



Anatomy of a Union Civil War Pension File

Civil War pension files—there are about two million of them—are some of the best known and most frequently used research sources in the National Archives. And yet, they are at the same time underused and underappreciated.

The U.S. federal government granted pensions to Union veterans of the Civil War, and to their widows, minor children, and dependent fathers and mothers. (The federal government did not grant pensions to former Confederate veterans or widows until 1959.) All the files have common elements; yet, each file is also unique in content.

The size of Civil War pension files varies, but one hundred or more pages is common. Size depends upon the number of claimants involved, the complexity of the claims, and any difficulties the claimant had in proving the claims.

Although a pension file is about one man and, possibly, his family, there are many “actors” in the “theater” of each pension file. In a randomly chosen pension file—that of John W. Moore (Company I, 19th Kentucky Infantry; WC 708353)—more than 100 people are mentioned, including various family members, comrades-in-arms, co-workers, employers, physicians, neighbors, friends, notaries public, court clerks, persons who witnessed the signing of affidavits, and others.

The pension file will contain records for all claims relating to one veteran—the soldier’s, the widow’s, the minor children’s, and the dependent father’s or mother’s. If a Civil War widow later became the widow of a second Civil War veteran, all records relating to both veterans may be consolidated in one file.

If the veteran survived the war, he applied for a pension based upon what was allowable by law at the

time of his application, which might be loss of limb or eye, disability from wounds, or disability because of disease incurred in the service. The laws were liberalized over time and if the veteran lived long enough he might simply receive a pension based on old age.¹

Likewise, laws relating to widow's pensions changed over time, but in all cases the widow would have to prove her legal marriage to the veteran. Minor children could receive a pension until they were 16 years old; application would be made by the surviving parent or guardian. A mother or father who had been dependent solely upon a son who died in the war could receive a pension.

A veteran's pension claim began with an affidavit that is typically headed with the words "Declaration for Original Invalid Pension." (That's the *noun* invalid (person who is incapacitated, sick, or disabled), not the adjective *invalid* (having no legal force). The declaration includes the veteran's name; age; place of residence; identification of the unit(s) in which he served; the date he was enrolled in service and by what officer; the date and place he was discharged; his physical description (height, and color of complexion, hair, and eyes); the date, place, and manner in which he was wounded, injured, or disabled by disease; the date and place at which he was treated in hospitals; his occupation before and after the war; his place of residence before and after the war; and his post office address. The declaration would be executed before an officer (clerk or judge) of a court.

The veteran's claim needed to be supported by corroborating evidence. Thus, a veteran might obtain affidavits from comrades-in-arms who were with him when he became injured or sick; they held unique knowledge as witnesses to the event. Sometimes the pension office would send its own letter to persons who served in the veteran's company and ask for their recollections of the veteran and the event. Sometimes these comrades could not remember the man or the event in question, which isn't surprising since a company would have more than one hundred men, and the event might have occurred a decade or more previously.

The veteran would also obtain affidavits from his physicians who could describe the nature and cause of his medical problems—as best as nineteenth or early

twentieth-century medicine could do so. Physicians may not have had detailed records; sometimes they had no records to rely upon but their memories.

The veteran would also obtain affidavits from family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and employers. Persons who knew him before the war could testify that he had been "a sound man" able to do a full day's work, who was now sickly, weak, and able to only do one-fourth or one-half of a day's work since the war. They could describe the man's symptoms, complaints, and demeanor as known to them.

The pension office might send a letter of inquiry to the town's postmaster, a greatly trusted federal employee since he handled the government's money. The postmaster might be asked his opinion on the reputation, character, and truthfulness of the claimant or some other person providing testimony on a claim. He might be asked his opinion of the validity of the claim itself.

The pension office would also send requests for information about the claimant's war record to the War Department's offices of the Adjutant General or Surgeon General. Was the soldier at a particular place on a particular date? Did the records indicate he was wounded or suffered an injury? Was there a hospital record? Sometimes the pension office would ask if the records showed whether the claimant's comrades who testified on his behalf were at the place on the date he alleged injury or disease occurred.

After studying all the evidence provided by government records and the claimant and his supporters, the pension office would normally grant the pension because all the legal and proof requirements had been satisfied. Sometimes, however, the evidence for a claim looked suspicious or questionable. In those circumstances, the pension office would appoint a special examiner to personally go take testimony from the claimant and his witnesses, judge for himself the validity of the claim, and make a recommendation to the pension office whether the claim should be granted or denied, or, sometimes, that additional testimony should be taken from persons living in some other state or county.

