
Family data circulars of 1898 and 1915

In honor of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, this is the sixth in a series of articles about records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., that are useful in researching the war and its participants.

Civil War pension files are a significant source of information about the lives of veterans, their families, and the communities in which they lived.

An overall view of their contents was given in a previous article, "Anatomy of a Union Civil War Pension File," *NGS NewsMagazine* 34 (July–September 2008): 42–47. This article will discuss the "family data circular" often found in these files.

Widows needed to prove legal marriage to the veteran and the death or divorce of the veteran's prior wives. Minor children needed to prove their parentage and their parents' legal marriage. This led the pension office to accept affidavits of witnesses in lieu of official records. In 1898 and again in 1915, the pension office took a proactive step to help smooth the claims process for potential future claimants by asking veterans to fill out and return the family data circular. Some veterans filled out similar forms in other years as well.

The 1898 family data circulars

Pension office form 3-402, dated 15 January 1898, asked veterans five questions:

1. Are you married? If so, please state your wife's full name and her maiden name.

2. When, where, and by whom were you married?
3. What record of marriage exists?
4. Were you previously married? If so, please state the name of your former wife and the date and place of her death or divorce.
5. Have you any children living? If so, please state their names and the dates of their birth.

Each veteran wrote his answers in the space provided and returned this form to the pension office by sending it to his pension agent with his signed voucher for his next quarterly pension payment² Many files have a similar form, 3-173, dated in 1897, 1898, and probably other years.

Commissioner of Pensions Henry Clay Evans stated, in his annual report for the fiscal year ending 30 June 1898, that veterans' answers to these forms would enable "the Bureau to more readily and promptly adjudicate his widow's claim for pension, should such a claim be filed in the future, thus saving the widow much annoyance in securing data necessary to the passage of her claim." Two years later, Evans reported that 800,000 family data circulars were on file. These forms proved so useful that veterans who made their first application for a pension after 1898 were probably routinely sent these forms.

The 1915 family data circular

Pension office form 3-389, dated 2 January 1915, asked veterans nine numbered questions:

1. Date and place of birth? The name of organization in which you served?

2. What was your post office at enlistment?
3. State your wife's full name and her maiden name.
4. When, where and by whom were you married?
5. Is there any official or church record of your marriage? If so, where?
6. Were you previously married? If so, state the name of your former wife, the date of the marriage, and the date and place of her death or divorce. If there was more than one previous marriage, let your answer include all former wives.
7. If your present wife was married before her marriage to you, state the name of her former husband, the date of such marriage, and the date and place of his death or divorce, and state whether he ever rendered any military or naval service, and, if so, give name of the organization in which he served. If she was married more than once before her marriage to you, let your answer include all former husbands.
8. Are you now living with your wife, or has there been a separation?
9. State the names and dates of birth of all your children, living or dead.

Commissioner of Pensions Gaylord M. Saltzgeber wrote in his annual report for the fiscal year ending 30 June 1915, that the "family data circular" was mailed to 440,000 pensioners and 349,091 were filled out and returned. The cost to print, mail, receive, and file the circulars was \$15,814.97. A sampling of 10,095 circulars revealed that 60.7 percent of veterans were married before 27 June 1890; 8.9 percent after June 27, 1890; 3.4 percent never married; 1 percent were divorced; 1.6 percent were separated; and 24.1 percent were widowers. Saltzgeber said the information would be valuable in adjudicating claims of veterans, widows, and minor children, and would "place on record an accurate history" of the veteran's

marital and family relations "so that for all time to come such data would remain here for appropriate use and historical reference." He further wrote that "the old soldiers" had "urged that something like this be done" and generally gave their "cordial cooperation" in providing this information that would "remain of permanent benefit to them and their families."

Genealogical value

The information provided on the family data circulars has obvious genealogical value, especially for births and marriages that occurred in localities with poor records. The responses may also offer insight into the veteran's personality and educational level.

On 10 March 1915 John F. Beaumont wrote that he and his wife "have lived together 42 years last Newyears and expect to live together till death." He and Harriet Duckering were married in 1873 by Methodist minister Reverend F. Traver at Davisburg, Michigan. The date, place, and time of birth of their children, Mary S. and Graice M., were also given. John himself was born 27 December 1843 at Highland, Oakland County, Michigan. (John F. Beaumont, Company A, 3rd Michigan Cavalry, Civil War Pension File C2568681).

