WAR OF 1812 ANCESTORS GENEALOGY RESEARCH RESOURCES

Military service records, pension & bounty-land files, state militia, naval & privateer records, free-first repositories, and ready-to-use AI prompts for family historians

How To Use This Cheat Sheet

*Work free-first. Start with 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'll find, free vs. fee, online vs. in-person, and a full **https://** URL.*

FREE online	$ FEE / subscription	IN-PERSON / request	BOTH / mixed
View or search from home; a free account may be required.	Membership, credits, or a copy order needed for full access.	Order copies or visit the repository; verify ID and hours.	Free index online, with originals onsite or by paid request.

1. Confirm service	2. Find the file	3. Read & extract	4. Prove & cite
Place, age, and unit — who likely served, and where.	Index → service record → pension → bounty land.	Mine every page for names, dates, and relationships.	Correlate sources and record a clean citation.

1. Why the War of 1812 Is a Researcher's Goldmine

The War of 1812 (1812–1815) pitted the young United States against Great Britain, and it pulled in tens of thousands of regular soldiers, state militiamen, sailors, and privateersmen from nearly every state and territory. For a long time those men sat in a hard spot for genealogists: too late for the well-worked Revolutionary records, too early for the 1850 census, the first to name every person in a household. That gap is exactly why the 1812 records are so valuable. When you find a file, it often hands you a family that no other source preserved.

Here's the part that changes everything. The **Preserve the Pensions** (https://www.fold3.com/publication/761/us-war-of-1812-pension-files-1812-1815) project digitized roughly 180,000 pension and bounty-land files — about 7.2 million pages — and those images are free on Fold3 forever. As of late 2025 the files for surnames A through V were online, with the last letters being added. A pension application can hand you a marriage date, a widow's maiden name, a list of children, residences, and now and then a page torn from the family Bible. That is genealogy gold, and it costs nothing.

WHAT SURVIVES Compiled Military Service Records (CMSRs), pension application files, bounty-land warrant applications, prisoner-of-war records, naval and Marine records, discharge certificates, and seamen's protection certificates — plus state militia muster and pay rolls held at State Archives.

PENSION LAW, PLAIN-SPOKEN The 1813 and 1816 acts covered service-related death or disability. The 1871 act opened pensions to veterans with 60+ days of service (widows if married before the war's end). The 1878 act widened it again to 14 days' service or any single engagement, for veterans and widows regardless of marriage date. Translation: a file may exist 60+ years after the war — keep looking even if your soldier died young.

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2. Where the Records Live

Four kinds of homes hold War of 1812 records, and knowing which is which saves you weeks. The **National Archives (NARA)** keeps the federal core — service records for the Regular Army and federal Volunteers, pension files, bounty-land applications, and naval records. **Fold3 and FamilySearch** put much of that online for free: Fold3 hosts the free pension images, while FamilySearch carries the indexes and many service-record films. **State Archives** hold what NARA does not — state militia muster and pay rolls, commissions, and adjutant-general papers. And the **lineage and patriotic societies** — the General Society of the War of 1812 and the U.S. Daughters of 1812 — maintain ancestor databases that can confirm service and crack collateral lines.

Subscription sites earn their keep on the edges. **Ancestry** indexes the federal service records and several state collections; **Findmypast** is your friend for the British and Canadian side; and **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 ONE RULE** If a website asks you to pay to view a War of 1812 pension file, stop. Those files are free on Fold3 and at the National Archives Catalog. You never need a subscription to read them.

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3. Archives & Repositories — Quick Reference

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

🏛 FEDERAL & FREE ONLINE

Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
National Archives (NARA) – War of 1812 Records	The federal mother lode: compiled military service records (CMSRs), pension and bounty-land application files, prisoner-of-war records, naval and Marine records, and discharge certificates for the Regular Army, Volunteers, and Navy. Start here to learn what survives and where it lives.	**FREE** Online + In-person	https://www.archives.gov/research/military/war-of-1812
NARA – Genealogy & Military Records Guide	NARA's how-to hub for using service, pension, and bounty-land records in family history, including holdings details 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 and series descriptions. War of 1812 pension and bounty-land files are free to view and download here; use the citations to order the rest.	**FREE** Online	https://catalog.archives.gov/
NARA Catalog – Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files	Roughly 2,000 bounty-land warrant application files are digitized and free; the balance are ordered from NARA using the warrant number, acreage, and act of Congress.	**FREE** Online + Request	https://catalog.archives.gov/id/567388
Fold3 – U.S. War of 1812 Pension & Bounty-Land Files	The crown jewel. About 180,000 files (7.2 million pages) from the Preserve the Pensions project — free forever, basic registration only. As of late 2025 surnames A–V are online with the final letters being added. Expect marriages, widows, children, and even Bible records.	**FREE** Online	https://www.fold3.com/publication/761/us-war-of-1812-pension-files-1812-1815

