
Pension Payment Cards, 1907–1933

In honor of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, this is the seventeenth 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.

Any time money is involved, a record must be created. Successful pension applicants expected payment. Records were created to ensure that payment was timely, correct, and made to the right persons. Records also helped guard against theft and fraud.

From the nineteenth century to mid-1909, pension payments were made by designated “pension agencies” located in major cities across the United States, and payment records were kept in unwieldy, oversize, leather-bound volumes. In the late nineteenth century until 1912, the pensioner had to present himself or herself, along with his or her (1) pension certificate and (2) quarterly pension voucher to a notary public or other officer authorized to administer oaths on or after the fourth day of the designated month. Then the pensioner mailed the notarized voucher to the pension payment agent, who then mailed the pensioner his quarterly pension check. Beginning in February 1913, that system was replaced by centralized payment from Washington D.C..

Beginning in 1907, the Bureau of Pensions transitioned from the giant leather volumes to a card-based record keeping system. Payments were recorded on over 1.8 million cards that measured 5 inches by 8 inches. These cards were arranged in alphabetical order by name, except for those persons with Native American names, which are found at the beginning of each letter of the alphabet.

In the early 1970s, these records were published as National Archives Microfilm Publication M850, *Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards, 1907–1933* (2,539 rolls). M850 includes veterans and widows of the Civil War and all other wars, *except* those from World War I, whose needs were serviced by different agencies than the Bureau of Pensions. This record series ends in 1933 due to changes in the pension system. The records were transferred to the National Archives sometime between 1941 and 1948.

Information content

Veterans’ cards are titled “Army Invalid” and “Navy Invalid.” Both contain similar information. The front side has the veteran’s name, military unit, pension certificate number and its most recent date of issuance, disability for which pensioned, pension law under which pensioned, monthly pension rate (amount)

NAME: Ayres, Dellitt C. (D-W. A. 1.)
Certificate No. 41414 ARMY INVALID. Law: GENERAL LAW
Service: Pvt. of 102 Pz. Inf
Disability: Loss left leg above knee

Class	Rate	Date of Commencement	Date of Certificate	Class	Rate	Date of Commencement	Date of Certificate
A6	2	2 Mar. 1903	10 Apr. 1903				

From: 1914 Accrued order dated June 25, 1914
payable to widow Martha J. Ayres
Transferred from: PITTSBURGH
Transferred to: Rochester Pa.
Died: 5 Feb. 1914
Dispen method: 1914 Adams St.
Former Staff No.: 51 C. B.
Date: JUL 1 1914

NAME: Dellitt C. Ayres Certificate No. 41414
APR 4 1908 Rate: 46

Tr.	Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr.	Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr.	Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr.	Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr.	Qr.	Dep.	Amount
1				1	7			1				1				1			
2				2	7			2				2				2			
3				3	8			3				3				3			
4				4	10			4				4				4			
1				1	9			1				1				1			
2				2	10			2				2				2			
3				3	9			3				3				3			
4				4	11			4				4				4			
1				1	4			1				1				1			
2				2	4			2				2				2			
3				3	4			3				3				3			
4				4	4			4				4				4			
1				1	138			1				1				1			
2				2	138			2				2				2			
3				3	138			3				3				3			
4				4	138			4				4				4			
1				1	138			1				1				1			
2				2	138			2				2				2			
3				3	138			3				3				3			
4				4	138			4				4				4			
1				1	138			1				1				1			
2				2	138			2				2				2			
3				3	138			3				3				3			
4				4	138			4				4				4			
1				1	138			1				1				1			
2				2	138			2				2				2			
3				3	138			3				3				3			
4				4	138			4				4				4			

Remarks: No date of receipt
GROUP 1

and the date that rate began, name of previous pension agency or payment group, date of death, and date the Bureau was notified of death. Since pensions were paid in arrears, not in advance, the veteran's unpaid accrued pension moneys could be paid to his widow after his death. Thus the card may indicate the widow, her address, and the date that the veteran's accrued pension was ordered to be paid to her. Dates upon which the pension rate was increased may also be noted. Sometimes, the name of the pensioner's lawyer is given along with the amount of the fee paid to the lawyer through the Bureau.

The reverse side has the veteran's name, certificate number, and the rate and record of individual quarterly payments. It includes the day the voucher was notarized (or received) by the pension payment agents for payments made through 1912.

