

REVOLUTIONARY WAR ANCESTORS

GENEALOGY RESEARCH RESOURCES & PATRIOT RECORDS

Service records, pension & bounty-land files, patriot databases, state militia, free-first repositories, and ready-to-use AI prompts for family historians

How To Use This Cheat Sheet

Work free-first. America turns 250 in 2026, and the timing could not be better for patriot research: the headline Revolutionary War records are open to everyone right now. Start with the official portals and the free pension files, then reach for fee databases or onsite requests only when they save time or unlock an original. Every entry below tells you what you will find, free versus fee, online versus in person, and a full <https://> URL.

 FREE online View or search from home. A free account may be required.	 Mixed / library Access or coverage varies by collection, library, or location.	 Fee / subscription Paid database, membership, order fee, or copy fee. Verify current price.	 In person / request Contact the repository or visit. Ask about pulls, ID, and copies.
1. Confirm service Place, age, and side. Who likely served, where, and for whom.	2. Find the file Index, then service record, then pension, then bounty land.	3. Read & extract Mine every page for names, dates, and relationships.	4. Prove & cite Correlate sources and record a clean citation.

1. Why Revolutionary War Records Are Worth the Hunt

The Revolutionary War (1775 to 1783) is the deepest layer most American family trees can reach with documents alone. It is also one of the trickiest. The war predates the 1850 census, the first to name every person in a household, so a patriot ancestor often lived and died without ever appearing by name in a federal population schedule. Worse, fire took a heavy toll: War Department blazes in 1800 and 1814 destroyed most of the original service paperwork, and an 1800 fire wiped out the earliest pension applications. What survives was largely rebuilt afterward from muster and pay rolls into compiled records, so you are frequently working with a reconstruction rather than the original.

Then there are the forks in the road. Was your ancestor a Continental Army regular, a state line soldier, or a local militiaman called out for a few weeks? Did he serve at all, or did he support the cause as a civilian by supplying goods, signing an oath, or lending money? Was the family Patriot or Loyalist, and if Loyalist, did they flee to Canada and leave their paper trail in British and Canadian archives? Federal records sit at the National Archives, but state militia rolls, state pensions, and state bounty land live in state archives. Naming was loose, too, with clerks spelling by ear. Sorting these threads is the whole game.

Here is the payoff, and why 2026 is the year to dig in. A Revolutionary War pension file can hand you a marriage date, a widow's maiden name, a roster of children, a string of residences, and now and then a page lifted straight from the family Bible. Picture a researcher chasing Elias Thornton, said to be "from Orange County" with nothing more to go on. His widow's 1838 pension application names her maiden surname, the county where they married in 1781, and four children with birth years. One file rebuilt a family that no census ever recorded. That is the prize waiting in these records, and for a limited window much of it is free.

WHAT SURVIVES **Compiled Military Service Records (CMSRs)** for the Continental Army and naval personnel, Revolutionary War Rolls (muster and pay rolls), pension application files, bounty-land warrant application files, prisoner-of-war and prize-case records, and final-payment vouchers. State militia muster and pay rolls, state pensions, and state bounty land are held separately at State Archives.

PENSION LAW, PLAIN-SPOKEN Early pensions were primarily for disability or death incurred in line of duty. The 1818 act provided service pensions to qualifying veterans; the 1820 act required property/income schedules and narrowed eligibility. The 1822 date is not the usual headline date in pension summaries; many summaries cite 1820 and later 1823 restoration/amendment activity. The 1832 act expanded service pensions to many surviving veterans without a poverty test; the 1836 act opened widow applications. The 1836 act required the widow to have married the veteran before the expiration of his last Revolutionary War service, not simply before the end of the war in 1783. Later acts extended widow eligibility to later marriage-date cutoffs. Translation: a file can exist 50 or more years after the war, so keep looking even if your soldier died young.