The pension office selected a board of examining surgeons for each county. Some veterans were required to be examined annually or biennially by this board.

3-155.

SURGEON'S CERTIFICATE.

Insert character and number of claim: Renewed + Increased Pension Claim No. 207257

Name of claimant: John W. Moore Aged 66 years. CRAWFORDSVILLE, IND. P. O. 180 State IND.

Claimant's present address: Green Castle, Ind. MAR 24 1909 (Date of examination.)

Name of claimant: Right inguinal hernia complete

He receives a pension of 12 dollars per month.

He makes the following statement in regard to the origin of his disabilities and date when first discovered by him: hernia first at siege of Vicksburg, have had to wear a truss most of the time since, hurts me a good deal, Rheumatism, just after war, comes on less every once, gets worse of late years

Birthplace: Clay Co Missouri; age, 66 years; height, 5' 2 3/4; weight, 182 7/8 pounds; complexion, fair; color of eyes, blue; color of hair brown; occupation, keep a sawy shop; permanent marks and scars other than those described below, none

We hereby certify that upon examination we find the following objective conditions:
 Pulse rate 88-96-150; respiration, 20-22-30; temperature, 98.5°
 (Sitting, standing, after exercise.) (Sitting, standing, after exercise.)
 General health poor, nutrition good -
Hernia
The rings are patulous and dilated, canals clasped, tumor not down at present, he states that it comes down into scrotum at times, that it was down two weeks ago, no tumor now, abdomen is very pendulous and prominent, he states that the reason he has no tumor on is because it has been broken, the hernia is a complete one, all the rest down at present. = 1918
Rheumatism
Flattened over sacrum, muscles rigid in lumbar region, he cannot stoop at all, shoulders are stiffened left the worst cannot raise left arm to head, knees and hips are stiffened, he uses a cane in walking, arms are small in proportion to right, see description, chest measures 34" abdomen at umbilicus 43", knee force & motion in affected joints shafts 16 7/8, he goes up and down stairs sideways. = 1918
Chest
Small, symmetrical 34"-44" 37 3/4", vocal fonation & resonance normal, no dulness, respiration clear,
Heart
Apex 6 1/2 spaces, dulness increased, rhythm irregular, force feeble, sounds indistinct, particularly 2nd sound, action rapid, no murmurs, syst. of heart on exercise, no edema, general capillary congestion. = 1918
Wine Ambrs 10% acid, no albumin, no sugar,
No other disability found, no evidence of vicious habits.

This claimant is so disabled from hernia, rheumatism and dis. of heart as to be incapacitated in a degree equivalent to the loss of a hand or foot for the purposes of manual labor and is entitled to \$24 a month.

H. Manning Sec'y. E. H. Swan Sec'y. E. M. G. Jones Treas.

As certificate must not be made by any member of a board except upon a special order of the Government of Pension.

(This certificate to be filled in and signed by the secretary when the full board is present.)
 I hereby certify that Dr. Crummigan, Dr. Cowan, and Dr. Keegan, were personally present and actually participated in the examination of John W. Moore, the claimant in this case, on _____ day of MAR 24 1909, 190__.

(Signature) E. H. Cowan

(This certificate to be filled in by the member of the board acting as secretary, and signed by the applicant, when a full board is not present.)

I, _____, the applicant for (increase or original) pension referred to in this medical certificate, hereby consent to be examined by Dr. _____ and Dr. _____, the examining surgeons here present (waiving examination by full board), on this _____ day of _____, 190__.

Witnesses to mark: _____ (Signature of Applicant.)

SURGEON'S CERTIFICATE
 IN CASE OF
John W. Moore
 Co. 2, 19 Regt. My. Infy

APPLICANT FOR Renewed + Increased
 No. 207257

DATE OF EXAMINATION:
MAR 24 1909

Board:
A. H. Keegan, Sec'y.
E. H. Cowan, Pres.

Post office: CRAWFORDSVILLE, IND.
 County, Montgomery.
 State, IND.

Do not use the back of certificate for any purpose other than indicated by printed matter on other sheets.

The outlines of the human skeleton and figure should be used to indicate precisely the location of a disease or injury, the entrance and exit of a bullet, an amputation, etc.

