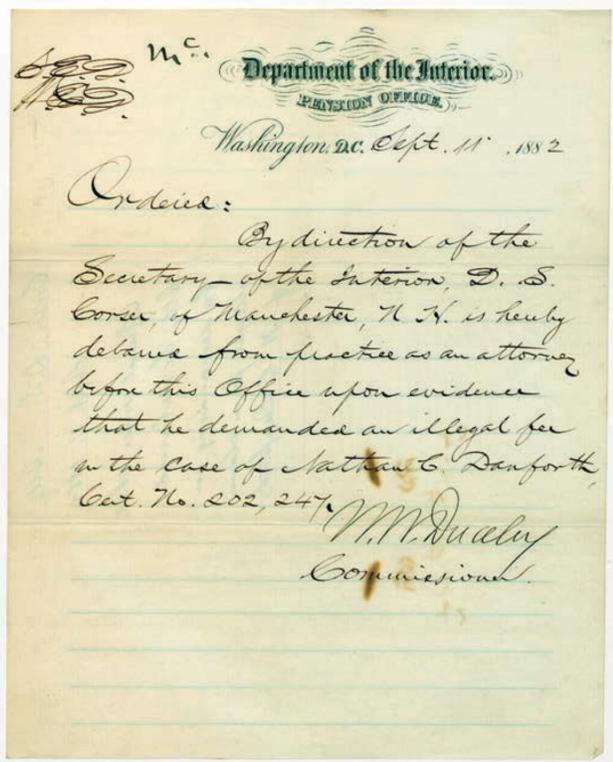


# Thieves, Scoundrels, Impostors, and More



Order of Commissioner of Pensions W. W. Dudley disbaring D. S. Corser of Manchester, New Hampshire, from practice before the Pension Office (later Bureau of Pensions) due to collecting an illegal fee from Nathan C. Danforth. Case File of D. S. Corser, NAID 66327566, image 15.

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Congress enacted pension legislation during and after the Civil War to enable injured, diseased, disabled, and—ultimately—elderly veterans to avoid poverty and live with dignity. Pensions for widows, children, mothers, and other dependents of veterans allowed those persons to receive a small income in acknowledgment of the loss of support from their deceased loved one.

Unfortunately, the pension laws also provided opportunities for thieves, scoundrels, and impostors to obtain money from pensioners or the government under false pretenses.

The Law Division of the Bureau of Pensions was established in 1886 to prosecute persons who committed fraud relating to pension matters and to promote and improve compliance with legal requirements in cases in which criminal intent was lacking. The division's files extend from 1862 to 1933, and are described in the National Archives' online Catalog as the "Case Files of Attorneys, Agents, Pensioners, and Others Relating to the Prosecution of Pension Claims and the Investigation of Fraudulent Practices" (National Archives Identifier [NAID] 2538355) at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2538355>.

The files are often rich in names, since they may include pensioners, family members of pensioners, neighbors, notaries, justices of the peace, clerks of court, postmasters, and others.

## Collecting illegal fees

The pension laws strictly limited the fees that pension attorneys could charge for their services, but unscrupulous attorneys sometimes obtained money by taking advantage of their clients' legal ignorance. Many claimants subsequently wised

up to the scam, and the resulting investigation by the Bureau of Pensions often resulted in reimbursement to the claimant and, sometimes, prosecution of the wrongdoer.

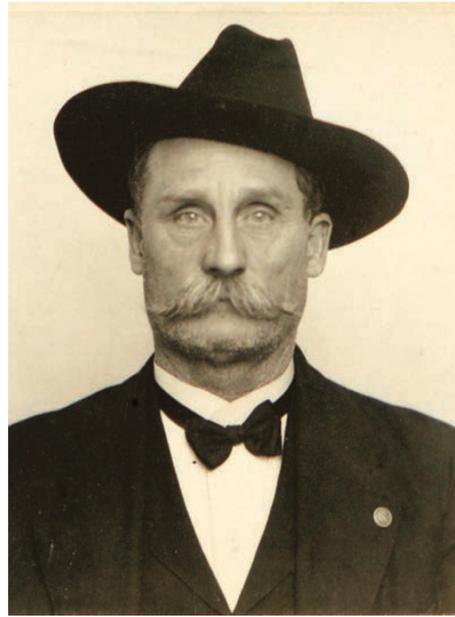
Examples include George W. Day of Barham's Gap, Alabama, who collected \$1,400 from Elizabeth A. Osborn, widow of Harry A. Osborn, 1st Alabama Cavalry (NAID 74618195); Edward Beha of Wood County, West Virginia, who took \$300 from pensioner Phoebe Duff (NAID 12044717); and Augustus E. Day of Webster, Massachusetts, who took \$219.86 from Wellington Balcom, 51st Massachusetts Infantry (NAID 74618186).