2. Where the Records Live

Four kinds of homes hold Revolutionary War records, and knowing which is which saves weeks. The National Archives (NARA) keeps the federal core: compiled service records for the Continental Army and naval personnel, the Revolutionary War pension and bounty-land files, and the Revolutionary War Rolls. Fold3 and FamilySearch put much of that online: Fold3 hosts the digitized pension images and service records, while FamilySearch carries free indexes and links out to the Fold3 images. State Archives hold what NARA does not, usually state militia muster and pay rolls, state pensions, and state bounty land. And the lineage societies, chiefly the DAR and the SAR, maintain free patriot databases that confirm service and crack collateral lines.

Subscription sites earn their keep on the edges. Ancestry indexes the federal pension and service collections and many state records. Findmypast is your friend for the British and Loyalist side of the conflict. American Ancestors (NEHGS) goes deep on New England. The tables that follow are sorted so you can spend nothing first and pay only when a record truly lives behind a paywall.

THE 2026 WINDOW For America's 250th, Fold3 has opened its entire Revolutionary War collection (34 million-plus records, including the complete pension files) free through 6 July 2026 at 11:59 p.m. Ancestry's America 250 featured collections are free through 30 June 2026 at 10 a.m. ET. Free registration is required; after each window the records return behind a subscription. If you have any reason to suspect patriot ancestry, search now. See <https://genealogybargains.com/free-access-alert-fold3/>

THE ONE RULE You never need to pay to read a Revolutionary War pension file. The complete files are free and full-text searchable on Fold3 during the 2026 window, and they live permanently in the free National Archives Catalog. If a site asks you to pay to view a pension file, stop and go to NARA.

3. Archives & Repositories: Quick Reference

Scan by category. Free resources come first; fee-based and in-person options are flagged clearly.

 FEDERAL & FREE ONLINE			
Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
National Archives (NARA) – The American Revolution	The federal starting point: an overview of Revolutionary War military service records, pension and bounty-land files, and how to order what is not yet digitized. Read this first to learn what survives.	 FREE Online + In-person	https://www.archives.gov/research/military/american-revolution
NARA – Genealogy & Military Records	NARA's how-to hub for using service, pension, and bounty-land records in family history, including holdings detail and how to order copies by mail or onsite.	 FREE Online + In-person	https://www.archives.gov/research/military/genealogy
National Archives Catalog	Search and view digitized federal records. The Revolutionary War pension and bounty-land case files are scanned here and are free to view and download. Use the citations to order anything not yet online.	 FREE Online	https://catalog.archives.gov/
Fold3 – Revolutionary War Pension & Bounty-Land Files (M804)	The crown jewel: roughly 80,000 case files from NARA M804, fully digitized and full-text searchable. Expect marriages, widows, children, residences, and even Bible pages. Free for America 250 through July 6, 2026, then by subscription.	 FREE Online FREE thru Jul 6, 2026	https://www.fold3.com/publication/467/us-revolutionary-war-pensions-1800-1900

Fold3 – Revolutionary War Collection	The full Revolutionary War collection: service records, rolls, prize cases, the burial index, Black and Indigenous soldier records, and more. Free in full during the 2026 window; some titles sit behind a subscription afterward.	 MIXED Online FREE thru Jul 6, 2026	https://www.fold3.com/collection/us-revolutionary-war-us
Fold3 – Revolutionary War Burial Index	Fold3 announced a new Revolutionary War Burial Index with more than 67,000 records for veterans who died between 1775 and 1875. Treat it as a lead, not proof of service.	 MIXED Online FREE thru Jul 6, 2026	https://www.fold3.com/blog/new-revolutionary-war-burial-index/
FamilySearch – Pension & Bounty-Land Applications, 1800–1900	Free name index to the M804 pension and bounty-land files, created by Fold3. Confirm a name and pension number here, then view the page images on Fold3 or in the NARA Catalog.	 FREE Online (free account)	https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1417475
FamilySearch – Full-Text Search for Revolutionary War pension/bounty-land applications	A major free search path for names, places, witnesses, and kin inside pension file.	 FREE Online (free account)	https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/full-text/collection/5000421
FamilySearch – Records Search & Research Wiki	Free compiled service-record and pension indexes, plus place-by-place guides, record start dates, and repository pointers. Search broadly, then follow the wiki to state militia sources.	 FREE Online + FS Library	https://www.familysearch.org/search/