(Paste continuation sheet, if used, here.)

If the veteran felt his own county's board was unfair or prejudiced against him, he could request that the pension office send him for examination to another county's board. In the 1860s and 1870s, the "board" consisted on one doctor; in the 1880s and later the "board" consisted of three doctors.

In many files there is a "family questionnaire" that asked for information about his wife and children. It asked the full name of his wife (or wives) and the date, place, and name of the person who officiated at the marriage(s). It asked for the names and dates of birth of his children. The questionnaire is often found in files of veterans receiving pensions in the summer of 1898, as well as around 1915.

The pension file may also contain copies of vital records, such as the veteran's death certificate, the marriage records for the veteran and his widow, and

even "birth records" for the veteran's children if the case involves application for a pension for a deceased veteran's minor children. Since official recording of births did not start in many states until well after the Civil War, the birth record may be an affidavit by a physician or midwife who witnessed the birth. Some files have affidavits attesting to the content of the family's Bible records, especially if the veteran lived long enough to qualify for a pension based on age. (For example, the Act of Congress of 6 February 1907, allowed a \$12 monthly pension to veterans who were age 62; \$15 to those who were age 70; and \$20 to those who were age 75.)

For veterans who lived into the twentieth century, there are often copies of bills for expenses of the veteran's last sickness and funeral.

A widow applying for a pension had to prove that she was legally married to the veteran. If she or the veteran

had been previously married, she needed to prove divorce or death of the prior spouse. Thus, a the file might include a copy of divorce papers from the appropriate court or a record of death of the prior spouse. In the case of Rhoda A. Keiffer, former (remarried) widow of William McCarter (Company E, 118th Pennsylvania Infantry; WC 911425), the special examiner investigating where Rhoda's second husband lived between 1872 (when she separated from him without legal process) and his death in 1911, included a list of all the entries in the Philadelphia City Directory relating to him during those years.

A minor's pension claim was often included with that of the widow. If the widow remarried, her claim for a pension ended, so the minor's claims were then pursued separately. The minor's guardian would have to provide a copy of the court record of that appointment. A successful minor's claim needed proof of the minor's birth and proof of the legal marriage between the deceased veteran and the child's mother.

A father or mother applying for a pension had to prove he or she was dependent solely upon the son who died in the war, legal marriage to the other parent, as well as the son's birth. If the applying parent had other children, it was necessary to explain that the other children were deceased or for some other reason unable to support the parent.

The files also contain a variety of administrative papers that helped the pension office keep track of the status of the claim.

Untapped potential

Civil War pension files are an extremely useful source of information about a soldier and his immediate family. However, additional worth—and their untapped potential—lies in the richness these files can bring to broader research projects.

Are you writing a unit history of a specific company or regiment? All the surviving men had stories to tell. Their later affidavits preserve recollections of what they saw, what they experienced, and what the war did to

their bodies. All this is surely untapped material for unit histories.

Are you writing a local history? Who employed whom? Who were friends of whom? Who were customers of which general stores? Who employed which local doctors? What do all these people say about each other? There is surely much untapped material for local history research.

Are you writing a biography of a physician? Civil War pension files are replete with affidavits by veterans and their physicians describing medical conditions and treatments. Much can be learned about the physician's medical practice from those affidavits. For a glimpse into this kind of research, see Claire Prechtel-Klusgens, "Researching the Career of a Nineteenth-Century Physician" at <<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/summer/genea-doctor.html>>. Are you researching a storekeeper, postmaster, or some other locally prominent person? He might have provided an affidavit on behalf of a veteran. There is also much untapped material for this kind of biographical research.

Are you researching someone who was too old or too young to serve in the Civil War, or someone who was the right age but did not serve? He probably had a Civil War veteran as a neighbor or friend, and might have provided an affidavit in his behalf. There is surely much untapped material for this kind of research in the Civil War pension files.

Last Union veteran: Albert Woolson, died 2 Aug. 1956.²

Last Union widow: Gertrude Janeway, died 17 Jan. 2003.³

Three Civil War dependents are receiving a pension,⁴ and sixty-seven Civil War veterans' children are still living.⁵

Online research

Researchers can begin by searching pension indexes available online: NARA Microfilm Publication T288, *General Index to Pension Files, 1861–1934*, online at Ancestry.com; or in NARA Microfilm Publication T289, *Organization Index to Pension Files of Veterans Who Served Between 1861 and 1900* (765 rolls), online at Footnote.com and Familysearchlabs.org.

