Records of Claims Against the Federal Government

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The idea of looking for ancestors in records of claims against the U.S. Federal Government (or against foreign governments) would be an afterthought, at best, for most researchers. Yet, they can contain valuable data. Here are a few examples:

French Spoliation Claims. These were claims presented by U.S. citizens against France, Spain, and Holland for vessels and cargo taken by privateers prior to September 30, 1800, and condemned at ports controlled by those countries. There are records of these claims in the National Archives of the United States. The long and convoluted general history of those claims, along with guidance on the research process, is found in Angie Spicer VanDereedt’s 1991 Prologue article, “Do We Have Any Records Relating to French Spoliation Claims?” online at <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1991/spring/french-spoliation-claims.html>.

Claims Involving Various Foreign Countries, 19th-20th centuries, in a variety of contexts. For brief introductory information, see “Records of Boundary and Claims Commissions and Arbitrations” online at <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/076.html>.

Southern Claims Commission approved, barred, and disallowed claims. From March 1871 to March 1873, over 22,000 Southerners filed claims alleging they had been loyal Unionists during the Civil War and had furnished to, or had materials taken by, the Union Army or Navy. These are very useful to family historians because the paper trail created by the claimants and various witnesses included relatives, neighbors, friends, former slaves, and free people of color. Their testimony provides a wealth of information about individuals living in the South during the Civil War. Get started with these records by learning more about them in the guide to “Researching Southern Claims Commission Records” online at https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/scc_guide.pdf> on the Saint Louis County (Missouri) Public Library website.

Civil War Claims against the Office of the Quartermaster General. The Quartermaster General (QMG) and his staff were responsible for procuring all the equipment and supplies the Army needed. Generally, claims arise when mistakes happen of one kind or another. In 1901, a clerk in the office of the QMG compiled a list of 19 different claims boards that had been created during the Civil War which gave a brief description of the location, purpose, composition, and authority of each board. You can read through that 9 page list at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/70177129>.

One of those 19 boards was the Cairo Claims Commission. By direction of President Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton appointed a commission to examine and report upon all unsettled claims against the War Department at Cairo, Illinois, that originated before April 1, 1862, due to allegations of fraud and corruption in the Quartermaster Department there. Stephen B. Logan, Charles A. Dana, and George S. Boutwell were first appointed, but Shelby M. Cullom soon replaced Mr. Logan, who resigned due to ill health. The commission examined 1,696 claims totaling $599,219.36, and approved and certified for payment $451,105.80. Most
of the claims rejected were for losses suffered in active operations of the army, either from misconduct soldiers or from requisitions made by officers who failed to give receipts and certificates to the claimants, who thus had insufficient evidence to support their claims. Some claims were rejected due to proof of disloyalty by the claimant. Claims by owners of vacant lots and by the Cairo city trustees for use of city land were disallowed. A small percentage of the claims were rejected due to fraud. Charles A. Dana discusses the Commission in his biography, Recollections of the Civil War: With the Leaders at Washington and in the Field in the Sixties (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1913), pp. 11-14, online at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3289443;view=1up;seq=33>.

The Proceedings of the Claims Board Meeting at Cairo, Illinois, June-July 1862, are online at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/66383424>. Following the meeting minutes, they include a roughly alphabetical list of claimants that gives the voucher number, date, name of claimant, name of officer who had approved the expense, type of article or claim, amount of claim offered, and the amount allowed by the claims board.

In conclusion.... Finding records in the National Archives about an ancestor requires that person to have had some kind of interaction with the Federal Government. Claims against the government are one possibility, but it will take time and effort by the researcher.