NARA – Citizen Archivist: Rev War Pension Transcription	An America 250 project to transcribe the pension files. Browsing and transcribing is free, and freshly transcribed pages become keyword-searchable. A fun way to read deep into a file page by page.	● FREE Online	https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/missions/revolutionary-war-pension-files
NARA – bulk downloads for Revolutionary War pension files	NARA provides bulk downloads of digitized images, transcriptions, and metadata for the Revolutionary War pension files.	● FREE Online	https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/catalog-bulk-downloads/revwarpensionfiles
National Genealogical Society (NGS) Veteran Bounty Land Records Project	Bounty Land Warrant Application files from veterans of early American wars	● FREE Online	https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/veteran-bounty-land-records-project/
Library of Congress – Chronicling America	Free, full-text historic newspapers for war coverage, casualty notices, enlistment and bounty-land ads, obituaries of aging veterans, and local color for your ancestor's unit.	● FREE Online	https://www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america/
Southern Campaigns Revolutionary War Pension Statements	A free, volunteer-built archive of 30,000-plus transcribed pension applications and 400-plus rosters for soldiers who served or lived in the South. Often the fastest way to actually read a pension narrative.	● FREE Online	https://www.revwarapps.org/
Military Indexes – Revolutionary War (by state)	A free, link-rich directory of online Revolutionary War indexes and records organized by state and record type. The fastest route to state rosters, muster rolls, and pension lists.	● FREE Online	https://www.militaryindexes.com/revolutionarywar/

USGenWeb Project	Volunteer-built free state and county pages with transcribed muster rolls, pension abstracts, DAR/SAR markers, and cemeteries. Often the only online home for a small local militia list.	 FREE Online	https://www.usgenweb.org/
American Battlefield Trust	Free battle maps, animated overviews, primary sources, and unit articles. Use it to place a regiment at a battle, confirm identity, and turn a name on a roll into a story.	 FREE Online	https://www.battlefields.org/

PITFALL NARA holds federal military records and the compiled service records of soldiers who served with the Continental Army, including many state-raised units in Continental service. Purely state militia payrolls, state pensions, state bounty land, and adjutant-general papers are usually held by the State Archives, not NARA.



LINEAGE & PATRIOTIC SOCIETIES

Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
DAR Genealogical Research System (GRS)	Free databases from the Daughters of the American Revolution: an Ancestor Database of 900,000-plus proven patriots, a Descendants Database of 7,100,000-plus names, the GRC every-name index, plus the Rev War Pension Index and Patriot Records Project images. The single best place to check whether a patriot is already proven.	● FREE Online + DAR Library (DC)	https://www.dar.org/research/genealogy-resources
SAR Patriot Research System (PRS)	The Sons of the American Revolution free database of patriots, graves, and member-linked descendants, with biographical sketches. Free to all. Treat entries as leads; you still must find the original service reference for an application.	● FREE Online	https://www.sar.org/patriot-research-system/
Society of the Cincinnati / American Revolution Institute	The nation's oldest hereditary society (1783), for descendants of Continental Army officers. Its American Revolution Institute library and museum at Anderson House offer open research resources, articles, and collections.	● MIXED Online + Library (DC)	https://www.societyofthecincinnati.org/
National Society Children of the American Revolution (N.S.C.A.R.)	Youth lineage society (under 22) for descendants of patriots. Useful for family connections, local chapters, and confirming a documented line within a family.	● MIXED Online	https://www.nscar.org/
National Genealogical Society (NGS)	Education, standards, and research guidance. Strong for method, citation, and proof when you are assembling a Revolutionary War case.	● MIXED Online	https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/

