Finding clues from World War I

In 1917 and 1918, as the United States entered World War I, approximately 24 million men in the U.S. filled out draft registration cards. Here’s how to determine if you’re related to one of them.

1. Look for males in your family tree born between the years 1872 and 1900—the birth years covered by the draft (fudge the 1900 cutoff a bit if you think an ancestor may have lied about his age).

2. Search for those same males in WWI Draft Registration cards on Ancestry.com. Begin with just first and last name. Add identifying factors like state and birth year to help narrow your list of results as needed.

3. Click on the names of people who best match the person you’re looking for; then click on the actual draft card image. Compare address, occupation, names of any other family members listed on the card, birth date, and other details to information you’ve found in censuses and other records.

4. Keep an open mind: your relative may have gone by a nickname most of his life but used his real name on the draft card, or he may have changed jobs or moved to a different address than you are expecting. Explore all possibilities.

5. Note that men who registered for the draft did not necessarily serve, and not everyone who served registered for the draft—many simply enlisted. Search for the same members of your family tree in the entire military collection on Ancestry.com to see if you can learn more.

What’s on a draft card? And where will it take you?

During WWI, the U.S. conducted three separate draft registrations. The forms used varied slightly from one registration to the next, but all cards asked the following:

- registrant’s name
- age and date of birth
- citizenship status or nation registrant is a subject of
- occupation and employer
- physical description
- infirmities that would exempt registrant from the draft
- marital status and whether registrant had a family member dependent on registrant’s support (1st draft) OR name and address of the nearest relative (2nd and 3rd draft)
5 Steps Beyond

You’ve found a World War I draft registration card. So what do you do now? Use the clues in it to find five more records.


2. Harry’s answer “yes” doesn’t clearly indicate whether he’s a citizen, an alien, or somewhere in between. But a quick check of naturalization records confirms he became a citizen in 1910. Bonus—you’ll also find his hometown, the ship he sailed on, arrival date, and his middle name: Joseph.

3. Harry listed his mother as a dependent. Turns out that Harry’s mother, Eliza, is living with him in the 1920 census, too. Year of arrival in the U.S., 1907, is a clue that should send you directly to passenger lists.

4. A draft registration card doesn’t tell you whether a man served—but the 1930 census might. Column 30 indicates that Harry is a veteran of WWI. A search of the military collections on Ancestry.com also surfaces a WWII draft registration card, plus a Pennsylvania veteran burial card, as well as other military documents.

5. Harry’s employer? Otis Steel, where Harry worked as a foreman. U.S. City Directories for Cleveland, 1917, gives an address for the company. A quick web search provides more details and photos.