, rosters, casualties, capture, and desertion.

[Pension Records](#)³ contain applications for payments of service and often include documents, submitted by a veteran or his family, to prove eligibility. Supporting documents might include: service narratives (often in the veteran's own hand); affidavits of friends, family members, fellow soldiers, etc.; vital records recording place/date of birth, place/date of marriage, wife's maiden name, minor children, and places of residence; family Bible pages; letters; and discharge papers.

[Bounty Land Records](#)⁴ document land granted by the government as compensation for service or as an enlistment incentive to those serving in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, early Indian Wars, and the Mexican War. Land records from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 may be combined with pension records. A good resource is the [U.S. War Bounty Land Warrants index \(1789 –1858\)](#)⁵.

Tip: Additional military resources include [unit histories](#)⁶, [letters and diaries](#)⁷, [newspapers](#)⁸, [cemetery records](#)⁹, [awards and decorations](#)¹⁰, [state adjutant records](#)¹¹, and the [American State Papers](#)¹². Don't forget to visit local court houses and state archives!

Where Can I Find Military Records?

U.S Military records are property of the federal government. Physical documents are generally in two primary locations:

Revolutionary War to 1912

[National Archives Records Administration](#)¹³ (NARA)
Washington, D.C.

World War I to the present

[National Personnel Records Center](#)¹⁴ (NPRC)
St. Louis, Missouri

To begin searching for records online:

1. Check what records and indexes are available on PPLD genealogy databases (especially [AncestryLibrary](#)¹⁵, [Fold3](#)¹⁶, [FamilySearch](#)¹⁷, and [HeritageQuest](#)¹⁸).
2. Search for additional records using the National Archives [Catalog](#)¹⁹ and [Archival Databases](#)²⁰. Copies of records that have not been digitized can be [ordered online](#)²¹ (there may be a fee).

REGISTRATION CARD (Men born on or after July 1, 1924, and on or before December 31, 1924) (Also for the registration of men as they reach the 18th anniversary of the date of their birth on or after January 1, 1943.)			
SERIAL NUMBER W-16	1. NAME (Print) Orlen Clayton Kelley		ORDER NUMBER 11,857
2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print) Pickering Nodaway Missouri			
3. MAILING ADDRESS Same			
4. TELEPHONE Pickering	5. AGE IN YEARS 18	6. PLACE OF BIRTH Maryville Missouri	
7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS Orlen Kelley, Sr. Pickering Nodaway Missouri			
8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS Orlen Kelley, Sr. Pickering Nodaway Missouri			
9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS Same			
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.			
DSS Form 1 (Rev. 11-16-42)		e16-21659-4 (OVER)	

Draft registration card for Clayton Kelley,
World War II

Accessibility Limitations

- Not all records have been microfilmed or digitized.
- In 1973, a massive fire destroyed 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files at the NPRC. Losses include:
 - 80% of Army records for personnel discharged November 1, 1912 to January 1, 1960
 - 75% of Air Force records for personnel discharged September 25, 1947 to January 1, 1964
- Archival records, those of individuals who left service more than 62 years ago, are open to the public. The records of those who left service less than 62 years ago are considered non-archival and are not accessible by the general public. Only limited information from non-archival records is available to researchers without the consent of the veteran or [next-of kin](#)²².

Additional Resources

Lineage Societies

Military lineage societies members have an established relationship with a qualifying ancestor, usually a soldier or patriot. Applications tend to require proof of descent. Lineage (and Veteran) societies often keep organizational records, membership lists, and may have other useful family history materials. Two major societies include the [Daughters of the American Revolution](#)²³ (DAR) and the [Sons of the American Revolution](#)²⁴ (SAR). [Many additional societies](#)²⁵ cover other conflicts.

Military Histories

The history divisions of each military branch offer histories and other useful resources: [Air Force](#)²⁶; [Army](#)²⁷; [Navy](#)²⁸; [Marine Corps](#)²⁹; and [Coast Guard](#)³⁰.

FamilySearch Catalog

Use the [FamilySearch Catalog](#)³¹ to find publications related to the military. Search by *Place* using your ancestor's location (state or county) and scroll through topics to find *Military history* and *Military records*.

For information about military records from major U.S. military conflicts, check out our [U.S. Military Records: By Conflict](#)³² *handout!*