

# Veterans and Disability

## Teaching Disability History Student Research Guide

A project of Keene State College and Emerging America

### Overview

Disabled veterans have always played an influential role in American thought and history. Americans honor veterans in part due to the sacrifice represented by their disability. Yet the record of care has been mixed. Veterans have been their own most important advocates.

In its first 80 years, the new United States provided haphazard support for soldiers permanently injured in the Revolution and other wars. The Civil War found both sides wholly unprepared for the half million soldiers wounded in body or in mind. Led by determined reformers and by the Grand Army of the Republic and other veterans' groups, the Union responded with a national system of hospitals and soldiers' homes. Post-war, states also built institutions, including in the South. By 1900, the U.S. government also paid nearly a million veterans pensions based on disability. Pensions became the single largest item in the federal budget.

Determined to do better when the U.S. joined World War I, the focus shifted to rehabilitation and job training. Yet devastating injuries from new



weapons, the large number of disabled soldiers, and prejudice made it difficult in truth for disabled veterans to find good jobs. Programs combined under the Veterans Administration (VA) in 1930.

After World War II, disabled veterans organized and challenged stereotypes as they demanded access to resources. Veterans played

vital roles in the emerging, diverse movement of disability rights activists who protested and lobbied to win support in federal legislation in Section 504 protections in 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Veterans of wars in Korean, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan have advocated relentlessly for adequate treatment and care from hospitals and other support services.

Image: [Sergeant Thomas Plunkett](#). (1863). Photo by James Wallace Black. Library of Congress.

### Guiding Questions

How has the experience of war changed across the centuries? • How has the U.S. response to the needs of disabled veterans changed in different eras? • What should be governments' responsibilities to care for citizens, especially veterans who need care? • What do the experiences of individual veterans and of institutions tell about the character of the U.S.?

### Topic Ideas

Investigate the story of one soldier or regiment, historically often created by state, or an [institution](#) such as a soldiers' home. Focus on a particular war. Or trace a change in the experiences of veterans or of technology.

## Selected Digital Collections of Primary Sources

- [Disabled Veterans. Serving Our Voices: Stories from the Veterans History Project](#), Library of Congress. The Veterans History Project contains thousands of recordings from WWI to today.
- [Military Resources](#), National Archives and Records Administration.
- [The National Archives](#) can provide veterans' service records.
- Ancestry.com provides access to a wide array of [military records](#) for a fee.
- Local and State historical societies. Ask for help to search holdings related to disabled veterans.
- Numerous regimental histories are available on the Internet Archive. See [this example](#).
- For WWI disabled veterans, a good place to start is [Carry On](#), published by the American Red Cross.
- For WWII blinded veterans, [scrapbook](#), Perkins School for the Blind
- Students might interview veterans from the family or from a local organization. Guides from the [Smithsonian Institution](#) and from [StoryCorps](#) at the Library of Congress.
- [United States Military Old Soldiers Home Records](#) - FamilySearch.

## Secondary Historical Resources

- Emerging America - Online Exhibition, [How Civil War Veterans Transformed Disability](#). Includes extensive primary and secondary sources in accompanying Reform to Equal Rights curriculum.
- National Museum of Civil War Medicine. [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the American Civil War](#). (May 2, 20219). Discusses PTSD throughout American history.
- Taylor, L. [PTSD: A Lasting Impact of War](#). (March 6, 2017). Blog post. Library of Congress.
- Reft, R. [World War I: Injured Veterans and the Disability Rights Movement](#). (December 21, 2017). Blog post. Library of Congress.
- RetroReport. Video. (12:10 minutes). [Walter Reed: The Battle for Recovery](#). 2023. It details gaps in treatment and responses at VA facilities from 2007 to 2023.
- [Disabled American Veterans](#) was organized following WWI to assist disabled vets and their families.

## Search Terms

Veteran, prosthetic, amputee, peg-leg, cripple, lame, deaf, dumb, blind, disabled, post-traumatic stress syndrome, PTSD, shell-shock, combat fatigue, disordered mind, insane, lunatic, mad, soldiers home, VA, U.S. Pension Bureau, Sanitary Commission. (Many historical terms for disabled people are offensive today. Use them with great care and respect.)

## Glossary

Active duty = full-time military service; almshouse = poorhouse; ANC = Army Nurse Corp; asylum = mental hospital; corpsman = military medic; Invalid Corps = Union Army division of wounded and ill soldiers; MASH = mobile army surgical hospital; Medvac = medical evacuation.

## Bibliography

- National History Day 2026 [Theme Book](#).
- Gerber, David A. [Disabled Veterans in History](#). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012.
- Handley-Cousins, Sarah. *Bodies in Blue: Disability in the Civil War North*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2019.

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- Linker, Beth. *War's Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Wool, Zoë. *After War: The Weight of Bodies at Walter Reed*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.