

Finding A Revolutionary War Ancestor In Rhode Island

By Maureen A. Taylor

Reuben Ballou, of Rhode Island, and Mark Noble, of Massachusetts, both served in the American Revolution in companies from the Colonies where they were born. And both men left Revolutionary War records in Rhode Island. Genealogists looking for evidence of military service or other participation during the Revolutionary War should not overlook the possibility of resources in the colonies where companies were stationed. A researcher might automatically check Rhode Island records for Reuben Ballou but overlook resources available for their Massachusetts ancestor, Mark Noble.

Many Revolutionary War companies, including non-Rhode Island-based military units, stationed their men in the Colony of Rhode Island. It is fairly well known that the British occupied Newport from 1776 to 1780, but how many genealogists are aware that soldiers from French and Hessian armies found themselves stationed in Rhode Island? The Revolutionary War created a myriad of records that survive at local and national repositories. Clues to military service appear in vital records, cemetery inscriptions, court documents, and newspapers.

Census

In the spring of 1777, the General Assembly ordered an enumeration of all resident males in the colony between the ages of 16 and 60. Mildred M. Chamberlain transcribed the list in her volume, *The Rhode Island 1777 Military Census* (Baltimore: GPC, 1985). Soldiers stationed in the Colony are not part of the census. Unfortunately, records for several towns could not be located for publication specifically: Exeter, Little Compton, Middletown, Newport, New Shoreham, and Portsmouth.

The 1840 federal census has a column that designates whether an individual was receiving a federal pension for military service. It does not necessarily refer to Revolutionary service but does indicate that military service records might be available.

Compiled Service Records

There are several sources for manuscript material relating to compiled service records for Rhode Island units. The National Archives, the Rhode Island State Archives, and the [Rhode Island Historical Society](#) all have relevant collections.

At the National Archives, the War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records (RG 93) contains pension roll lists, copies of commissions, resignations, enlistment papers, orders and accounts, and papers transferred from other agencies.

The [Rhode Island Historical Society](#) (121 Hope St., Providence, RI 02908) has a large collection of Revolutionary War Military Records relating to various regiments, both Continental and militia, and their officers. Interested individuals should write to the Manuscripts Curator of the Society for a copy of their *Guide to Revolutionary War Military Records* (1997). Their holdings include:

- Military Papers (MSS 673), including muster rolls, enlistment papers, and returns
- Papers relating to the Continental Line Units. These units began in 1775 as an Army of Observation. They later came under the auspices of the Continental Congress. This refers to the 1st and 2nd regiment.
- Papers of James Varnum (MSS 9001-V), John Sullivan (MSS 743) and Nathanael Greene (MSS 464)
- 1st Rhode Island Regiment: muster rolls; rosters and enlistment books; papers of Jeremiah Olney, Sanford Smith, and Christopher Greene.
- 2nd Rhode Island Regiments, Continental: muster rolls, orderly books; papers of Israel Angell, Jeremiah Olney, Simeon Thayer, Sanford Smith, and William Allen
- Muster rolls for Col. Henry Sherburne's Continental Regiment (1777-1781) of residents of Rhode Island and Connecticut
- Rhode Island State Troops. In existence from 12/1776 to 3/16/1780, these regiments were formed in reaction to

the British occupation of Newport. Papers consist of muster rolls and pay lists for various regiments.

- State Militia Regiments (organized by county). Scattered muster rolls and pay lists exist for these units.
- Town-based Militia Companies: Muster rolls and enlistment papers for various companies and years are in MSS 673.
- Naval Vessels. Records relating to the Revolutionary War are found in the papers of Silas Talbot (MSS 747), Esek Hopkins (MSS 491), Zuriel Waterman (MSS 788), Abraham Whipple (MSS 802), and in the papers from the sloop *Providence* (MSS 673), the privateer *Blaze Castle* (MSS 354), and the brig *Diligence* (MSS 828).

The Rhode Island State Archives (337 Westminster St., Providence, RI 02903-3302) has muster rolls from the regiments of Crary, Topham, and Elliott. They also own the Revolutionary War Names Card Index, 1770-1785. This file indexes material in the U.S. Pension Office, U.S. War Department, the U.S. Treasury Department (last payment of pension or date of death listed), Congressional Library Record, Military Census of 1777, Military Returns at RISA [Rhode Island State Archive], and Military Papers at the Rhode Island Historical Society. Unfortunately, some of the locations mentioned in this catalog are no longer accurate. (Many items originally kept in scrapbooks at the Rhode Island Historical Society are now arranged chronologically.)