On 4 June 1898 Spencer D. Lee reported that he and Sarah S. Putnam had been married at Highland, Oakland County, Michigan, in 1861, by Reverend W. B. Grow, but thought his "marriage Certifacet [was] not recorded." He had one child, Etta M. Lee "now Mrs. William Jones" born 6 June 1879. (Spencer D. Lee, Companies D and G, 1st Michigan Cavalry, Civil War Pension File WC 891864).

Some veterans, such as William H. Kershner, answered the family data circular in both 1898 and 1915. William H. Kershner on 26 January 1898 reported that he and Melissa Maria Cook were married on 1 December 1860 at Nunday, New York, by Reverend J. H. Wilson, and he

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RETURN TO
3-402. U. S. PENSION AGENT,
DETROIT, MICH.
Department of the Interior,
BUREAU OF PENSIONS,
Washington, D. C., January 15, 1898.

Certificate No. 536-544
Name Spencer D. Lee

SIR:
In forwarding to the pension agent the executed voucher for your next quarterly payment please favor me by returning this circular to him with replies to the questions enumerated below.

Very respectfully,
Highland
Oakland Co
Michigan
W. H. Kershner
Commissioner

First. Are you married? If so, please state your wife's full name and her maiden name.
Answer. Yes Sarah J. Lee maiden name Sarah Putnam

Second. When, where, and by whom were you married?
Answer. at Highland Oakland Co. by Rev W B Grow 10/6/61

Third. What record of marriage exists?
Answer. Missing Certificate not recorded

Fourth. Were you previously married? If so, please state the name of your former wife and the date and place of her death or divorce.
Answer. No

Fifth. Have you any children living? If so, please state their names and the dates of their birth.
Answer. Yes one Ella M. Lee born May
William Jones born June 6th 1873

Date of reply June 4th 1898
Spencer D. Lee
(Signature)

1898 Family Data Circular, Spencer D. Lee, WC 891864.

3-389
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF PENSIONS
WASHINGTON, D. C., January 2, 1915.

See: Please answer, at your earliest convenience, the questions enumerated below. The information is requested for future use, and it may be of great value to your widow or children. Use the inclosed envelope, which requires no stamp.

Very respectfully,
WILLIAM H. KERSHNER,
HARTLAND, MICH.
728004
U. S. OFFICE
MAR 20 1915

No. 1. Date and place of birth? Answer. Highland, Steuben Co. N.Y. Sept. 25, 1840.
The name of organizations in which you served? Answer. 7th Reg. Cavalry, Steub. Co. N.Y.

No. 2. What was your post office at enlistment? Answer. Bards, Steuben Co. Mich.

No. 3. State your wife's full name and her maiden name. Answer. Melissa Maria Kershner, Michigan, Cook
No. 4. When, where, and by whom were you married? Answer. first of Dec. 1861 at Nunday N. Y. by Rev. A. Wilson

No. 5. Is there any official or church record of your marriage?
If so, when? Answer. No church certificate

No. 6. Were you previously married? If so, state the name of your former wife, the date of the marriage, and the date and place of her death or divorce. If there was more than one previous marriage, let your answer include all former wives.
Answer. I was married but she died

No. 7. If your present wife was married before her marriage to you, state the name of her former husband, the date of such marriage, and the date and place of his death or divorce, and state whether he ever received any military or naval service, and, if so, give name of the organization in which he served. If she was married more than once before her marriage to you, let your answer include all former husbands.
Answer. She never was married before

No. 8. Are you now living with your wife, or has there been a separation? Answer. I do not

No. 9. State the names and dates of birth of all your children, living or dead.
Answer. We never had but one child. Answer. was Charles Wilson Kershner married Aug 29 in the year one thousand eight hundred & sixty three he is dead

Date March 12th 1915
William H. Kershner

1915 Family Data Circular, William H. Kershner, WC 889481.

had a marriage certificate to prove it. Their one child, Charles Wilson Kershner was "Borned August forth 1863." Kershner's answers on 17 March 1915 spelled their marriage place "Nunday" and added the sad fact that their son was dead. (William H. Kershner, widow Melissa M. Kershner, Company I, 7th Michigan Cavalry, Civil War Pension File WC 889481).