"Army Widow" and "Navy Widow" cards contain information similar to that found on veterans' cards, except that the veteran's name is given instead of disability. There is space for recording names of minor children, and the beginning and ending dates for their \$2 per month benefit. Pension payments for minors typically ended on the sixteenth birthday.

Starting in January 1923, payments were made monthly instead of quarterly, so new cards were added to the file that had adequate

space to record monthly payments. Thus, some pensioners have two cards. In few instances, a communication about the pensioner may be included in the records.

Let us look at a few examples.

Typical cards

DeWitt C. Ayres and his widow, Martha J. Ayres, have typical cards.

DeWitt C. Ayres, Co. I, 102nd Pennsylvania Infantry, has one card. He was pensioned for loss of left leg above the knee under the "General Law" at \$46 per month, beginning 2 March 1903, under certificate 41,414, dated 10 April 1903. He previously received his payments through the Pittsburgh pension agency. He died 5 February 1914 and the Bureau received notification on 2 March 1914. Accrued pension moneys were paid to his widow, Martha J. Ayres, Adams Street, Rochester, Pennsylvania, by an order dated 25 June 1914. On the reverse side is a record of Ayres' \$138 quarterly payments from the third quarter of 1908 to the first quarter of 1914, followed by the \$49.07 arrears payment to his widow on 22 July 1914. Although Ayres had been a pensioner since the 1860s, this card only gives information about his pension payments made while the card-record system was being used.¹

Martha J. Ayres has two cards that identify her as DeWitt's widow. Her widow's pension certificate 777,501 was granted 25 June 1914. She first received her pension pursuant to the provisions of the Act of Congress of 19 April 1908, and later under the Act of Congress of 1 May 1920. Her monthly pension rate was \$12 per month beginning 12 March 1914, then increased to \$20 on 8 September 1916, then to \$25 on 6 October 1917, and finally to \$30 on 1 May 1920. Based on those *monthly* rates, she received her first pro rata *quarterly* payment of \$44.80 in the third quarter of 1914. Thereafter, the two cards detail the \$36, \$60, \$75, or \$90 *quarterly* payments she received as her monthly rate rose. She and other "Group 1" pensioners were transitioned to monthly payments by October 1922, and received \$30 monthly thereafter. She died 21 January 1926 and the Bureau received notification on 5 February 1926. Due to her death, her last payment is marked "check canceled."²

Unusual cards

Occasionally there are unusual records in this series. Emma D. Ayrand has a "Permanent Withdrawl Request and Receipt." It is rare for the National Archives to "give back" records to the creating agency, but that is what happened to Emma's real card(s) in December 1948. The Veterans Administration requested the cards be returned because Emma D. Ayrand, WC [widow's certificate] 890,110, Spanish American War, was being restored to the pension roll as "Emma Ayrand Cooley, as former widow of Richard P. Ayrand, XC 2,625,022." Thus, the researcher learns that she had been pensioned as Ayrand's widow in the past, was likely now Mr. Cooley's widow, and was again being returned to the pension rolls.³

Lawrence Tobnic, SC [survivor's certificate] 1,098,744, has a card called "Charge Dummy" that indicates the "Final Adj. Accts. Section" of the "Vets Adm R [Room] 636," charged out Tobnic's cards on 29 November 1941. Thus, the

NAME: Ayres, Martha J. (9-P. A. S.)
 Certificate No. 777501
 ARMY WIDOW
 Law: Act of May 1, 1920
 Name of Soldier: DeWitt C.
 Service: Pt. I. 1st Pa. Inf.
 ISSUES: CLASS, RATE, DATE OF COMMENCEMENT, DATE OF CESSATION, NAME, COMMENCEMENT, ENDING
 Class: 30, Rate: 30, Date of Commencement: May 1, 1920
 Died: Jan 21, 1926
 Reported: FEB 5 1926

NAME: MARTHA J. AYRES, Act of May 1, 1920
 Certificate No. 777501
 Fee: 20 SEPTEMBER 8, 1914
 GROUP 1

RATE	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
JANUARY	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
FEBRUARY	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
MARCH	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
APRIL	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
MAY	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
JUNE	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
JULY	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
AUGUST	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
SEPTEMBER	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
OCTOBER	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
NOVEMBER	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								
DECEMBER	4 30	4 30	4 30	4 30								

