

Bounty Land: It's Complicated

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Bounty land is a story of the hope of the men who enlisted for military service, convinced that they would be justly rewarded after discharge with a few acres of land. It is also the story of the obstacles that often prevented the fulfillment of that hope.¹

United States bounty land was given for military service from the Revolutionary War through 1855 for three reasons: to encourage enlistment, to encourage remaining in the service, and to reward military service. The wars covered by the period of bounty land distribution are the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, various Indian wars of the period, and the Mexican-American War. In some cases, bounty land was also awarded by states, in addition to the federal government.

Distribution of federal bounty land was governed by various acts of Congress, among which are²

- Revolutionary War—acts of 1788, 1803, 1806, and 1855
- War of 1812—acts of 1811, 1812, 1842, 1850, 1852, 1855
- Mexican War—act of 1847
- Old Indian Wars—acts of 1850, 1852, 1855

Former soldiers showed they were eligible for bounty land by producing a warrant, a piece of paper issued by the government showing they had earned the land. The greatest number of bounty land warrants went to soldiers of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

Why it's complicated

Bounty land research is complicated because of the many rules and regulations governing its distribution and the fact that the rules kept changing. When the law allowed it, many veterans sold their warrants, which means that an ancestor who received bounty land may not have been a veteran at all. Sometimes warrants could only be redeemed in certain geographic areas and other times they could be redeemed for any public land.

¹ Christine Rose, *Military Bounty Land 1776–1855* (San Jose, California: CR Publications, 2011), xix.

² NARA, "Bounty-Land Warrants for Military Service, 1775–1855," rev. December 2010 (<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/bounty-land-1775-1855.pdf>).

When researching an ancestor's bounty land, it's important to consult the law that was in effect at the time the warrant was redeemed in order to understand clearly why that ancestor was entitled to land and why the chosen tract was located in a particular place. It's also important to differentiate between bounty land granted by the United States government and grants by state governments.

Revolutionary War

The initial act of the Continental Congress promising free land passed on 16 September 1776. It promised varying amounts of land for men of different ranks or positions and that the land would go to their heirs if the soldier was killed. These early warrants, by law, could not be sold or gifted to another person. They were for the eligible individual only.

An application procedure was established in 1788, the time it also became possible for a veteran to transfer his warrant to someone else. From 1796 to 1830, the U.S. Military District (USMD) in Ohio was the only area a holder of a federal warrant could claim land, except for Virginia veterans who could claim in the Green River Tract in Kentucky and the Virginia Military District in Ohio.

Between 1830 and 1835, Congress relaxed restrictions on where Revolutionary War veterans could acquire land with their warrants to the point that any government land that was available for private sale could also be acquired by warrant.

States that also awarded bounty land for Revolutionary War service:

- Virginia
- Georgia
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- New York
- North Carolina
- Pennsylvania
- South Carolina

Each state had its own rules, which adds to the complicated nature of bounty land research.

War of 1812

The initial acts awarding bounty land for the War of 1812 were passed in 1811 and 1812. Warrants were again not assignable, though they could be inherited. Three military tracts were designated: two million acres each in Michigan, Illinois, and

present-day Arkansas, and these were the only areas land could be acquired by warrant until 1842. In 1816, the Michigan tract was removed, and a Missouri tract substituted. In 1852, warrants became assignable.

Other wars and extended eligibility

Bounty land was authorized by Congress for veterans of the Mexican-American War in 1847. Any non-commissioned officer or soldier who served twelve months or longer was eligible for 160 acres. Warrants could be redeemed for any land that was subject to private entry.

The bounty land acts of 1855 and 1856 extended eligibility to those who had participated in various wars with Native Americans, to Native Americans who had served with the U.S. military, naval veterans, and many other categories of veterans.

Digitized Collections

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FamilySearch. "United States Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Applications, 1800–1900."

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1417475>

FamilySearch. "War of 1812, Military Bounty Land Warrants, 1815–1858."

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Fold3. "Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Index."

https://www.fold3.com/title/918/bountyland_warrant_applications_index. This index of approved and disapproved bounty-land applications for soldiers who served after the Revolutionary War (1790–1855) is free to use without a Fold3 subscription. Copies of applications can be ordered from the National Archives online at <https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline/start.swe>

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Resources

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<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/bounty-land-1775-1855.pdf>

---- *Index to War of 1812 Pension Application Files*. Descriptive Pamphlet M313.
<https://www.fold3.com/pdf/M313.pdf>

---- *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files.*
Descriptive Pamphlet M804.
<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/microfilm/m804.pdf>

---- *War of 1812 military bounty land warrants, 1815–1858 [microform].* M848,
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