Military Records
Video Podcast Transcript
Minnesota Historical Society

Military service has been an important aspect of American citizenship and a major event in the lives of individuals. Records of that service provide useful insights into past lives and are a valuable resource for genealogists. Because the Minnesota Historical Society holds the archives of the state of Minnesota, many of the state’s military service records can be found in our library. Most of these are in the records of the Minnesota Adjutant General - the official in charge of the state militia or National Guard - or the records of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs.

Among the earliest records of the Adjutant General’s office are the muster rolls for Minnesota’s Civil War regiments. These include information on a soldier’s age, place of birth, place of residence, and enlistment date. The same office was responsible for administering pension records to Civil War veterans. These records sometimes provide detailed information about an individual’s service, including wounds, and incidents of illness.

Records for the Spanish-American war include these detailed service record cards. This information was extracted from other records, such as muster rolls, and they represent a complete overview of an individual’s service.

By far the largest series of military records are those for World War I. Minnesota took its role in the war effort very seriously and sought to document what most citizens saw as an important chapter in the state’s history. A temporary state agency, the War Records Commission, was formed specifically for this purpose. Its records included extensive questionnaires sent to service men and women across the state. Many thousands of these were returned to the agency and they often include detailed information on service experiences of Minnesotans who served in all branches of the Armed Forces.

Another war-time agency, the Public Safety Commission, was created to oversee the state’s war effort. While this controversial body often engaged in heavy-handed and authoritarian practices, it also created some extraordinary records. Among the most useful of these are the
Gold Star Rolls. These records were intended to honor those men and women who died while in the service. The files include service records as well as biographical information.

Beginning in World War I the Federal Government took over most of the recruitment and training duties for the armed forces. The Adjutant General’s office became more concerned with documenting who served and administering veterans’ benefits. The Service Record Cards were the agency’s primary record of military service. They represent a consolidated record reaching as far back as the Civil War, and covering National Guard service as late as World War II. The World War I records are the most complete, however, as they include all branches of the military, nurses and even Minnesotans who enlisted in foreign service prior to America’s entry into the war. The cards show the dates of service, branch, unit, and sometimes areas of overseas deployment.

Following World War I the state of Minnesota awarded a bonus payment to all who had served during the conflict. The Adjutant General’s offices administered the application for and payment of bonuses. Application files include service information and usually a copy of the applicant’s discharge record. They also indicate post-war residence and occupation.

After World War II, the number and complexity of veterans’ benefits led to the formation of a new agency, the Department of Veterans Affairs. This agency administered World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War bonus applications. These records are also held here at MHS although state privacy laws limit access to Vietnam era records. These series are similar in content to the WWI bonus applications but they also include applications by beneficiaries - family members of deceased veterans. These soldiers, sailors and airmen were often killed in action and the beneficiaries’ applications include information on the circumstances of their deaths. These records sometimes include action reports, letters from commanding officers and official War Department notifications.

From the late 1940’s through the early 1970’s the Veterans Affairs Dept. maintained a record of veteran’s burials known as the Veterans Grave Registration. In some ways these are augmented death certificates, with added information on the individual’s military service. Occasionally these records include biographical information including newspaper clippings.

Overall the military records housed at the Minnesota Historical Society are an important addition to the official Federal records. Many of the latter were destroyed in a 1973 fire at the National Archives Military Records Center in St. Louis. This disastrous blaze destroyed the bulk of Army service records for WWI and WWII making the MHS records that much more important. For many individuals these are the only surviving records of their service.

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