

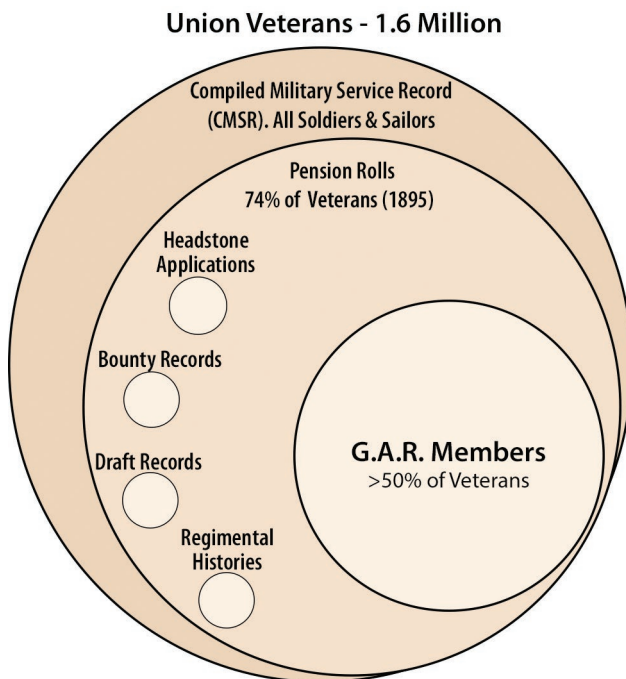
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G.A.R. RECORDS

What Can You Expect To Find • The Glory Years • G.A.R. Structure • What is a Regiment • Where Are Records • National Records • Department Records • Post Records • Media Resources • Museums

Grand Army of the Republic records are one of many subsets of Civil War records available to researchers. They touch a majority of Union veterans, though during the 70-plus years of the organization's existence there is no way to precisely determine the total number of members during the seven decades. Still, these records not only provide a look at many veterans, but the detail is unique since it is usually a reference to the locale where they lived and a record of their wartime experience.

Approximately 2,100,000 Union soldiers served during the Civil War; about 500,000 of them perished from battle or disease. This left about 1.6 million veterans after the war.



G.A.R. member records comprise one of the three largest record collections of Civil War veterans, following the CMSRs and Pension Rolls. Still, all record sets should be explored to uncover the maximum amount of ancestor history.

Since the G.A.R. was a private organization, there is no direct connection between their records and government documents that recorded their service. Yet, the conditions of membership in the G.A.R. dictated that the veteran show discharge papers or other proof of service.

If your ancestor served in the Civil War, it is very likely that a record of him can be found in one or more places, including Grand Army of the Republic sources.

G.A.R. records should be considered one of the priority search areas, along with the federal Compiled Military Service Records and the Pension Rolls. These three record groups include the greatest number of veterans, though admittedly the G.A.R. records are sometimes more difficult to uncover than the federal records.

Research Tip: the G.A.R. was a private organization, and not part of the Federal Government. Its archives are not among the records at National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).¹

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT TO FIND?

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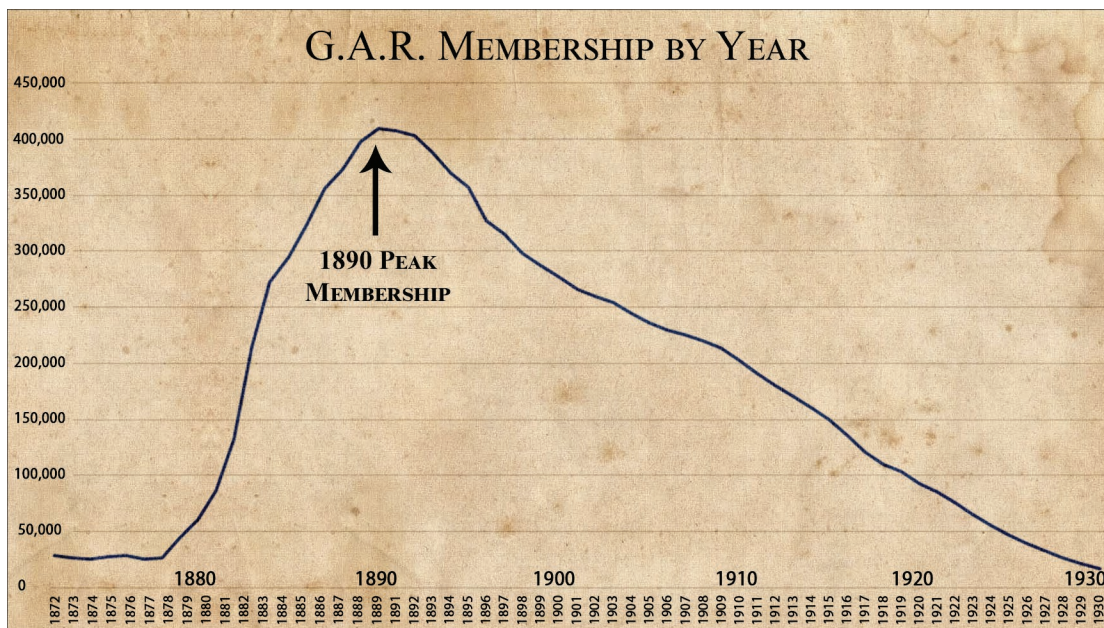
Part of the incentive to write this book was to help the researcher avoid futile efforts. To calibrate expectations and avoid searching for phantom records, it helps to know where the greatest number of records were created and subsequently archived.