Cyndi's List – American Revolution	A curated, free gateway to hundreds of Revolutionary War links: societies, state records, rosters, battles, loyalist sources, and databases gathered in one place.	 FREE Online	https://www.cyndislist.com/amrev.htm
---	--	---	---

 SUBSCRIPTION & FEE-BASED			
Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
Ancestry	Indexed Revolutionary War pension and bounty-land files, compiled service records, SAR membership applications, state rosters, and DAR lineage books. Many records link to Fold3 images. Featured collections are free for America 250 through June 30, 2026.	 FEE Online (free at many libraries)	https://www.ancestry.com/
Fold3 (Premium)	Home of the digitized Revolutionary War pension and service images. Free in full during the 2026 America 250 window; afterward the wider military archive sits behind a subscription.	 MIXED Online FREE thru Jul 6, 2026	https://www.fold3.com/
Findmypast	Strong for British and Loyalist records, the other side of the conflict. Useful if your ancestor stayed loyal to the Crown, served with British forces, or resettled in Canada.	 FEE Online	https://www.findmypast.com/
American Ancestors (NEHGS)	New England Historic Genealogical Society databases, journals, and compiled records, with deep coverage of New England soldiers, town records, and the early republic.	 MIXED Online + In-person (Boston)	https://www.americanancestors.org/
MyHeritage	Large record and tree-matching service with Revolutionary-era collections and useful international coverage for families that moved before or after the war.	 FEE Online (free trial)	https://www.myheritage.com/

FREE AT THE LIBRARY Many public and genealogy libraries offer Ancestry Library Edition and Fold3 free to walk-in patrons, and the SAR Library in Louisville provides free onsite access to Ancestry, Fold3, HeritageQuest, and American Ancestors. A library card can stand in for a subscription. Ask your local library or a nearby FamilySearch affiliate.

STATE ARCHIVES, IN-PERSON & LOYALIST

Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
Your State Archive (militia, state pension & bounty land)	NARA does NOT hold state militia rolls, state pensions, or state bounty land. Search your ancestor's state for militia commissions, muster and pay rolls, oaths of allegiance, and adjutant-general records. Locate yours through the FamilySearch Wiki or Military Indexes.	● IN-PERSON Online + In-person	https://www.militaryindexes.com/revolutionarywar/
DAR Library, Washington DC	A premier Revolutionary-era reference library, free and open to the public, with images and indexes available onsite that are restricted online. Note: a Library Restoration Project begins July 2026, so verify access and hours before visiting; the GRS stays free online.	● IN-PERSON In-person Restoration: Jul 2026	https://www.dar.org/library
SAR Genealogical Research Library, Louisville KY	A national research library of 55,000-plus items spanning all 50 states, with free onsite access to Ancestry, Fold3, HeritageQuest, and American Ancestors. Open to the public for a small daily admission.	● IN-PERSON In-person \$5/day, members free	https://www.sar.org/genealogy/
UELAC – United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada	The leading body for Loyalist research, with a Loyalist Directory of individuals including service, settlement, and land-grant detail. Essential if the family stayed loyal to the Crown and moved north.	● MIXED Online + Request	https://uelac.ca/
Library and Archives Canada	Loyalist land petitions, muster rolls, and military service records for those who resettled in British North America. Pair with UELAC and Findmypast for the British side.	● MIXED Online + Request	https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/

4. How To Find Your Revolutionary War Ancestor

Follow the path in order. Each step narrows the field and feeds the next, and most of it is free.