George Maxfield gave similar answers on both the 1898 and 1915 family data circular but added several details in 1915—his wife's middle name, her date of death, his explanation that he resided with his daughter (which daughter not specified), and his own date and place of birth. (George Maxfield, Company D, 16th Michigan Infantry, Civil War Pension File SC 770455).

Administrative agency decisions

The federal government relied heavily upon veterans' answers to family data circulars in resolving difficult cases.

Assistant Comptroller of the Treasury Leander P. Mitchell said that moneys authorized by Congress to be paid to the heirs of George A. Armstrong, Company D, 7th Michigan Cavalry, should be distributed according to the laws of the state in which he died, and quoted Armstrong's answers to the family data circular regarding the identity of his wife and children. (*Decisions of the Comptroller of the Treasury*, Volume 17, pages 999–1,000 (Washington, 1911). The family data circular played an important role in a case involving the widow Christina Carle. (*Decisions of the Department of the Interior in Appealed Pension and Bounty-Land Claims*, Volume XIX, pages 264–67 (Washington: 1914).

Congressional recommendations

Congress frequently overruled harsh decisions by the pension office by passing special acts granting pensions to worthy claimants. A deceased veteran's voice from the grave—

his answers on family data circulars—was sometimes a deciding factor in determining whether the woman claiming to be his widow could overcome legal technicalities.

The House of Representatives Committee on Pensions in 1911 recommended Lena von Schack, widow of Colonel George W. von Schack, 7th New York Infantry, for a \$12 monthly pension based on George's answers about his former wife's death on his 1904 family data circular. She had been unable to prove that her husband divorced his first wife before marrying her, but his answers on the questionnaire supported her assertion that she married him in the good faith belief that he had no living wife. (U.S. House Committee on Invalid Pensions, *Pensions and Increase of Pensions for Certain Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War, Etc.* (H. Rpt. 61-1869; Serial Set 5850)).

The Senate Committee on Pensions in 1909 recommended Sophia (née Lee) Irvin, widow of Elijah Irvin, Company F, 114th U.S. Colored Troops, for a \$12 monthly pension based on her late husband's answers on the 1898 questionnaire. Elijah and Sophia were married in 1860 in Boyle County, Kentucky, "under the slave custom" with the ceremony performed by Reverend Samuel Green. They had not ratified their marriage in compliance with a law passed by the Kentucky legislature in 1866, however, so the pension office had rejected her claim. While the senators acknowledged the pension office's decision was "technically correct" they felt that Congress's legislation (*Revised Statutes* §4705) concerning the legality of slave marriages, should be applied to all ex-slave widows' pension applications, not just those based on the act of 14 July 1862. (U.S. Senate Committee on Pensions, *Pensions and Increase of Pensions for Certain Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War, Etc.* (S. Rpt. 60-1064; Serial Set 5383)).

The Senate Committee on Pensions in 1910 recommended Clara (née Summers) Weber, widow of J. C. Charles Weber, 4th Independent Battery, New York Light Artillery, and Company L, 1st New York Engineers, for a \$12 monthly pension, based on her late husband's answer to

the 1898 questionnaire that he not been married before he and Clara were married in Wayne County, Ohio, on 15 October 1881. After her husband died in 1907, Clara learned that he had previously married Mollie Reynolds in 1869. Soon after that Mollie separated from Weber, had a child with another man, and refused to continue her marriage with Weber—but they never legally divorced. The senators felt that Clara should get a pension, being the "innocent party, having married the soldier in good faith" and being his wife for twenty-six years. (U.S. Senate Committee on Pensions, *Pensions and Increase of Pensions for Certain Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War, Etc.* (S. Rpt. 61-784; Serial Set 5590)).

Conclusion

Since every pension file is unique, there is no guarantee that the family data circular will be in the file you seek. However, there is a pretty good chance of finding one. May it prove useful! 🌳

Notes

1. In those days pensions were paid quarterly by designated pension agents. For more information, see Claire Prechtel-Klusdens, "Follow the Money: Tracking Revolutionary War Army Pension Payments," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 40 (Winter 2008): 46–57, online at <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2008/winter/follow-money.html>. For more information about pension processing, see Claire Prechtel-Klusdens, "A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude: Civil War Pension Application Processing, 1861–1885," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 42 (Spring 2010): 26–35, online at <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/spring/civilwarpension.html>.

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