These indexes will yield the pension file numbers relating to a veteran's file. While both indexes will indicate the unit in which the man served, only T288



Pension Office

This article uses the generic term “pension office” to describe the government agency that handled veteran’s claims. The real name of that agency has changed many times. The Bureau of Pensions was established in the War Department by an act of 2 March 1833 (4 Stat. 622) as the Office of the Commissioner of Pensions from the preexisting Pension Bureau (established 1815), which had been the successor, with the Land Warrant Bureau, to the Military Bounty Lands and Pension Branch (established circa 1810). It was transferred with bureau status to the Department of the Interior by the act creating the department, 3 March 1849 (9 Stat. 395). It was then consolidated with the U.S. Veterans Bureau and the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers to form the Veterans Administration (VA) in 1930. The bureau was designated the Pension Service, on 1 July 1931, and was functionally absorbed into the VA on 1 April 1936. The Department of Veterans Affairs Act (102 Stat. 2635) raised the Veterans Administration to department-level status in the executive branch without change in mission or functions, and redesignated the agency as the Department of Veterans Affairs, effective 15 March 1989.

From 1887 to the 1960s, the pension office was located in a beautiful historic building now open to the public as the National Building Museum <<http://www.nbm.org/about-us/historic-building/>>, 401 F Street NW, Washington, DC 20001. Visitors to Washington, D.C., should consider adding a stop to this building to their tour itinerary, which is just five blocks from the National Archives Building.

identifies the man’s widow. Although the index card in T288 and T289 will show that the file was assigned several different numbers over the years, there is only one file. When the veteran applied for a pension, his file was filed under a Soldier’s Original (SO) number; when it was approved, it then was filed under a Soldier’s Certificate (SC) number; when the widow applied, it was filed under a Widow’s Original (WO) number; when it was approved, it was filed under a Widow’s Certificate (WC) number, and so forth. Longer-lived veterans later had their files renumbered to C- or XC-file numbers. Files with numbers assigned to dependents, such as minor’s original (MO), and minor’s certificate (MC) were, as a practical matter, interfiled with WO and WC files. The *last* number used by the pension office for a file is the number under which it is filed.

To obtain copies of Union Civil War pension files

Researchers are welcome to do their research in person at the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. For more information about hours, rules and procedures, and self-service copying, see “Information for Researchers at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC” at <<http://www.archives.gov/dc-metro/washington/researcher-info.html>>. Researchers choosing this option will do their own copying or scanning. For information, see “Self-Service Copying at the National Archives Building...” at <<http://www.archives.gov/dc-metro/self-service-copying.html>>. T288 and T289 are also available there.

Copies of Civil War pension files can also be ordered by mail for \$75 for up to one hundred pages plus \$.65 for each additional page. Pension packets (containing just eight documents) are \$25 each. For more information, see Form NATF 85, “National Archives Order Form for Federal Pension or Bounty Land Warrant Applications” <<http://www.archives.gov/forms/pdf/natf-85.pdf>>. Ordering online is faster; go to <<http://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline>>.

To obtain copies of Confederate Civil War pension files

Pensions based on military service for the Confederate States of America were authorized by some southern and border states. For more information, see “Confederate Pension Records” at <<http://www.archives>>.

gov/genealogy/military/civil-war/confederate/pension.html>.

Notes

1. For more detailed information on the evolution of pension laws up to 1923, see *Laws of the United States Governing the Granting of Army and Navy Pensions Together with Regulations and Instructions Relating Thereto In Effect November 1, 1923* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923).

2. "Fact Sheet: America's Wars" (Nov. 2007 edition), online at <<http://www1.va.gov/opa/fact/amwars.asp>>.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. "Living Union Civil War Widows and Children, 2008," online at <http://suvcw.org/kids/CWkids.pdf>.

Claire Prechtel-Kluszens, a microfilm projects archivist at NARA, Washington, D.C., served as NGS registrar (1996–98) and director (1998–2000). She can be reached at <ckluszens@yahoo.com>. Opinions expressed are her own and do not necessarily reflect the policies of NARA.



"There are two lasting bequests we can give our children: One is roots, the other is wings."

– Hodding S. Carter



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