#	Step	How To Do It
1	Confirm likely service	Was your ancestor a man roughly 16 to 60 between 1775 and 1783 (born about 1715 to 1767) living in the colonies? Lean on family lore, county histories, DAR and SAR markers, and later “pensioner” notes to build the case. Decide Patriot or Loyalist early.
2	Check the patriot databases	Search the free DAR GRS and SAR PRS to see whether your ancestor is already a proven patriot. A hit gives you a documented line, a service summary, and a record copy you can order.
3	Search the index first	Use the free FamilySearch pension index and compiled service-record index to confirm a name, unit, and pension number before ordering or viewing anything.
4	Pull the service record (CMSR)	The Compiled Military Service Record is key evidence for Continental or state-line service and names the unit. It is the federal anchor for everything that follows.
5	Get the pension file – free	Read the pension file free on Fold3 (through July 6, 2026) or in the NARA Catalog. These files carry marriage dates, widows’ names, children, residences, and sometimes Bible records. Never pay for them.
6	Chase the bounty land	Many bounty-land claims are filed with the pension. Federal warrants were granted under the acts of 1788, 1803, 1806, and 1855; order warrant-based files from NARA using the warrant number and act.
7	Go to the state for militia	For militia, state pensions, or state bounty land, contact the State Archives. NARA does not hold these. Use the Military Indexes state list to find rolls fast.
8	Build the unit’s context	Identify the regiment’s battles and movements (Boston, Saratoga, the Southern Campaign, Valley Forge, Yorktown) using the American Battlefield Trust to confirm identity and add story.
9	Work collateral & loyalist records	When direct proof is thin, mine siblings and in-laws, DAR and SAR applications, grave markers, and newspapers. If the family was Loyalist, turn to UELAC and Library and Archives Canada.

BOUNTY-LAND TRAP Veterans often claimed federal bounty land far from where they served, and many moved west to settle it. Search by name nationwide, not just the home county, or you will miss the file.

NAMES MUTATE Clerks spelled by ear, and 18th-century spelling was anything but fixed. “Reuben Fitch” may appear as Ruben, Reuben Fytch, or simply R. Fitch. Build phonetic and clerk’s-error variants before you decide a record does not exist.

PATRIOT OR LOYALIST? Not everyone supported independence. Loyalist numbers are debated; many modern estimates are closer to about one-fifth to 30%, varied sharply by region, and the old one-third formula should be treated cautiously. Many Loyalist families left for Canada after 1783. If your ancestor vanishes from American records around the war, look north before concluding the trail is cold.

5. AI Prompts for Revolutionary War Research

Use AI as a research assistant, translator, and planning partner, never as a source of facts. Always verify names, units, repositories, fees, and links against the records themselves. Copy a prompt, fill the [BRACKETS], and paste in your file or transcription where noted.

Use Case	Copy-Ready Prompt
Identify likely service	Act as an expert in U.S. Revolutionary War military genealogy. My ancestor was [NAME], born about [YEAR] and living in [PLACE] during 1775 to 1783. Tell me whether he was likely of service age, whether he may have been Patriot or Loyalist, which theaters and units recruited from that area, and exactly which record sets (compiled service record, pension, bounty land, state militia, DAR/SAR databases) I should check and in what order. Do not invent records or URLs; flag anything I must verify.
Analyze a pension file	You are a military pension analyst. I will paste the contents of a Revolutionary War pension file for [NAME]. Extract every genealogical fact: enlistment date and place, unit and rank, service dates, marriage date and place, spouse and maiden name, children with dates, residences, and the pension act under which it was granted. List facts separately from inferences, and note any conflicts. File: [PASTE].
Transcribe a muster roll	Transcribe this handwritten Revolutionary War muster or pay roll line by line. Preserve original spelling, ranks, and column order. Use [illegible] for unreadable text and [?] for uncertain letters. Do not fill gaps from context unless clearly labeled as a hypothesis. Then list each soldier with rank and any dates. Image or text: [PASTE OR UPLOAD].
Decode terms & abbreviations	Explain these Revolutionary War-era military and pension abbreviations and terms in plain English, with the likely meaning for genealogy: [PASTE LIST]. Where a term has more than one meaning in this period, give each and say how I could tell them apart from the surrounding record.
Build unit context	Act as a Revolutionary War regimental historian. For the [UNIT, e.g., 2nd Virginia Regiment], summarize when and where it was raised, its commanders, major engagements, and movements from 1775 to 1783. Note which battles my ancestor [NAME] may have seen and which records (returns, rolls, pension narratives) would confirm his presence. Cite the type of source for each claim and flag anything uncertain.
Patriot vs. Loyalist sort	Help me determine whether [NAME] of [PLACE] was a Patriot or a Loyalist during the Revolution. List the record types that would point each way (oaths of allegiance, confiscation and banishment acts, claims to the British Crown, DAR/SAR proof, UELAC directory), and give me a checklist of searches in priority order. Do not guess his allegiance; tell me what evidence would settle it.

