

Across the Border: Rhode Islanders and Pancho Villa

By Maureen A. Taylor

Immediately prior to World War I, a short-lived conflict called The Mexican Punitive Expedition of 1916-1917 occupied national attention. Lost in the shadow of the "Great War," the conflict has disappeared from most Rhode Island record books even though the Rhode Island National Guard was called in to national service to assist.

In January 1916, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, a bandit who opposed the Mexican president, killed nineteen American rail passengers in Mexico. Then in March, he and approximately 500 followers attacked the small New Mexican community of Columbus. In this skirmish, at least fifteen American soldiers died, as did a few Mexican troops. This was just one of the many border conflicts in which Villa and his men participated.

Following the attack on Columbus, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson directed Brigadier General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing to command 14,000 Army troops. Additionally 140,000 members of the army and National Guard protected the border between the United States and Mexico. Rhode Island members of the Light Battery A, Rhode Island Field Artillery, participated in this conflict.

The goal of the campaign was to capture Villa, but this never happened. He and his followers proved impossible to detain despite being greatly outnumbered. The "Punitive" Expedition failed to fulfill its mission, but Woodrow Wilson campaigned for re-election with the slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War," meaning a war with Mexico, not the war looming in Europe.

Despite its small size and scope, a wide range of materials exists on the military operation, both on the state and federal level. It is unknown how many Rhode Islanders served in the army during the expedition. You can determine if your ancestor participated in the Mexican Border conflict by first requesting service records that list units they served with. The second step is to research general accounts of the expedition to see if the unit took part in the military operations.

An historical overview of the Punitive Expedition appears in a two-part article by Mitchell Yockelson, "The United States Armed Forces and the Mexican Punitive Expedition." This is found on the National Archives website ([part 1](#), [part 2](#)) and in print in *Prologue* Vol. 29, nos. 3 and 4, (Fall and Winter 1997). A concise version of the conflict appears on the National Park Service website under the title "[Pursuing Pancho Villa](#)." It includes photographs of the effort and biographical materials on General Pershing.

Locating National Service Records

Yockelson's articles include relevant collections of material in the National Archives that contain data on individual soldiers and are outlined here.

Begin your search by requesting military personnel records from the [National Personnel Records Center](#) (9700 Page Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri 63132). To request copies, obtain a NATF Form 180 by mail or download it from their website. The following information is needed: name, branch of service, and approximate dates of service. Be aware that a fire in 1973 destroyed many of the case records for Army personnel discharged between November 1, 1912 and January 1960.

Consult Yockelson's articles for complete descriptions of the record groups. Here are the highlights:

Record Group 24, Records of the United States Navy

Use this resource for muster rolls of enlisted men and deck logs for a roster of officers.

Record Group 45, Naval Records Collection of the Naval Records and Library.

WE-Mexico includes casualty lists for Tampico and Vera Cruz.

Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General.

You'll find a list of recipients of Mexican Service Badges in these files. According to Yockelson, entry 256 is a name

index to “all the medal and badge-related series in this record group.”

Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, 1780s to 1917.

The scope of this record group covers more than two hundred years, including materials relating to the Mexican expedition. According to Yockelson, “it is possible to locate documents pertaining to enlisted personnel in the regular army or National Guard particularly if a soldier was discharged, deserted or died while in the army.”

Record Group 112, Records of the Office of the Surgeon General

Contains personnel files for medical officers serving during the expedition.

Record Group 127, Record of the United States Marine

Includes muster rolls for marines occupying Vera Cruz.

Record Group 165, Records of the War Department and Special Staff

Photographs of the U.S. Army operations along the Mexican Border are part of materials in this collection.

Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General, 1917 .

In this series are the “Organization Records of National Guard under orders, sick reports, rosters, payroll vouchers and correspondence regarding recruits.”

To learn more about the materials held by the National Archives and Records Service consult their [website](#) or the following publications:

Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States (Washington, DC: National Archives, 1996)

George S. Ulibarri, and John R. Harrison, comps., *Guide to Materials on Latin America in the National Archives* (Washington, DC: National Archives, 1974)

James C. Neagles, *U.S. Military Records: A Guide to Federal & State Sources* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1994).

Records on the State Level

On June 19, 1916, 658 men and 28 officers from the Rhode Island National Guard were called in to serve with Pershing’s troops. They consisted of four units of the Light Battery A Field Artillery: Cavalry (companies A, B, C, and M), Ambulance Corps 85, a Quartermaster unit, and Medical Corps.

National Guard records for the Punitive Expedition maintained by the Rhode Island State Archives (337 Westminster St., Providence, RI) include muster records and descriptive rolls. These files are open to the public.

Archivist Ken Carlson of the Rhode Island State Archives has compiled a list of officers in the Mexican Border Campaign, which is available below. The list does not include all the names of enlisted men who served with the National Guard during the Punitive Campaign. Included in the list is Norman Case, who went on to become governor of Rhode Island from 1928 to 1933.

Armington, Herbert H., Captain, Cavalry

Arnold, Davis G., 1st Lieutenant & Adjutant, 1st Cavalry Squadron

Babcock, Donald S., 2nd Lieutenant

Barker, Harold R., 2nd Lieutenant

Blair, Frederick L., 1st Lieutenant

Bugbee, William C., 1st Lieutenant

Buxton, Bertam H., Lieutenant

Calder, Augustus W., Major, Medical Corps

Carney, Harold E., 1st Lieutenant

Case, Norman S., 1st Lieutenant

Chaffee, Everitte S., Captain

Chandler, Earle W., 2nd Lieutenant

Dean, Herbert R., Captain

Gammell, William Jr., 1st Lieutenant

Garlick, William J., 2nd Lieutenant

Glines, Charles T., Major, Q.M. Corps

Greene, Clarence H., Captain, Q.M. Corps.

Hall, Samuel A., Captain

Hanley, Gerald T., 1st Lieutenant

McDonough, James P., 2nd Lieutenant

Merchant, Marcius H., Captain, Medical Corps

Montooth, Charles, 1st Lieutenant, Cavalry

Nield, Fred B., 1st Lieutenant

Rancourt, John J., 2nd Lieutenant

Richards, Charles H., Captain

Richards, John J., Major, Cavalry Squadron

Spratt, Charles W., Captain

In addition to military records, researchers should consider reading local newspaper accounts of the conflict. See my earlier article [All the News Fit to Print: Rhode Island Newspapers](#) for further information.

Research alert: The Rhode Island Historical Society Library has reduced its hours of operation to Wednesday and Friday 10-5 and Thursday Noon – 8. All manuscripts materials are now paged to the Reference Department during regular business hours.