



National Archives and Records Administration

700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20408-0001

Research Guide to Records of Artificial Limbs Provided to Civil War and Later Veterans, 1861–1927

Claire Kluskens
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Part 1 – Introduction

The American Civil War was the first to result in thousands of amputations. New technology was largely to blame. The invention and use of the Minié ball, a rifle ball made of soft lead with a hollow base, expanded when fired and caused large, irregular, and slow-healing wounds upon impact. Infection and gangrene set in quickly. Faced with shattered bones, shredded tissue, and limited medical knowledge, resources, and options, amputation actually offered the best chance of survival.

By war's end, about 60,000 soldiers on both sides suffered amputation. A skilled and experienced surgeon could remove a limb in five minutes. Speed was critical to minimize blood loss and length of anesthesia by chloroform or ether. The overall survival rate was 75 percent, but varied depending upon location of the surgery. Loss of part of the foot was survived by 96 percent, while amputation at the hip joint was survived by only 17 percent. Later in the war, “resection” became more common. This technique removed only the injured section of the arm or leg, leaving a shortened, less functional limb. Nearly 40 percent of amputations were lost fingers or toes.

In 1862, Congress authorized the Army's Surgeon General to purchase artificial limbs for disabled soldiers and seamen, and in 1868 extended that benefit to officers. In 1866, Congress authorized the Secretary of War to provide free transportation to veterans between home and the artificial limb manufacturer. In 1870, Congress authorized veterans to receive a new limb or “apparatus for resection” every five years, then increased the frequency to every three years in 1891. Veterans who did not want a limb or who could not wear one could instead obtain money (commutation) at the rate of \$75 for each leg, \$50 for each arm or foot, and \$50 for apparatus for resection. In 1874, Congress decided that veterans who “lost an arm at or above the elbow, or a leg at or above the knee” could receive a pension of \$24 per month instead of receiving commutation or an artificial limb.

Part 2 – Records in the National Archives

The following three records provide basic information about a soldier's wounding.

- 1. Compiled Military Service Record (CSMR)** should include information about the wounding, nature of the injury, hospitalization, and discharge from military service.

Access: CMSRs for selected states are online at *Ancestry.com* and *Fold3.com*. Records that are not online can be viewed at the National Archives, or copies can be requested online at

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"Order Online" at <https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline>, or by mail using Form NATF Form 86 (www.archives.gov/forms/pdf/natf-86.pdf). For more information, see "Requesting Copies of Older (pre-WWI) Military Service Records" at www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records.html.

2. **Carded Medical Records** include records of hospitalization, etc., that may not be in the CMSR. Access: None of these records are online. The records can be viewed at the National Archives, 700 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20408. Requests for copies can be mailed to Old Military and Civil Reference, National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20408, or emailed to archives1reference@nara.gov. Specify the soldier's name, company and regiment, and your name, postal mailing address, phone number, and email address.
3. **Pension File** should include declarations for pension (applications), affidavits, and other records that describe the wound; date, location, and circumstances in which the wound occurred; hospitalization; and effects the wound had on the veteran in post-war years. Access: Some Civil War pension files are online at *Fold3.com*. Records that are not online can be viewed at the National Archives, or copies can be requested online at "Order Online" at <https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline>, or by mail using Form NATF Form 85 (www.archives.gov/forms/pdf/natf-85.pdf). For more information, see "Requesting Copies of Older (pre-WWI) Military Service Records" at www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records.html.

The specialized records listed below provide information about commutation (money), artificial limbs, or resection apparatuses provided to veterans. None of these are online. The records can be viewed at the National Archives, 700 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20408. Inquiries can be mailed to Old Military and Civil Reference, National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20408, or emailed to archives1reference@nara.gov.

Legal Background.

4. **Compilation of Laws, Decisions, and Instructions Pertaining to the Settlement of Claims for Prosthetic Appliances and Commutation, 1862–1892** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 32; NAID 2538353).

Limbs.

5. **List of Persons Furnished Artificial Limbs and Commutation, 1885** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 17; NAID 2538346), a giant volume measuring 18 by 12 by 4 inches. It lists thousands of veterans alphabetically by name, giving each man's unit, date of first application for limb or commutation, and the number of limbs received or paid for at five year intervals, being *approximately* 1870, 1875, 1880, 1885, 1890, and 1895. "Dead" or "rejected" is sometimes noted.

6. **List of Veterans Furnished Artificial Limbs, 1871–1872** [*sic*] (RG 15, NM-23, Series 16; NAID 2538345), is a single 251-page volume that contains a list of men furnished artificial limbs under laws enacted *before* 17 June 1870, according to the explanation written at the front by U.S. Army Steward Magnus Koechling, Surgeon General's Office, 1 April 1872. He noted the list included records for 3,021 arms, 4,464 legs, 48 feet, and 214 apparatus for resection.