Use Case	Copy-Ready Prompt
Generate a research plan	Build a free-first Revolutionary War research plan for [ANCESTOR], born/married/died around [DATES] in [STATE]. Include the order of records to pursue (DAR/SAR databases, then index, service, pension, bounty land, state militia), the free repositories for each, likely spelling variants, common pitfalls for this state, and my next 10 searches in priority order.
Reconcile the evidence	Review my sourced findings for [ANCESTOR] and write a proof-style summary. Correlate the service record, pension file, bounty-land claim, lineage-society proof, and any state or collateral evidence. Identify conflicts, missing records, and the single strongest next step. Rate the conclusion as proved, probable, possible, or not proved, and explain why. Sources: [PASTE].

VERIFY EVERYTHING AI tools can invent plausible-looking citations, URLs, regiments, and dates. Treat every AI answer as a lead to confirm, not a fact to record. If a prompt tells the AI “do not invent” and it does anyway, throw the answer out.

6. Quick Tips & Pitfalls: Field Notes

Tip / Pitfall	What To Do
Pensions are free – always	Read the pension files free on Fold3 (through July 6, 2026) and permanently in the NARA Catalog. Never pay a subscription just to view one.
Start with DAR & SAR	Before anything else, check the free DAR GRS and SAR PRS. If your patriot is already proven, you inherit a documented line and a record copy to order.
Mind the 2026 windows	Fold3's full Revolutionary War collection is free through July 6, 2026; Ancestry's America 250 collections through June 30, 2026. Grab images now, before the paywall returns.
Service record first	Pull the compiled service record to prove service and lock the unit. It anchors the pension and bounty-land search.
State holds the militia	NARA does not keep state militia rolls, state pensions, or state bounty land. Go to the State Archives for those.
Follow the bounty land	Federal warrants came under the acts of 1788, 1803, 1806, and 1855, and claims may sit in a state your ancestor moved to. Search nationwide and chase the warrant number to NARA.
Mind the later acts	The 1832, 1836, 1838, 1843, 1844, 1848, and 1853 acts widened pensions. A widow's claim may appear 50-plus years after the war. Search even if the veteran died young.
Sort Patriot from Loyalist	About a third of colonists stayed loyal. If the trail goes cold around the war, check UELAC and Library and Archives Canada.
Expect ragged survival	The 1800 and 1814 fires created real gaps. A negative search is still a result; record what you checked and did not find.
Build the unit's story	Regimental movements confirm identity and turn a name on a roll into an ancestor with a place in the nation's founding.

ONE LAST THING A Revolutionary War file is rarely the end of a search; it is the doorway. The marriage in a pension, the witnesses in a deposition, the land that a warrant set in motion: each one points to the next record. The 250th anniversary has thrown these doors wide open for 2026. Start free, read every page, write down where you looked, and let one patriot lead you to the whole family.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to be transparent that this content – **REVOLUTIONARY WAR ANCESTORS GENEALOGY RESEARCH RESOURCES & PATRIOT RECORDS** – was created in part with the help of an artificial intelligence (AI) language model – **Claude Opus 4.8**. The AI assisted in generating an early draft of the content, but every paragraph was subsequently reviewed, edited, and refined by me. The final content is the result of extensive human curation and creativity. I am proud to present this work and assure readers that while AI was a tool in the process, the story, style, and substance have been carefully shaped by the author.