



# NARA Record Ordering Demystified: 10 Easy Steps

**T**he building above looks austere and imposing, no doubt about it. But ordering records from it is a stroll in the park on a warm and sunny day.

It's the one question I'm most asked about research: "Can you get me the fellow's Civil War military records from the National Archives?"

Sure. But so can you. Anyone can, and I'm here to demystify the process for you.

**Step 1.** Hie thee to a computer. If you don't have a computer, commandeer a friend who does. The process is so simple that it won't take more than a few minutes out of his or her day. A single lager rather than a six-pack should suffice if bribery is necessary.

**Step 2.** Go to the home page of the National Archives, nara.gov, and click on Obtain Copies in the left-hand column.

**Step 3.** At the next screen, click Military Service Records.

**Step 4.** At the next screen, click Pre-WW I Records.

**Step 5.** Under Military Service Records, scroll down and click Order Online.

**Step 6.** At the next screen, click Compiled Military Ser-

vice File (NATF 86).

**Step 7.** At the next screen, click Add to Cart.

**Step 8.** You will then be taken to a User ID and Password screen. If you don't yet have such, simply register. Anyone can, and an automated acknowledgment will pop up in the e-mail inbox momentarily.

**Step 9.** At the next screen, enter all the information you know about the soldier in the appropriate boxes (name, unit, and so on). Include any additional comments and variant spellings in the text box at the bottom. Once that's completed, hit Continue to Pay & Ship at the bottom right.

**Step 10.** Supply your charge card information and the shipping information. You will be charged \$25 if they find the records. If they don't, there's no charge.

Such a deal. And in all these years, I've only had a handful of instances in which no record at all could be found.

I'll add that copies of some of the Confederate service records are immediately available through a pay site, footnote.com, but if you're only after a single soldier or

even two, their membership fee might be better spent adding to your collection or your library.

More, the downloads at footnote.com are rather laborious if the Southern soldier's file is thick. I always have a good book on hand to flip through while I'm doing the painfully slow waltz of download-printout with Confederate records at that site.

For all of the Union records, the National Archives is currently still the way to go.

Although the NARA site suggests that there might be a time lapse of some months before the materials are sent, I've never experienced anything like that. The most recent set of records I ordered—shortly before this issue went to press—arrived in two weeks flat.

**S**ome service records, once received, may seem like a waste of time and money. No exciting accounts of battle experiences, no dramatic retellings of wounds received in valorous action.

But the simple legend “present” or “absent” on the muster rolls can help define whether or not a soldier was likely in the heat of battle, rather than in the hospital or on detached service, during a crucial period of time.

And on occasion, you hit platinum.

This example might inspire you to go ahead and order the records of anyone whose service you've been wondering about. I requested the records of a 7th Michigan cavalryman. He had joined up at age 44, or so his enlistment records said.

But the truth was contained in a copy of a letter in his file:

Washington, D.C. September 25th 1863

Surgeon General Burns

Sir. I desire to invite your special attention to the condition of Isaac B. Potter, a private in Co. M, 7th Michigan Cavalry, now an inmate of Lincoln General Hospital.

He desires a discharge from the U.S. Service. He is nearly 61 years of age. Is considerably deaf. Has but a portion of his teeth remaining, and they are nearly all of them loose and unsteady in their position in the jaw. Has chronic rheumatism, and on the whole he appears to me a poor specimen of a soldier.

He has four sons in the Army, and two sons in law, in the same service, and the old man having more patriotism than wisdom thought it his duty also to serve his country by himself enlisting.

He has tried it and failed. I request that an investigation of this case be had and he be discharged and permitted to return to his family.

I am your obedient servant

J. Tunnicliff Jr.  
Michigan Agent

More patriotism than wisdom? I'd have liked this old gent even if he weren't related to me. He is: That was three-greats-grandpa Isaac trying to pass for 44. I know *just* how he felt.

Not all Civil War military files will contain such enlightening personal information, but it's always worth looking into, and the ordering process is so easy that it begs doing.

In fact, the 10-step ordering system is so addictive that you may need a 12-step program to stop doing it. **NSTCW**

—Nancy Dearing Rossbacher, editor

*The soldier's records are likely to contain muster rolls and enlistment papers, but occasionally you'll find a great deal more personal detail in them.*