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FamilySearch – War of 1812 Pension Index (M313)	Free name index with images of the pension jacket-envelopes — soldier, unit, widow, and pension/bounty numbers. Pair it with the Fold3 page images.	**FREE** Online (free account)	https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1834325
FamilySearch – Records Search & Research Wiki	Free service-record and pension indexes (M602/M313), 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/
Library of Congress – Chronicling America	Free, full-text historic newspapers for war coverage, casualty lists, militia call-ups, enlistment notices, and local color for your ancestor's unit.	**FREE** Online	https://www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america/
USGenWeb Project	Volunteer-built, free state and county pages with transcribed muster rolls, pension abstracts, pay records, and cemeteries — often the only online home for small local militia lists.	**FREE** Online	https://www.usgenweb.org/
Military Indexes – War of 1812 (by state)	A free, link-rich directory of online War of 1812 indexes and records organized by state and record type — the fastest route to state militia, muster, and pay records.	**FREE** Online	https://www.militaryindexes.com/warof1812/

PITFALL NARA holds federal military records and CMSR/index material for volunteer soldiers, including many state-designated units in federal service, but purely state militia payrolls, commissions, adjutant-general papers, and state benefit records are usually at state archives.

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LINEAGE & PATRIOTIC SOCIETIES

Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
NGS – Preserve the Pensions	Home of the project that digitized the 1812 pension files. Background, progress updates, and confirmation that the records remain free on Fold3 indefinitely.	**FREE** Online	https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/preserve-the-pensions/
U.S. Daughters of 1812 – Ancestor Database	Searchable index of ancestors who gave civil, military, or naval service 1784–1815, drawn from member applications. Excellent for collateral lines and confirming service.	**FREE** Online + HQ Library (DC)	https://usdaughters1812.org/
General Society of the War of 1812	Hereditary society for descendants of Army, Navy, revenue-marine, or privateer service. Membership pages list approved ancestors and research aids.	**MIXED** Online + In-person	https://gswar1812.org/
DAR Genealogical Research System (GRS)	Free databases of patriots, descendants, and member applications. Revolution-focused, but invaluable for linking the Revolutionary generation to their War of 1812 sons.	**FREE** Online + DAR Library (DC)	https://www.dar.org/
Cyndi's List – War of 1812	A curated, free gateway to hundreds of War of 1812 links: societies, state records, rosters, battles, and databases in one place.	**FREE** Online	https://www.cyndislist.com/1812/

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SUBSCRIPTION & FEE-BASED

Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
Ancestry	Indexed War of 1812 service records, state militia rolls (e.g., New York payroll abstracts), pension lists, and searchable collections — many linked to Fold3 images.	**FEE** Online (free at many libraries)	https://www.ancestry.com/
Fold3 (Premium)	The 1812 pension files are free, but Fold3's wider military holdings — additional service records, rolls, and other war records — sit behind a subscription.	**MIXED** Online	https://www.fold3.com/
Findmypast	Strong for British and Canadian military records — the other side of the conflict. Useful if your ancestor served with British or Canadian forces, or for Royal Navy context.	**FEE** Online	https://www.findmypast.com/
American Ancestors (NEHGS)	New England Historic Genealogical Society databases, journals, and compiled records — deep coverage of New England soldiers, town records, and the early republic.	**MIXED** Online + In-person (Boston)	https://www.americanancestors.org/

FREE AT THE LIBRARY Many public and genealogy libraries offer Ancestry Library Edition and Fold3 free to walk-in patrons. A library card can stand in for a subscription — ask your local library or a nearby FamilySearch affiliate.

STATE ARCHIVES & MILITIA RECORDS

Resource	What You'll Find	Access / Cost	Full https:// URL
Your State Archive (militia, muster & pay rolls)	NARA does NOT hold state militia records — these live in State Archives. Search your ancestor's state for militia commissions, muster and pay rolls, bounty land, and adjutant-general records. Locate yours through the FamilySearch Wiki or Military Indexes.	**MIXED** Online + In-person	https://www.militaryindexes.com/warof1812/

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4. How To Find Your War of 1812 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 16–60 between 1812 and 1815 (born about 1755–1799) living in or near the fighting? Lean on family lore, county histories, and later census "pensioner" notations to build the case.
2	**Search the index first**	Use the free service-record index (NARA M602) and pension index (M313) at FamilySearch and Fold3 to confirm a name, unit, and rank before ordering anything.
3	**Pull the service record (CMSR)**	The Compiled Military Service Record proves service and names the unit. It is the first federal record to consult and anchors everything that follows.
4	**Get the pension file — free**	Search Fold3's free 1812 pension collection. These files carry marriage dates, widows' names, children, residences, and sometimes Bible records. Never pay for these.
5	**Chase the bounty land**	Many bounty-land claims are filed with the pension; warrant-based files are ordered from NARA using the warrant number, acreage, and act of Congress.
6	**Go to the state for militia**	For state militia service, contact the State Archives — NARA does not hold these. Use the Military Indexes state list to find rolls and pay records fast.
7	**Search naval & privateer records**	Sailors and privateersmen will not appear in Army CMSRs. Search NARA naval records, privateer commissions, and prize and admiralty court records separately.
8	**Build the unit's context**	Identify the regiment's battles and movements — the Niagara frontier, Lake Erie, New Orleans, the Chesapeake, the Creek War — to confirm identity and add story.
9	**Work collateral records**	When direct proof is thin, mine siblings and in-laws, the Daughters of 1812 ancestor database, lineage applications, grave markers, and newspapers.