The amount in dispute was often small, such as five dollars collected by George F. Cowing of Fergus Falls, Minnesota, from Dorothea Kassel, widow of Nicholas Kassel, 11th Illinois Infantry (NAID 66539390). Sometimes the allegedly illegal fee was actually reimbursement for unrelated services or products previously provided by the attorney, agent, or family member. Some pension attorneys were simply ignorant of fee limitations and payment procedures.

### **Impersonating government officials**

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, traveling con artists pretended to be special examiners sent by the Bureau of Pensions to investigate pension claims. The ruse was an easy way to obtain overnight lodging, food, and money under false pretenses. A fake shiny badge, papers that appeared to be from the Bureau, and a silver tongue were enough to fool people for a day or two before arousing suspicion. Then the con man would quickly move on to the next county, town, or state.

Charlevoix Campau, whose residence was unknown, falsely posed as a special examiner in Barry County, Michigan, in 1885 (NAID 29007720). Eli Carpenter of Sandy Hill, New York, pretended to be a United States government officer in Oswego, Warren, and Washington counties, New York, in April and May 1890, and demanded three to seven dollars to assist claimants (NAID 32200157). James Blue took money from pension claimants and former slaves while posing as a special examiner in Oklahoma and Texas in 1895 (NAID 17394251). Professional impostor George Franklin Anderson, alias George F. Calkins, who had served in the 28th Michigan Infantry during the Civil War, served several stints in prison for fraudulent activities (NAID 7545901).



*Detail from mugshots of Alfred Dougherty, a conman who obtained pension money by falsely claiming to be two different Civil War veterans, circa January 1908. Case File of Alfred Dougherty, NAID 75667197; portion of image 182. The full mugshot also has a profile view.*

### **Impersonating pensioners**

Some pension claimants were impostors who pretended to be eligible for a pension. Alfred Dougherty, who was born in 1856, successfully (for a time) posed as John L. Market, Company F, 149th Indiana Infantry. He also posed as William F. Crouch, Company A, 148th Indiana Infantry; tried to get pension moneys owed to William C. Ready, Maria Whitney, and Thomas Anderson under false pretenses; and finally was sentenced to time in federal prison for helping his wife, Maria J. Dougherty, file a false pension claim in which she alleged she was the mother of Alfred's deceased uncle, William Dougherty, Companies I and K, 30th Illinois Infantry (NAID 75667197).

More commonly, impostors were women who were not "real" widows; they had divorced or separated from veterans years earlier. Agnes Demarest, also known as Margaret Agnes Bresnahan, of Paterson, New Jersey, was prosecuted in 1915 for falsely claiming she was the widow of U.S. Navy veteran James J. Demarest (NAID 74860086). Sarah F. Tirrell Duty of Fargo, North Dakota, filed a pension declaration in which she claimed to be the lawful widow of James Duty, 8th U.S. Colored Troops

**UNITED STATES PENITENTIARY,  
Leavenworth, Kansas.**

Name Alfred Dougherty Color White  
 No. 5985 Alias John L. Markot +c.  
 Nativity Illinois Trade Policeman  
 Criminal Traits  
 Age 56 Height 5 ft. 6 1/4 in. Weight 154  
 Build med. stout Complexion fair  
 Hair chest grey Nose Rect.  
 Eyes Light Blue  
 Color of Beard Sandy grey  
 Sentenced January 14 1908  
 From Springfield Ill. for 5 years  
 Crime Pension Frauds  
 Marks, Scars, etc. I Dip middle finger injured,  
 nail turned down over end.  
 II Right wrist has been broken, wrist  
 stiff.  
 III Vert. sc. R. side nose 1 3/4" from inner  
 corner right nostril 1/2" above right  
 corner of mouth.  
 Nose turned to left.  
 Slightly bald.  
 Right collar bone very prominent.  
 Right shoulder evidently been broken.