When searching Civil War veteran information, think of your research as a series of sub-projects. Records in each sub-project are found in specific places, separate from others. Complete a sub-project with success or exhaustion, then move on to a next sub-project. To start with, one of the first pieces of the research puzzle is knowing when G.A.R. records were created.

THE GLORY YEARS

The quantity and quality of records coincided with G.A.R. growth. Therefore, it helps to understand the Grand Army lifecycle. If your ancestor died before the 1880s, he is not likely to have any G.A.R. records due to early mismanagement. From the 1870 Proceedings of the National Encampment, the Adjutant General wrote:

In making this report, I have found it to be absolutely impossible for me to furnish anything like a correct report of the present membership of the organization. Posts communicate with Department Headquarters and receive no answers to their communications; consequently, they feel that they are neglected, and feel further that they receive in return nothing to compensate them for their dues and reports . . .²



Membership in the G.A.R. by year. Compiled from 1872-1930 National Encampment Journals.

Beginning in the early 1880s, membership grew at an astounding rate to over 400,000 members, driven largely by interest in new and generous pension legislation. In addition, the record fiascoes of the 1870s disappeared as more efficient reporting processes were implemented. It is easy to see why there are more records available beginning in the 1880s.

It must be remembered that the 400,000 members in 1890 was a snapshot in time. That number does not include those who previously died, dropped out, re-joined, or joined in the future.

Improved record keeping accurately revealed how many veterans were active members at any time, allowing leaders to create credible promotions to increase membership. In his 1888 address to the National Encampment, Commander-in-Chief John P. Rea proudly reported recent G.A.R. growth with expectations that enrollment would soon exceed 400,000. However, he stressed:

Although the growth of our order has been gratifying, and our aggregate membership is large, there are still fully one-half the living honorably discharged soldiers and sailors not upon our rolls.³

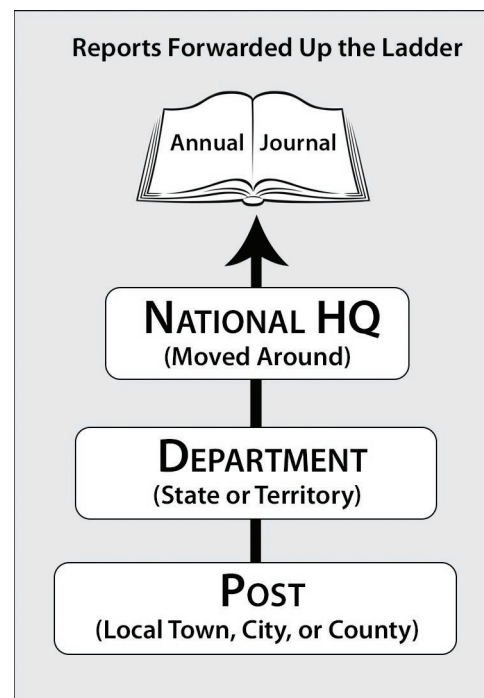
Local posts kept a *Descriptive Book* that listed, in chronological order, all veterans who joined the post. Quarterly *Muster Reports* recorded the number of *Members in Good Standing*. Quarterly reports were the basis of official membership numbers. A sampling of *Descriptive Books* and *Muster Reports* showed that two to four times as many veterans joined a post over its life, as were active (good standing) at any point in time. This analysis suggests that aggregate G.A.R. membership may have been more than one million over the life of the organization.

While the late 1880s saw membership climb dramatically, it became difficult to sustain the growth as the 20th century approached. The inevitable march of time took a substantial toll on veterans since by 1900 the average veteran age was about 60 years. It is a testament to dedicated members that the Grand Army did not wither away sooner, as the downward slope in the graph shows a gentle, albeit steady, membership decline.

G.A.R. STRUCTURE: BLESSING AND CURSE

The organizational structure of the G.A.R. is both a blessing and a curse for the genealogist and historian seeking information about individual members. Since all records began at the post level and were created by elected officers who personally knew the members by name and face, you can be sure that the information is mostly correct. We are blessed that many recorded entries were written from the veterans spoken words as they told the officer their story—these are valuable original-source records.

The curse stems from the same organizational structure. In 1890, the largest ten departments consisted of an average of more than 400 posts. The largest, Ohio, had 733 posts. The sheer number of posts, many with membership in the low double digits, gave opportunity for records to be lost or destroyed by natural events. Yet we seek these records to help build the story of our ancestors.



G.A.R. reporting structure with data published yearly in the Annual Journal