BOUNTY-LAND TRAP Veterans often claimed bounty land in a different state than where they served — and many moved west to settle it. Search by name nationwide, not just the home county, or you'll miss the file entirely.

NAMES MUTATE Clerks spelled by ear. One pension file recorded the same man as both "Swinehart" and "Scheinhart." Build phonetic and clerk's-error variants before you decide a record doesn't exist.

BROADER THAN BRITAIN "War of 1812" service spills into the Creek War and the frontier Indian campaigns of 1813–1814. Widen your theater and unit search before concluding there's nothing to find.

WHEN DIRECT PROOF FAILS No file for your soldier? Work the people around him. A brother's or neighbor's pension file, a Daughters of 1812 application, a county history, or a grave marker can place your ancestor in the right unit and family.

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5. AI Prompts for War of 1812 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. War of 1812 military genealogy. My ancestor was [NAME], born about [YEAR] and living in [PLACE] during 1812–1815. Tell me whether he was likely of service age, which theaters and units recruited from that area, and exactly which record sets (CMSR, pension, bounty land, state militia, naval) 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 War of 1812 pension file for [NAME]. Extract every genealogical fact: enlistment date and place, unit, service dates, marriage date and place, spouse and maiden name, children with dates, residences, and the act under which the pension was granted. List facts separately from inferences, and note any conflicts. File: [PASTE].*
Transcribe a muster roll	*Transcribe this handwritten War of 1812 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 name with rank and any dates. Image/text: [PASTE OR UPLOAD].*
Decode military abbreviations	*Explain these War of 1812-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 possible meaning in this period, give each and say how I could tell them apart from the surrounding record.*
Build unit context	*Act as a War of 1812 regimental historian. For the [UNIT, e.g., 25th U.S. Infantry], summarize when and where it was raised, its commanders, major engagements, and movements between 1812 and 1815. 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.*
Summarize regimental movements	*Create a clear timeline of the movements and battles of [UNIT] during the War of 1812, from formation to disbandment. For each entry give the date, place, and event, and note nearby NARA or state record series that document it. Keep it factual; mark gaps where the record is thin rather than guessing.*
Generate a research plan	*Build a free-first War of 1812 research plan for [ANCESTOR], born/married/died around [DATES] in [STATE]. Include the order of records to pursue (index → service → pension → bounty land → state militia → naval), the free repositories for each, likely spelling variants to search, common pitfalls for this state, and my next 10 searches in priority order.*

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Use Case	Copy-Ready Prompt
Draft a records request	*Draft a concise, polite email to the [NARA / state archive] requesting [RECORD TYPE] for [NAME], who served in [UNIT] during the War of 1812. Include the known service facts, the exact series or file I believe holds it (e.g., bounty-land warrant number, act, acreage), and clear questions about copies, fees, and turnaround. Add a short subject line.*
Reconcile the evidence	*Review my sourced findings for [ANCESTOR] and write a proof-style summary. Correlate the service record, pension file, bounty-land claim, and any state militia 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.

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6. Quick Tips & Pitfalls — Field Notes

Tip / Pitfall	What To Do
Pensions are free — always	View the 1812 pension files free on Fold3 and the NARA Catalog. Never pay a subscription to read them.
Start with the index	Confirm a name, unit, and rank in the free service and pension indexes before ordering or buying anything.
Service record first	Pull the CMSR 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. Go to the State Archives for muster, pay, and adjutant-general records.
Follow the bounty land	Claims may be filed in a state your ancestor moved to. Search nationwide and chase warrant numbers to NARA.
Mind the later acts	1871 and 1878 widened pensions — a widow's file may appear decades later. Search even if the veteran died young.
Search beyond the Army	Sailors and privateersmen need naval, privateer-commission, and prize records — separate from Army CMSRs.
Expect ragged survival	Fire, war, and custody created gaps. A negative search is still a result — record what you checked and didn't find.
Build the unit's story	Regimental movements confirm identity and turn a name on a roll into an ancestor with a place in history.

ONE LAST THING A War of 1812 file is rarely the end of a search — it's the doorway. The marriage in a pension, the witnesses in a deposition, the move that the bounty land set off: each one points to the next record. Start free, read every page, write down where you looked, and let one ancestor lead you to the whole family.

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