7. **Registers of Persons Furnished Artificial Limbs and Commutation, 1870–1927** (11 volumes)¹ (RG 15, NM-23, Series 18; NAID 2538348) provide the bulk of the documentation for most veterans. Most volumes have an alphabetical index that indicates the page containing further information. In addition to the veteran's name, each entry usually gives the veteran's rank, unit, current residence, date of injury, which arm or leg injured, amount of payment, date of commutation certificate or payment, and other information. Page 1 of the first volume explains many of the abbreviations used in that and subsequent volumes. The front of Volume 3 book contains a note, dated 29 February 1876, reminding the Surgeon General's clerks that "When no special directions are given by the applicants, orders for limbs will hereafter be sent to them, and not to the manufacturers."
Vol. 1 July 6, 1870–Jan. 14, 1871. 534 pages. ("Vol. 3" on spine). Index
Vol. 2 Jan. 16, 1871–May 12, 1875. 381 pages. ("Vol. 4" on spine). Index.
Vol. 3 June 22, 1875–June 30, 1877. 618 pages. ("Vol. 5" on spine). Index.
Vol. 4 July 2, 1877–June 16, 1880. 269 pages ("Vol. 6" on spine). Index.
Vol. 5 June 18, 1880–May 4, 1881. 527 pages ("No. 7" on spine). Index.
Vol. 6 May 5, 1881–Mar. 29, 1884, 475 pages ("No. 8") on spine). Index.
Vol. 7 Mar. 31, 1884–June 16, 1885. 253 pages ("No. 9" on spine). Index.
Vol. 8 June 23, 1885–June 29, 1887. 511 pages ("No. 10" on spine.). No index.
Vol. 9 July 1887–June 1911. 512 pages ("No. 11" on spine). Pages 1–231 (July 2, 1887–May 13, 1889); pages 232–233 contains an explanation about duplicate registers; pages 234–512, Oct. 31, 1889–June 24, 1911). Index.
Vol. 10 July 1911–June 1920. 35 pages. No index.
Vol. 11 Sept. 1920–Apr. 1927. 46 pages. No index.

8. **Letters Sent Relating to Prosthetic Appliances, Commutation, and Transportation Reimbursement, 1885–1892** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 2; NAID 2538344). 1 volume. 570 pages. Includes a fair copy of 1,337 letters written to veterans, physicians, manufacturers, and others. Alphabetical index includes both the person *to whom* the letter was written as well as persons *about whom* the letter was written.

9. **Register of Orders for Artificial Limbs Issued by the Medical Director in New York, New York, Dec. 1862–May 1869** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 21; NAID 2538350). 1 volume. Arranged in rough alphabetical order by first letter of the veteran's surname and then in chronological order. Includes the man's name, unit, date of order, limb lost, limb maker, battle in which the limb was lost, date the limb was inspected, date the account was approved, and remarks.

¹NARA numbers these leather-bound volumes 1-11, but the Surgeon General's Office considered them to be Volumes 3 through 13 of this series of records, and they are so marked. (The single volume discussed above that NARA describes as NM-23, Series 16, was the original "Volume 1 & 2" that began the series.)

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Trusses

- 10. Registers of Applications for Trusses, Sept. 1872–July 1895** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 25; NAID 2538351). 4 volumes. Arranged by time period then roughly alphabetically by the first two letters of the veteran's surname. Usually gives the veteran's name, place of residence, examining surgeon's name, pension certificate number, kind of rupture, date of injury, kind of truss, date the truss was sent, date of receipt, and the date the examining surgeon was paid his fee. The "kind of truss" column gives the manufacturer's name. The abbreviation BBP means a truss made by Buttman, Bartlett & Parker of Chicago.
Vol. 1. ca. 1872–1878.
Vol. 2. ca. 1879–1884.
Vol. 3. ca. 1884–1889
Vol. 4. ca. 1889–1891.
- 11. Registers of Veterans Issued Trusses, 1885–1923** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 28; NAID 2538352). No records for October 1895–December 1905. Arranged chronologically by date. Gives the surgeon's name, applicant's name, whether "S" or "D" (not sure what that means), and size (number).
Vol. 1. Nov. 1885–Sept. 1895. 349 pages.
Vol. 2. Jan. 2, 1906–June 30, 1923. 165 pages.
- 12. Letters and Endorsements Sent Pertaining to Trusses, Nov. 1875–July 1884** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 1; NAID 2538342). Not indexed, but only about 50 pages.

Manufacturers.

- 13. Register of Bonds Received from Manufacturers of Artificial Limbs, 1885–1919** (RG 15, NM-23, Series 20; NAID 2538349). Name index. Arranged chronologically by date of bond.

Part 3 – Information About Artificial Limb Manufacturers and Designs

Patent drawings with written descriptions of their features are available on the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office website at uspto.gov. For pre-1976 patents, it is necessary to know the patent number.

Part 4 – Publications about Artificial Limbs

Guy R. Hasegawa, *Mending Broken Soldiers: The Union and Confederate Programs to Supply Artificial Limbs* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012) provides a well-researched and written account of wartime efforts on both sides of the conflict. (Available from booksellers.)

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Newspaper advertisements and publications issued by the manufacturers and others can also provide information about the construction, features, usefulness, and durability of nineteenth-century artificial limbs.

U.S. Serial Set

“Artificial Limbs Furnished to Soldiers. Letter from the Secretary of War in Answer to a Resolution of the House of April 10, [1866,] relative to artificial limbs furnished to soldiers at the expense of government.” House Ex. Doc. 108, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., Serial 1263. Two lists of soldiers. List 1, pp. 3–121, is in rough alphabetical order by first letter of the surname. Includes each man’s unit; place of residence; whether furnished an arm, leg, or an apparatus; the cost of the item furnished; and the manufacturer. List 2, pp. 121–128, has names received after List 1 was compiled; includes the same information.

Part 5 – Miscellaneous

“Life and Limb: The Toll of the American Civil War” is an interesting online exhibit by the National Library of Medicine at www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/lifeandlimb/index.html.