Thank you, General Fred C. Ainsworth!

In honor of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, this is the second in a series of articles about records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., that are useful in researching the war and its participants.

A huge debt of gratitude is owed to General Fred Crayton Ainsworth by every researcher who has consulted any of the 58 million cards that comprise the Compiled Military Service Records (CMSR) of a volunteer soldier of the Revolutionary War, Post-Revolutionary era, War of 1812, Mexican War, Civil War (Union and Confederate), Spanish-American War, Philippine Insurrection, various Indian wars, or the carded medical records of the Mexican War or Civil War (Union).

Ainsworth didn’t have this work done for your benefit, of course. He did it to successfully achieve government efficiency, that holy grail that so often eludes others.

Ainsworth was born at Woodstock, Vermont, on 11 September 1852, the eldest son of Crayton Ainsworth and Harriet Batchelder Carroll. After studying medicine, he entered the U.S. Army in November 1874 as an assistant surgeon with the rank of first lieutenant. He served tours of duty at various U.S. forts until 1886.

Ainsworth was appointed head of the Record and Pension Division (R&P) of the Surgeon General’s Office (SGO) in December 1886. This unit furnished information about soldiers’ hospitalizations and deaths to the Commissioner of Pensions (Pension Office) to use in deciding pension claims agains the government. It was difficult, tedious, and time-consuming work to locate information about individual soldiers because there was no index to the nineteen thousand Civil War hospital registers in which names were recorded chronologically by date of admission. Many of these leather-bound volumes were dilapidated and the handwriting faded or difficult to decipher. The huge backlog of work at the R&P Division meant there was also a huge backlog of undecided pension cases at the Pension Office. This was politically unacceptable.
Ainsworth figured out a way to substantially reduce search time. He had clerks copy the name, rank, military organization, and medical history of each soldier from the volumes onto high quality paper cards that measured 3 1/4 by 8 inches. The cards were sorted by regiment then alphabetically by name. When the project was completed in January 1890, there were seven million “carded medical records” that provided, in one location, the entire treatment record of every man in every regiment. Searches took minutes instead of hours or days. It was fast, efficient, and eliminated the backlog of unfinished work.

Ainsworth’s successful project caught the attention of Congress, in particular the Senate’s Cockrell Committee that studied and made recommendations to improve the business methods used in the federal government.

Meanwhile, the Adjutant General’s Office (AGO) still had clerks searching through thousands of decrepit muster rolls to verify details of Union Civil War military service in order to report that information to the Pension Office. Delays in deciding pension cases caused by the AGO’s backlog was likewise politically unacceptable. Congress became convinced that Ainsworth’s card system offered “the only practical, feasible and economic solution” to the problem facing the AGO.

Thus in July 1889, the Secretary of War ordered that the SGO’s R&P Division and thirteen AGO divisions be consolidated into one new organization—the Record and Pension Division (renamed the Record and Pension Office in 1892). The new division had charge of all military and medical records of volunteer forces, and all non-current medical records of the regular army, in all about 400,000 muster and hospital rolls and 140,000 bound volumes. Work began on carding information from the Civil War muster rolls, and by July 1892 more than 26 million cards had been created. By mid-1894 the carding of service records from the Civil War (Union), Mexican War, and various Indian wars was nearly finished. Carding of Revolutionary
What is a Compiled Military Service Record (CMSR)?

Each CMSR contains the service record of a volunteer soldier (including draftees). It consists of an envelope (jacket) that contains card abstracts taken from records such as muster rolls, returns, pay vouchers, orders, and other records that relate to the individual soldier. Information in the service record may include references to mustering-in, mustering-out, wounds, hospitalization, absence from the unit, capture and imprisonment by the enemy, courts-martial, and death.

These records are arranged by war, then by state, then by military unit. For each war, there is a related index that is arranged alphabetically by name of soldier. Indexes to CMSRs and some CMSRs have been microfilmed, and are also available online at Ancestry.com or Fold3.com.

What is a Carded Medical Record?

Carded medical records (Record Group 94, Entry 534) are available for volunteer soldiers of the Mexican and Civil Wars who were admitted to hospitals for treatment and include information such as name, rank, organization, complaint, date of admission, hospital to which admitted, date returned to duty, deserted, discharged, sent to general hospital, furloughed, or died. This series is arranged by state, then by regiment number, then by first letter of the soldier’s surname. Copies can be obtained from the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

For more information


War and War of 1812 service records soon began. The Revolutionary War project required using Treasury, Interior, and State Department records, as well as records borrowed from some state governments to substitute for records lost in the disastrous War Department fire of 8 November 1800. When records of the Spanish-American War (1898) and Philippine Insurrection (1899–1902) arrived at Ainsworth’s office, they were carded immediately. Beginning in 1903, Confederate service records were also carded from the War Department’s collection of captured records plus records borrowed from Southern state governments. The ultimate result of all these projects was 58 million card records and related index cards!

On 15 May 1894, Secretary of War Daniel S. Lamont issued an order that had long-term impact to historical and genealogical research. He ordered that the R&P Office would have custody of all records relating to volunteer military service, while the AGO would have custody of all records relating to regular army military service. Thus, while Ainsworth’s R&P Office diligently created compiled records for volunteer soldiers of all wars from the Revolution to the Philippine Insurrection, the AGO made no such effort to do the same thing for regular army soldiers.

In 1904, the antiquated structure of the War Department was reorganized. The R&P Office and AGO merged and all records and
functions became controlled by Ainsworth in the new position of Military Secretary, which was redesignated Adjutant General in 1907. Ainsworth finally controlled both regular army and volunteer records. But it was too late—the momentum was gone. He had additional administrative responsibilities and challenges. He didn’t order clerks to card regular army records; they were still busy transcribing Confederate records. In 1912, after clashes with Army Chief of Staff General Leonard Wood and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Ainsworth resigned rather than face a court martial.

Legacy
Ainsworth’s legacy demonstrates how one person can make a significant difference. The value of his idea and the work of hundreds of government clerks under his command lives on. CMSRs and carded medical records for volunteer soldiers daily prove their value to researchers who would otherwise have to pour through voluminous quantities of muster rolls, pay rolls, hospital records, and so forth. Ainsworth spoiled us by making it absurdly easy to access information that would otherwise be incredibly challenging and time consuming to access in its original form. In stark contrast, researching most regular army soldiers and navy personnel remains fundamentally more difficult.

Archivists and historians quickly recognized the value of Ainsworth’s work. Articles about him were published by Siert F. Riepma (1938 and 1941), and National Archives staff member Mabel E. Deutrich (1959), and culminated in Deutrich’s definitive biography, Struggle for Supremacy: The Career of General Fred C. Ainsworth (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1962).


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