

Military Pension Records a Vital Resource

by Dee Gibson-Roles

With the observance of Memorial Day recently and with the Fourth of July looming on the horizon, it seems to be a good time to discuss military pension applications and the genealogical information that can be gleaned from them.

The first pensions offered were for the men who fought in the Revolutionary War. Before 1818, pensions were granted only for a specific disability or to the widow and/or orphans of a soldier who was killed in the service.

The pension act in 1818 granted pensions to those who were in need and had served at least nine months or until the end of the war. This act resulted in a deluge of applications, most of which were approved.

By 1820, claims of veterans feigning their financial circumstances, coupled with financial difficulties on the part of the government, resulted in legislation requiring the veteran to submit a certified statement of his financial worth and gave the secretary of state the authority to remove those from the pension rolls recipients whom he felt were not in true need of the pension.

In 1823, legislation was again enacted that restored many of the previously denied pensions.

By far the most liberal pension act was that of June 1832. Those who had served at least two years, whether in the Army or the militia (most of the pensioners here in Western North Carolina had been part of a militia that was called out when needed) were granted for life a pension of full pay.

Those who had served less time, but at least six months, could receive a pension of less than full pay. There was no requirement for demonstration of need. Many of these old veterans did not have a copy of their discharge, having lost it many years before if they ever even received a formal discharge.

In this case, the veteran could go into open court, give his statement of his service, the officers he served under and the units he served in, and have a clergyman and one other "respectable" citizen of his neighborhood testify as to his veracity and reputation.

In 1835, many of the pensions that were reviewed were suspended until further clarification of their service was submitted. By this time, many of the pension recipients were of advanced age and not able to appear in court and perhaps no longer had much, if any, memory of their service. As a result, many of them lost their pension and never regained it.

In July 1836, an act entitled the widow of a veteran to receive any pension that her deceased husband would have been entitled to under the 1832 act, provided she was married to him prior to the end of his service.

In 1838, this time limit was extended to widows whose marriage to the veteran took place before 1794. Finally, in 1848, the time limit was further extended to those who were married before 1800, and later acts completely removed the time limit.

Lastly, in 1878, a widow of a soldier who had served as little as 14 days or in any skirmish or battle was declared eligible for a pension. This, of course, was about 95 years after the end of the Revolution, so a widow who was receiving a pension would by the laws of nature have been quite a bit younger than the veteran.

What can a family researcher find in a Revolutionary War pension application? These documents can be a veritable treasure trove of information on an ancestor and his family. The veteran applying was required to answer a series of questions, which included his age and place of residence, the period(s) of his service in the war, the length of his service "with precision" and the names of the officers under whom he served.

Very often, his migration after the war is described, including the number of years he lived in each location. Using this information, the researcher can then ascertain the location of possible records of the ancestor. (Note: The pensions

were to be applied for in the court of the county in which the veteran was living at the time of the application and not of the county from which he had served.)

The clergyman and other witnesses ("respectable citizens") were obviously people who knew the applicant well. This can provide clues of records of other persons which should be checked, since these men obviously interacted with the applicant on a regular basis.

Some applications may even have a mention of the veteran's parents. In one such application we viewed recently, the applicant had served one tour as a substitute for his father, and he named his father in describing this tour.

Widows' pensions can be an even more valuable resource for the researcher. We noted the requirement of proof of the marriage, including the date, when applying for a widow's pension. One may be lucky enough to find a copy of the original marriage bond in the record.

Another find might be the pages from the family Bible including the date and place of the marriage and the list of the children's birth dates. Occasionally one finds that friends or family have testified as being present at the marriage and give the date.

Fortunately today we can access these pension applications online. With a valid library card, researchers in WNC can access Heritage Quest free of charge from home using their library card number.

Heritage Quest contains several databases, including the Revolutionary War pension and bounty land applications. These are the actual digitized images of the application pages.

Another possibility is to locate the microfilm of these applications. Western Carolina University has the set as well as several other libraries. Still another source is www.fold3.com, formerly known as footnote.com. While this is a subscription website, one can sign up for a seven-day free trial and have full access for those seven days.

One more note of interest: The researcher can order the "selected papers" from any application. These are described as any papers in the application with information of genealogical interest (as determined by the archives.)

Since many of the applications contain 50-75 pages, ordering the selected papers only can represent a substantial savings. However, a word of caution: Many researchers have found very valuable information in the additional "non-selected" papers.

We should also note that, contrary to popular belief, there was no bounty land granted in present-day North Carolina for service in the Revolution. Some bounty land was granted in what is present-day Tennessee, part of which was originally North Carolina.

There are numerous state land grants in the records, and these are often mistaken for bounty land grants. These are the original purchase of the land, and each grant recipient paid a price per acre for these state grants.

Next month, we will discuss the pension applications of other wars such as the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Civil War.