

World War I Draft Registrations

As the United States prepared to enter World War I, preparations were needed to assemble a fighting force to meet the demands of a full-scale war. By federal proclamation, Tuesday, June 5, 1917 was declared a national holiday. Young men were required to register with their local draft board located in each county throughout the country. The larger counties might have anywhere from 2 to 5 draft registration locations and larger cities would have regional sites. New York City had 189 draft registration locations within its boundaries. To facilitate locating a Draft Registration Card in a larger city, lists of Draft Registration Boards and their addresses are available. Copies of these lists are available through a variety of sources: LDS Family History Centers, National Archives, U.S. Defense Department, and Regional Genealogical Research Libraries (New England Historical Genealogical Society Library). The actual original copies are the property of the National Archives. Several state archives have copies of draft registration cards for the draft boards that were located in the state.

As manpower needs escalated, two other “draft” holidays were designated the following year (Wednesday, June 5, and Thursday, September 5, 1918.) By these dates, all men between the ages of 18 and 45 were supposed to have registered. All alien men were required to register as well as U.S. citizens. Only men currently in the military service were exempt from registering and those who failed to register were prosecuted. Court records would still exist for this time period.

Although the majority of men registered in their home county, there were no laws requiring it, nor did it always happen. Men who lived in the city could have registered near where they worked rather than at the Board location closest to where they resided. Men who were traveling on registration day registered in a county, and even a state, where they never lived. For example, in the western states, which have large and oddly shaped counties, miners and ranchers frequently found themselves residing in one county, but living nearer to the county seat of a neighboring county.

The United States government had different registration forms for each of the three registration periods. All forms required the full name, exact birth date, and residence of each draft registrant. Also listed is information stating whether the individual was a citizen, alien, or declarant of his intent to naturalize. The occupation, employer’s name, and address were given, as were number of dependants and any possible reasons for claiming exemption from the draft. Draft Board personnel also judged each man to be of tall, medium, or short height and slender, medium or stout build. Hair and eye color were also recorded, as well as any physical disabilities. Each card was signed by the registrant, then dated and signed by the Draft Board clerk.

The form used on June 5, 1917 asked for the exact place of birth, while the form used the following year asked for the registrant’s father’s place of birth - not the registrant’s! The third form asked only for the country of citizenship. No mention was made of what state or county the registrant came from. Usually the registrant declared whether single or married. If married, the registrant gave his wife’s name and address, while those who were unmarried gave the name of a parent or sibling. In the case of a young immigrant who came alone, the Draft Registration Card supplied a correct birth date and frequently with a place of birth, next of kin, and address if living in another state or country. Generally, the name and address of a relative were given.

World War I Draft Registration Cards exist for all U.S. states and territories. The only known exception is a small portion of registrations for the northern counties in Alabama that were destroyed before microfilming began. The originals are at the National Archives in East Point, Georgia, which is located outside of Atlanta. The largest Draft Boards registered well over 5,000 men, most of the cards were handwritten, and the cards for all registration periods are filed together.

Many discrepancies exist between the names at the tops of cards and the signatures on the reverse side. It seems that the local clerks who filled out the cards wrote the names phonetically while the immigrants often signed their original names as written "in the old country." Each Draft Registration Card was numbered, but filing procedures can vary widely state by state. It should also be noted that not all men who filled out draft registration cards would serve in the military.

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Compiled by Bryan Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers-Lee County Library, 9/4/2008.