Remarks: .....

Reverse side of mugshot of Alfred Dougherty. Case File of Alfred Dougherty, NAID 75667197; image 183.

Infantry, from whom she was divorced, but in 1911 the grand jury refused to indict her. (NAID 76193975).

Remarriage ended widows' pensions but some women tried to conceal their remarriage from the government. Bigamist Hannah Percel Beckert (alias Hannah Taylor) of Zanesville, Ohio, falsely claimed to be the widow of Daniel Taylor, 10th Ohio Cavalry. She married John Beckert in 1866, but never divorced him. Instead, she married her second husband, Daniel Taylor, in 1868, while Beckert was serving in the Army. In 1909, Beckert was still living in the same town as Hannah (NAID 12031464). Martha J. Cross Ansell of Lamont, Pennsylvania, widow of James B. Cross, Company D, 133rd Pennsylvania Infantry, was

prosecuted for continuing to draw her widow's pension for more than two years after her marriage to Wesley Ansell in 1906 (NAID 7552119).

### Fraudulently endorsing pension checks

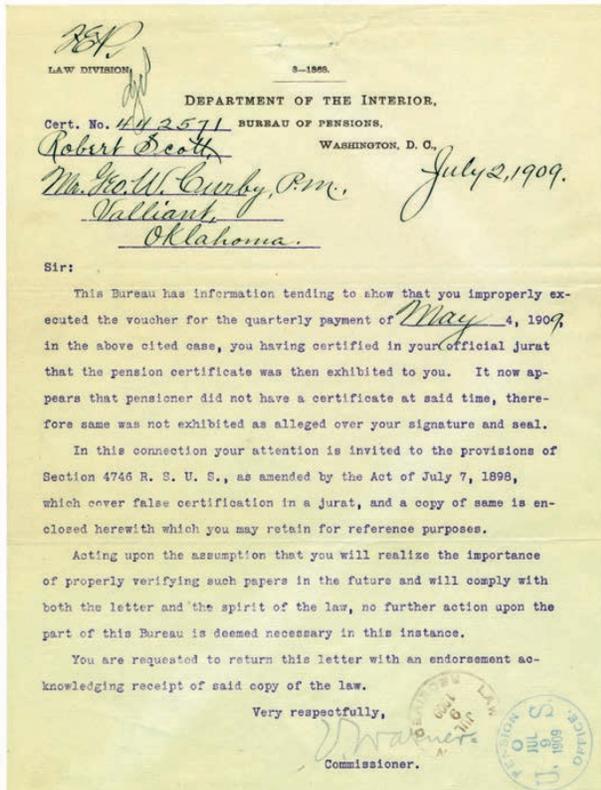
Stealing a check and falsely signing the rightful recipient's name is an old trick often perpetrated by a family member. Thomas Bidler, a Spanish-American War veteran of Pottsville or Chester, Pennsylvania, forged the signature of his father, Civil War veteran Samuel Bidler, on his father's pension check, and cashed it at a local store to buy a new suit and hat for himself (NAID 16730676). James W. Channell fraudulently endorsed the pension check of his grandmother, Susan Channell, widow of Wesley Channell, 4th West Virginia Cavalry. Martha A. Creen of Pensacola, Florida, and three of her family members committed conspiracy and forgery of pension checks of pensioners who were falsely claimed as residents of Creen's Hotel Vernon (NAID 66953504). John A. Cronk of Forestport, New York, was arrested for forging a pension voucher for John Near, a deceased War of 1812 pensioner (NAID 68121295).

### False certification of pension vouchers

The pension payment process used during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was intended to minimize fraud upon the government, but it provided ample opportunities for intentional misconduct and inadvertent mistakes.

The pensioner received a voucher in the mail that had to be executed (signed) in person on or after the fourth day of the particular month before a notary public, justice of the peace, postmaster, county clerk, or other officer authorized by law to administer an oath. The pensioner also had to show the officer his or her pension certificate. If any witnesses besides the officer administering the oath were required, the witnesses had to have personal knowledge of the pensioner's identity and continued eligibility. For example, a witness for a widow pensioner had to know that she had not remarried. After executing the voucher, the pensioner mailed the voucher to the pension payment agent, who then mailed a check to the pensioner.

