

Beyond the Draft Card: Researching Your Great War Ancestors

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The Draft Card

There were three registrations from May 1917 to May 1919:

- June 5, 1917 – all men ages 21-31
- June 5, 1918 – those who attained age 21 after June 5, 1917
- September 12, 1918 – all men ages 18-45

There was also one supplemental registration held on August 24, 1918, for those who turned 21 years old after June 5, 1918. NARA has included these records with the records of the second registration.

Remember: *the draft registration was required by law (the Selective Service Act of May 1917), so all men who fell within the indicated age range were required to register. This included men living in Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Native Americans, prisoners, those considered insane, and anyone in a hospital.*

Approximately 23% of the population in 1918 were men who registered for the draft. Not everyone who registered for the draft served in the military and not everyone who served in the military registered for the draft. Remember, by the time the U.S. started the draft up, the Great War had been raging for three years already. *It's important to note that the draft cards are not service cards or records and do not contain information about an individual's military service.*

- Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/6482/>)
- FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1968530>)
- Fold3 (<https://www.fold3.com/publication/959/wwi-draft-registration-cards>)

There were those who felt the need to join the war effort before the United States entered the war. Many of those individuals crossed the border to Canada and joined the Canadian military until the United States entered the war in 1917. Some even signed up with military units in the United Kingdom and France.

Newspapers

Newspapers are a fantastic way to find out about what was going on during the war. From front page news to MIA and KIA notices you never know what gems you might find when you look through a newspaper!

Military Records

The list of military records which can be utilized for research is extensive. Some of these records were impacted by the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. Additional information about that fire can be found at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/fire-1973> but the most important thing to remember is that NARA is still working on preserving the records that were saved from the fire. Whether you think the fire affected your ancestor's records or not, ***don't*** just assume your ancestor's file was destroyed in the fire, ***always*** submit a request to NARA to see if the records still exist. The NARA staff strives to be as helpful as they can be with these requests!

State Records

I truly wish I could list every state resource that I'm aware of on this handout but with 50 states, a federal district, and 14 territories I'm afraid that would make the handout entirely too long. Instead, I offer a list of suggestions for finding state resources:

- Check with your state historic society to see if they have record holdings related to the Great War
- Check with a state-sponsored library to see if they have record holdings related to the War
- Don't forget about the smaller, local libraries!
- Soldiers technically were required to file their discharge papers at the local county courthouse; these may have been filed in the "loose papers" and may require some piece-by-piece searching
- Do a Google search for your state name and either World War I or the Great War
- Do a Google search for your state name and either a specific year within the Great War period or the overall time frame; use the advanced search options in Google for this type of search

Civilians

Just because someone didn't serve in the military during the war, doesn't mean they didn't serve in some capacity which would have created a record for you to look for! From civic groups to Victory Gardens, there is probably a group or cause that your ancestor participated in. Think outside the box in your searches.

Prisoners of War/Injuries/Casualties

Casualty statistics vary widely for the Great War. Estimates range from 9 million to over 15 million casualties. Wikipedia has a good article on World War I Casualties at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties. It includes an explanation of classification of casualty statistics and a detailed table showing casualties by 1914-1918 borders. Influenza and its complications were a common cause of death.

Awards and Medals

There are a number of decorations, awards, and medals earned by military and civilian personnel during the Great War. The list of resources was, unfortunately, too lengthy to include in this handout and can be found on my website at <https://talkingboxgenealogy.com/resources-and-reading/>.

Division and Unit Histories

Division and Unit Histories are “yearbook style” books published after the Great War that contain information on the orders, movements, and soldiers of the book’s focus. Sometimes lists of soldiers’ names or even pages of soldiers’ photographs can be found in these histories. I recommend searching WorldCat, Hathi Trust or Google to learn whether there was a history written on the specific division or unit your ancestor was a part of.

Enemy Aliens

Many people automatically equate the term enemy alien with World War II, however, once a country declared war, natives from belligerent countries were immediately considered enemy aliens. Non-naturalized enemy aliens were required to register with U.S. authorities after the U.S. entry into the war.

Conscientious Objectors

With any war comes strong opinions and political beliefs. The concept of conscientious objectors is not a new concept. There were approximately 64,000 people who claimed conscientious objector status. Approximately 80% of those who claimed conscientious objector status still went to war. Others were court-martialed or placed into non-combatant roles. When the government is involved and requests are made, records exist!

Miscellaneous

Interested in learning more about the Great War in general? Here's some resources that might help you.

Books containing general information about the Great War and the AEF:

- First World War For Dummies (Dr. Seán Lang)
- The War to End All Wars (E.M. Coffman)
- Over There (Frank Freidel)
- Lady in the Navy: A Personal Reminiscence (Joy B. Hancock)
- I Was a Yeoman (F) (Mrs. Henry F. Butler [Estelle Kemper]), available to be viewed online at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/i-was-a-yeoman-f.html>.
- Soldiers' Songs and Slang of the Great War (collected by Martin Pegler)
- The Doughboys (Gary Meade)

Books containing detailed information about the Great War and the AEF:

- American Armies and Battlefields in France (GPO)
- Order of Battle of United States Land Forces in the World War, 1917-1919 (U.S. Army)
- World War I: The U.S. Army Overseas (U.S. Army Center for Military History)
- Official Record of the United States' Part in The Great War (Leonard Porter Ayres), available to be viewed online at <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p15012coll10/id/1157>. (This listing has been included under the "Awards and Medals" section because it contains information regarding the men who received the Congressional Medal of Honor)

Additional Great War resources can be found on my website at
<https://talkingboxgenealogy.com/resources-and-reading/>