Published Compiled Service Records

Most town histories mention the Revolutionary War service of its citizens, but colony-wide lists exist in only a few volumes. Bear in mind there is no comprehensive list of Revolutionary War soldiers from Rhode Island. To locate additional publications on the Revolutionary era in Rhode Island, search the catalogs of the [Library of Congress](#) and this site's [library](#), and consult the following publications:

- *Vital Records of Rhode Island*, vol. 12 (Providence: Narragansett Publishing Company, 1896).
- Benjamin Cowell, *Spirit of '76* (Boston: A. J. Wright, 1850).
- Joseph J. Smith, *Civil and Military List of Rhode Island*, vol. 1, 1647-1800 (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1900-1901).
- Thomas Hamilton Murray, < Revolution I> (*Providence: American-Irish Historical Society, 1903*).

Hospital Records

Returns of the Officers and Nurses (female) for the General Hospital at Providence (1778), a military facility, are at the Rhode Island Historical Society. Patient data includes date of admission, full name, company, regiment, disorder, and the event that caused them to be hospitalized. There is currently no index for this material.

Newspaper Notices

During the American Revolution three newspapers published notices of military deserters: the American Journal and General Advertiser, 1779-1781, the Newport Mercury, 1758-1800 (ceased publication with the December 2, 1776 issue and resumed on January 5, 1780), and the Providence Gazette. The advertisements included the name of the deserter, a physical description, place of belonging, unit they served with, and the name of the officer who placed the notice. For instance, Reuben Ballou placed several advertisements for men that deserted his unit. Original copies of the newspapers are available at the Rhode Island Historical Society and on microfilm at various academic and research libraries. The notices from the Providence Gazette have been published in myRunaways, Deserters and Notorious Villains (Picton, 1994).

Pension Papers

Lists of pensioners from 1820, 1835, and 1840 appear in vol. 12 of Arnold's Vital Records of Rhode Island, 1636-1850. The published 1820 list includes the name of the soldier, rank, service and date of death. The 1835 list includes the name, rank, annual allowance, sum total of what was received, description of service, when placed on the pension roll, the date the pension commenced, age at the time of commencement, laws under which they were placed on the rolls, remarks and date of death. The 1840 list is shorter and includes just name, age and place of residence. If living in another's household, the name of the head of that house is provided.

The Rhode Island State Archives also has the list of Invalid Pensioners (1790) and Revolutionary Pension Correspondence (1850-58). The largest collection of pension records is found at the National Archives. The records are available on microfilm (M804) at branches of the National Archives and through the mail. Their

[website](#) has additional information. Virgil D.White, in Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files, 4 vols, (Waynesboro, TN: National Historical Publishing, 1990-1992) abstracted these pensions.

Special Indexes

In addition to the card index at the Rhode Island State Archives, the Rhode Island Historical Society has a card file that indexes all the yearly volumes of the D.A.R. material compiled by local chapters. The actual volumes are available in their library and at the Daughters of the American Revolution Library in Washington, D.C.

Transient Examinations

Town councils routinely interviewed individuals that were not official town residents. While these examinations can be difficult to locate, they can prove military service. Their value is clearly illustrated by Mark Noble 's examination. It lists where he was born and outlines his life history and military service. According to his testimony, he

"...enlisted into the Army of the United States and served as one of the Hadley quota part of the time in Col. Patersons Regiment...

...He also Further saith that after having been duly discharged from Col. Patersons Regiment he enlisted into Col. Voses Regiment...

...then he enlisted as one of the Quota of Cranston in Col. Olney's Regiment, three years till peace took place when he had General Washingtons Discharge that he belonged to Capt. William Allen's Company while in Col. Olneys Regement. Providence. 9/15/98 [1798]."

Some of these transient examinations are found in the minutes of town meetings. Unfortunately no comprehensive list of these records currently exists.

Organizations

Once you've located that Revolutionary War ancestor, you may want to contact one of the following organizations for membership information:

- National Society, [Sons of the American Revolution](#) (NSSAR)
1000 S. 4th St.
Louisville, Kentucky 40203
(502) 589-1776
www.sar.org
- National Society, [Daughters of the American Revolution](#)
1776 D. St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 2006-5303
(202) 628-1776
www.dar.org
- National Society, [Children of the American Revolution](#)
1776 D. St. N.W. Room 224
Washington, D.C. 20006-5392
(202) 638-3153
www.nscar.org
- Society of the Cincinnati
2118 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20008
(202) 785-2040