Military service Records – Civil War

Many soldiers had similar names, so identifying the correct record can be tricky. First, you need to know which side your ancestor fought on – Union or Confederate – and then the crucial piece of information is which unit he served in. This will be a description such as “12th Ohio Infantry,” “5th Alabama Cavalry,” etc. That’s the key to finding his records.

How can I find out which unit my ancestor served in?
This information may be on his tombstone, or in an obituary, or someone in the family may have this written down. If your ancestor had a distinctive name, you may be able to pick him out just by knowing his name and the state he served from: check the on-line index of the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System, www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/ (which covers both Union and Confederate soldiers). If your military ancestor was married, you may also be able to pick him out by knowing his wife’s name: she may have applied for a widow’s pension after he died (even if he died long after the war). For union soldiers, this information is contained in the General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934. This index is available on microfilm through the Family History Library system, at www.footnote.com, and at www.ancestry.com. The index consists of a series of index cards alphabetized by soldier’s name, each with names of beneficiaries, the state from which the pension was applied for, and the designation of the unit.

Ordering service records for a Union soldier:
Each Union soldier has a Compiled Service Record. Most also have a Pension File. The Compiled Service Record lists the exact dates of service in each unit in which your ancestor served, based on muster rolls. The Pension File is often more interesting, because it may contain affidavits by soldiers who served alongside your ancestor, information about the soldier’s widow, or medical information. You can order either or both from the National Archives and Records Administration, which has an “order on-line” feature at www.archives.gov/research/order/orderonline.html. (Or you can do this by mail – write to: National Archives and Records Administration, Attn: NWDT1, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20408-0001.) The current cost is $25.00 for a Compiled Service Record and $75.00 for a Pension File. (Compare prices and services with Broadfoot publishing, www.soldiersearch.com/index.html.)

Ordering service records for a Confederate soldier.
The National Archives and Records Administration has some, but not all, Confederate service files. Most are still held by the individual Southern states. See www.archives.gov/genealogy/military/civil-war/confederate/pension.html for a list of state repositories. The fastest way to access these records is to get them on-line (for a fee) at www.footnote.com. (Compare prices and services with Broadfoot publishing, www.soldiersearch.com/index.html.) Note that a veteran was eligible to apply for a pension to the state in which he lived afterward, even if he had served in a unit from a different state. Also, some states conducted special surveys or censuses for veterans, such as the 1907 Alabama Confederate Veterans’ Census or the 1914-‘22 Tennessee Civil War Veterans’ Questionnaires; so check with your state historical society.

Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies:
The 70 volume Official Records is available on-line at http://digital.library.cornell.edu/m/moawar/waro.html. Individual enlisted men are not usually named, but you can find primary information about places and campaigns; and if your ancestor was an officer, you may be able to find his original reports.

The Southern Claims Commission:
Southerners who stayed loyal to the Union and had supplies taken by the Union Army were eligible for compensation after the war. See the Index to Southern Loyalists in the Civil War and other works by Gary B. Mills, or you can access the original records (for a fee) at www.footnote.com.

The National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers:
One of the last pieces of legislation signed by President Lincoln created a set of institutions where disabled soldiers who could not live independently could find refuge after the war – the beginnings of the Veterans’ Administration. Go to Ancestry.com and use the “Search” pull-down menu to go to “Military Records,” to find this and other record groups.

National Archives and Records Administration
www.archives.gov/research/civil-war
Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System
www.civilwar.nps.gov/cwss
Access Genealogy Civil War Records Index
www.accessgenealogy.com/military/civil/index.htm
Regimental Histories
www.civilwararchive.com/regim.htm
An outstanding source of information about the unit in which your ancestor served.
Footnote.com
www.footnote.com
The up-and-comer in the world of on-line genealogy, with lots and lots of information.
Civil War Data
www.civilwardata.com
Requires an annual fee, but the $10 visitors pass may be worth it.