While these requirements are simple to understand, loose adherence was often the rule and not the exception. The oath-giving officer could



Letter from Bureau of Pensions to Postmaster George W. Curby of Valliant, Oklahoma, 2 July 1909, admonishing him for his failure to require pensioner Robert Scott to exhibit his pension certificate when executing his pension voucher. Case File of George W. Curby, NAID 72014444, image 2.

commit false certification of a pension voucher in many ways.

### Postdating

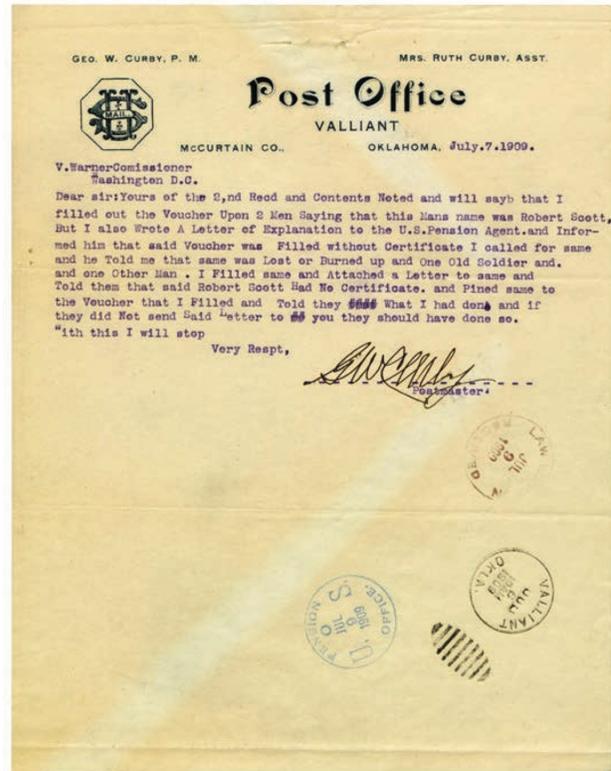
Eager to get the pension check as soon as possible, a pensioner would go to the notary or other officer on the third day of the month, but the voucher would be postdated to read the fourth day of the month. Then the pensioner mailed the voucher in the nearest mailbox, and the efficient post office postmarked the envelope the third! The postdating was easily detected by the pension payment agent. Payment was then delayed because a new voucher had to be sent to the pensioner.

### No certificate

Often a pensioner went to the officer without bringing the pension certificate because it was lost or forgotten.

### No appearance by pensioner

Elderly pensioners sometimes stayed home while younger relatives took the vouchers to the officer on their behalf. A few cases involved deceased



Postmaster Curby's letter of explanation, 7 July 1909, in response to the Bureau's letter. Case File of George W. Curby, NAID 72014444, image 3.

pensioners whose relatives forged the name of the deceased, such as Archie J. Eberhardt of Buffalo, New York, who in 1917 escaped prosecution for the fraudulent execution of a voucher after the death of his father, George Eberhardt, alias George Duchartin, 127th New York Infantry (NAID 77165975).

### Stock witnesses

If a pensioner failed to bring witnesses who could affirm the pensioner's identity and eligibility, the officer sometimes provided an employee to serve as a "witness" despite that person's lack of knowledge about the pensioner.

Officers and pensioners committing these irregularities were usually admonished to not repeat the error, but some were prosecuted, such as G. Sid Beavis of Corry, Erie County, Pennsylvania, who was prosecuted in 1899-1900 for postdating vouchers for Mary C. Livingston, widow of Alpheus P. Livingston, 6th Ohio Cavalry and 14th Veterans Reserve Corps (NAID 12024239).

## Conclusion

The Bureau of Pension's Law Division was primarily involved in matters that happened *after* a pension application was approved. Thus, its case files normally provide interesting information that are not found in pension files. Many persons who have no military service or pension claims are mentioned in these files as "bit part" actors in other people's dramas.

One way to effectively search for files of interest in the online National Archives Catalog is use the

Advanced Search at <https://catalog.archives.gov/advancedsearch>. Add "case file of" (in quotes) and a surname or place name as *Search Terms*, "15" as *Record Group Number*, and "File Unit" as *Level of Description*. Alternatively, go to <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2538355> and use the "Search Within This Series" function to search for surnames or place names. Several thousand files in this series are already indexed and the number of digitized files continues to increase. 🌳



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