Searching Online Archives

Some of these sites, like the National Archives, can be very difficult and frustrating to search. Some give tantalizing snippets that you must then track down to their source. Some websites look like a good reliable archive, and then turn out to be behind a paywall, or just incorporating work from another site entirely. Keep looking, be patient, and eventually you will find your gem.

National Archives

https://www.archives.gov/

https://www.archives.gov/research

https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy

Search unit names – USS Reuben James, 101st airborne

Search an event – Battle of the Bulge, Pearl Harbor

Sometimes a Google search does better than the website search for images

Google image searches can be very productive – and lead you to more sites. If you find a site using National Archive images, it should have a reference number or topic that you can use to search the NA site and get the original. Many sites try to copyright images they are using from the NA, this is not kosher. Government archives are not copyrighted.

If a photo shows up as Wikimedia Commons, click on it – there will usually be a link to the original source, like http://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-navy-ships/battleships/arizona-bb-39/80-G-6683.html which is the Navy history site.

Internet Archive: https://archive.org/index.php

Search Texts - Use "History" + county name & state to find histories of the county your ancestor lived in, or just search for everything about that county or town

Once you find a book that looks promising, open the book and do a "Search Inside this Book" to find specific names.

Download the entire book in a format your PC will read - *.pdf is usually largest in size but highest in scan quality, since it's a series of page images. Other formats in converting to text can get quite weird thanks to non-Latin alphabet characters. PDFs allow full text search and highlight all the occurrences of the search throughout the book.

Google is still your friend

Use the Google Image search – "National Archives Pearl Harbor" or your ancestor's unit/home town/birth place

Click on the VISIT button for an image that has what you want – it will say archives.gov under the picture (or whatever the source site is)

National Archives photos are not copyrighted – if a site wants you to pay for the picture, go back to the NA for a free version.

If you want to get really technical, put your search in quotation marks – that exact phrase only will be searched for. You can do advanced searching with Boolean operators AND OR NOT as well. In either case, you may be eliminating something that you actually want. On the other hand, you'll be getting rid of thousands of irrelevant pages. Experiment and find what works best for each search.

Wikipedia articles are supposed to have references – the links are at the bottom of the article – use them to find the originals

Search for towns, counties, military units, specific battles or events

Use the reference links to find the books online at archive.org

Many of the references have links to Amazon, but if the book is old it may be in the Internet Archive. Some are available through Google Books for free *.pdf download also, but always check back to the archive.

Ancestry & Heritage Quest

https://www.ancestry.com/

https://www.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/login/barcode?aid=6180

Open the Genealogy Books links

Search for the name & location

The results are page shots – if you want context, copy the resulting book's name into the Internet Archive & get the whole thing. Once you find page images with your person's name on them, download them to your hard drive. Then go to the Internet Archive and get the whole book for the context. For instance, your ancestor is listed as a school board member for several years running in an appendix – the chapter in the book will talk about the school itself, when it was built or expanded – details of your ancestor's life.

Military Archives & History

US Army Center for Military History

https://history.army.mil/bookshelves.html

Naval History & Heritage Command

https://www.history.navy.mil/

 Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships

https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs.html

USMC https://www.marines.mil/

USAF https://www.afhra.af.mil/

USCG https://www.history.uscg.mil/

Allied Navies resource Naval-History.net

 https://www.naval-history.net/

British – Royal Navy https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/features/history-timeline

ALL U.S. military units of whatsoever kind have a unit history somewhere, usually linked somewhere on an official history page for that service. If you know your ancestor's unit, you can find the unit history and have a pretty good idea what Great-Grandpa did in the War – whichever war it was.

There are also many, many good sites for any military history that are not official government sites. Their info can come from all kinds of sources, and a lot of it needs to be checked with official info, but they can be very helpful.

Museums & National Libraries

Smithsonian https://www.si.edu/

Library of Congress https://www.loc.gov/

British Museum   http://www.britishmuseum.org/

British Library https://www.bl.uk/

French National Library http://www.bnf.fr/en/tools/a.welcome_to_the_bnf.html

Context for your ancestor's life

Investigating the history of a place or time where your ancestor lived can give you a feel for what it was like during that person's lifetime. Stories of passage in steerage across the Atlantic, life in a soddie on the Montana/Dakota prairie, diaries of hiding in a trench during WWI – these things help put that person in a larger context. Finding the ship, or unit history, or diary, can make a big difference. You can Google a country's name + national library and get results for just about every country in the world.

For British ancestry

British – Imperial War Museums

https://www.iwm.org.uk/

https://www.iwm.org.uk/research/tracing-your-family-history/tracing-your-royal-naval-history

Covers every aspect of British warfare starting with World War I to the present, including a family search.