NAME: A Y R E S, M A R T H A J. (9-P. A. S.)
 Certificate No. 777,501
 ARMY WIDOW.
 Law: Act April 19, 1908.
 Name of Soldier: DeWitt C. Ayres,
 Service: Private Co. I, 102nd Regt. Pa. Inf.
 ACT OF MAY 1, 1920
 ISSUES: CLASS, RATE, DATE OF COMMENCEMENT, DATE OF CESSATION, NAME, COMMENCEMENT, ENDING
 Class: 75, Rate: 75, Date of Commencement: Mar. 12, 1914, Date of Cessation: June 25, 1914.
 Orig: 12, INC: 20, INC: 25
 Died: No Fee, Inc: 30
 Transferred from: Group 1.
 Remarks: JUL 1914, OCT 26 1916

NAME: M A R T H A J. A Y R E S, Certificate No. 777,501
 Last paid on: 12 25 30
 Remarks: ACT OF MAY 1, 1920

Tr. Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr. Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr. Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr. Qr.	Dep.	Amount	Tr. Qr.	Dep.	Amount
1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75
2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75
3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75
4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75
1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75
2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75
3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75
4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75
1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75
2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75
3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75
4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75
1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75
2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75
3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75
4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75
1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75
2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75
3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75
4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75
1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75	1	1	4 60	1	1	4 75
2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75	2	2	4 60	2	2	4 75
3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75	3	3	4 60	3	3	4 75
4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75	4	4	4 60	4	4	4 75

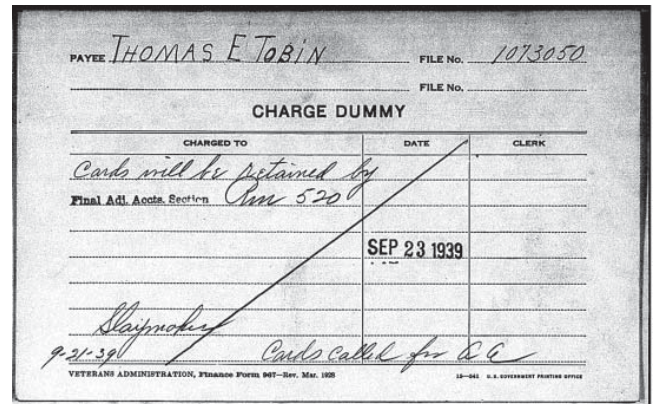
researcher at least learns that this file had some activity in 1941. Similarly, there is a September 1939 “Charge Dummy” card for Thomas E. Tobin, SC 1,073,050, whose “cards will be retained by Rm 520” for unstated reasons.⁴ Information about payments made to these individuals would have to be painstakingly gleaned from records in their pension files.

Patrick Tobin, Co. C, 44th New York Infantry, has a “Helpless Child” card filed under his name. It indicates the \$2 per month amount for his daughter, Lizzie, would “continue during period of helplessness” and it would “terminate with widow’s pension [Mary Tobin] provided it does not sooner end by death of minor or her ceasing to be helpless.” Lizzie’s \$2 began 9 June 1892 under a pension certificate issued 15 January 1896, and shows payment through the fourth quarter of 1911. Mary Tobin’s card indicates her widow’s pension dated back to 1888 and ended in March 1923. The card indicates that Lizzie, still helpless, would receive \$6 per month beginning 4 October 1911.⁵ Further details about Lizzie would, of course, be in Patrick Tobin’s pension file, which includes all records related to him, his widow, and minor child.

Online access

FamilySearch.org provides online access to these records in its “United States Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards, 1907–1933” database at <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1832324>. This database is searchable by name, or can be browsed image by image.

Internet Archive provides online access at <https://archive.org/details/veteransadminpensionpaymentcards>, but locating a specific roll of interest can be difficult. This obstacle can be overcome by using one of two web pages that link directly to specific rolls (ranges of names) of interest. One page is the Warren County, Ohio, US GenWeb page, “Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards 1907–1933” at http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ohwarren/military/pension1907_1933.htm. (The M850 links



on this page are *not* limited to Warren County.) The other page is FamilySearch’s “Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards, 1907–1933,” https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Veterans_Administration_Pension_Payment_Cards,_1907-1933. Note that this is a different FamilySearch page than the one listed in the previous paragraph.

Summary

Pension payment cards for 1907–1933 summarize the financial benefits pensioners received from the federal government by providing detailed information “at a glance” about payments made to veterans, widows, and minors. 🌳

Notes

1. *Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards, 1907–1933*, microfilm publication M850, 2,539 rolls (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1976), roll 71.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, roll 2272.
5. *Ibid.*

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