

Student Reading

Civil War Pensions

Veteran's pensions date back to the American Revolution. The Civil War, by its large number of veterans, created a massive pension system. The Union Army had approximately 1.8 million veterans at the conclusion of the war. There were more than 900,000 Confederate veterans that returned home. These men were not addressed by the U.S. Government, but were helped by individual state governments. Irish veterans of the Union Army are thought to number nearly 150,000. African American Union veterans number in excess of 180,000 in the United States Colored Troops, also known as U.S.C.T. These two groups combined account for something in excess of 15% of the Union Army. Both of these groups faced challenges in getting their Civil War pensions following the war.

Pensions were granted during the Civil War for deaths and injuries. The Union listed 281,881 non-mortal wounds; Union surgeons performed 29,980 amputations with a 75% survival rate (totaling 22,430). 306,952 gunshot wounds were documented during the war. These types of injuries provided clear cut pension claims.

The pension system continued to be expanded into the 1870-1880's. By 1884 one-third of Northern Congressmen were Union veterans. The pension system was expanded to include diseases such as rheumatism, piles (hemorrhoid), and catarrh (a chronic inflammation of the mucous membrane). These diseases were harder to diagnose, let alone prove a connection to military service. A byproduct of the expansion and liberalization of the pension system was widespread fraud. In 1872 a pension commissioner estimated 25% of the claims were fraudulent.

For the Irish and African-American veterans, the pension system provided several unique challenges. Standard documentation required for a pension claim included name and age. What seems like easy routine questions were very often quite complication for these men.

For African American's especially ex-slaves which were a large percentage of Union's U.S.C.T. veterans, this issue was critical to successfully receiving their pension. While enslaved, most slaves had only a first name (e.g. John or Tom). If a surname was used, it was their masters. This was known as their "slave name." Many ex-slaves changed their name upon achieving freedom. Freedom often meant enlistment in the Union Army. This created confusion for the veteran who often seemed to have two names. In his pension file Tobias Bowdry explains, "*Tobias Bowdry that was the name by which I was known when a slave... my master [was] William Bowdry... We were told by Colonel Moody at Camp Chase that if we ever went back South, or enlisted in the Union Army we should change our names and not be known by the names we were when in slavery as we would not be so apt to be recognized. I afterwards enlisted in the Union Army at Columbus, Ohio, and followed the advice of Colonel Moody [and] adopted the*

name of Wilson Jones when I enlisted, and went by that name while in the U.S. service...”

Irish immigrants also would often “Americanize” their surname. Many European immigrants would Anglicize or Americanize their names. Bias and prejudice toward Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century helped fuel this want to “blend in.” Irish veterans by the name of Shanahan became Shannon, and Piggott became Pickett. These name changes also posed another barrier to receiving their pension.

A veteran’s age was also a key part of the documentation process. Age is usually verified based on date of birth, not always as simple as it sounds. Slaves generally did not know their specific birth date: day, month, year. In his autobiography Frederick Douglass states, *“I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday.”*

Even if they did, it was usually oral tradition. This provided a challenge for African-American veterans applying for their pensions. Irish immigrants knew their date of birth, but the documentation was in Ireland. Sometimes a family member in Ireland could write a letter to document the date of birth, sometimes a parish priest would verify the information. For both African-American and Irish veteran, the family Bible (with dates of birth etc), would be used (if one existed). It is hard for us living in the information age, to imagine the challenges these men had proving their name and date of birth.

Another challenge was to prove you had received an injury during your military service. The pension bureau had physicians, but the veteran often had to find comrades to write a deposition on their behalf. These depositions became an important source of documentation. A challenge for all veterans following war, was to locate their comrades who could verify their war time accounts. African-American and Irish veterans migrated widely in search of work, so this became another challenge to their pension.

A final challenge faced by both groups of veterans appears to be institutional bias or racism. This is difficult to prove, often pension employees were fair and open minded. Let us just say the nineteenth century was not a “color blind” society. Anti-Irish prejudice was also prominent in the American culture. Statistically speaking based on a sample of claims; 92% of white veterans successfully achieved their pension claims, versus 75% of African American veterans. A host of reasons might explain this discrepancy (many of the factors previously listed: name, age, injury, etc). One is left to wonder the extent of institutional bias, and its effects on veteran’s pension claims. In a letter dated July 21, 1901, special examiner Clarence Barnett writes describing Rachel Cole the widow of U.S.C.T. veteran Leander Cole, *“She is a black woman of a rather repulsive appearance and of a fair reputation for truth that is of about the average for her race...”*

Another special examiner describes Woodson William's sister "...*I found the claimant Jamima Kelly to be a very ignorant, stupid Negro...*" The Special examiner's words speak for themselves and volumes about the potential for institutional bias.

All of these challenges created problems as America's newest citizens sought their hard fought pension claims.

SOURCES

BOOKS:

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- Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy by Ella Lonn (Baton Rouge, 1951).
- Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass by Frederick Douglass (Signet Classic, 1997).

ARTICLES:

- "Civil War Pensions" by Dr. Byron Stinson, Civil War Times Illustrated, July 1970.
- "Irish Catholic Civil War Veterans at the St. Colman of Cloyne Cemetery" by the 2006-2007 Senior Research History Class, Washington Court House High School, Ohio Civil War Genealogy Journal, Volume XII, 2008.
- "Researching Ohio's Men of Color and their Civil War Service" by Paul LaRue, Ohio Civil War Genealogy Journal, Volume X, 2006.

PRIMARY SOURCES:

- Pension Files (various veterans) held by National Archives and Records Administration