

Special Examiners: Records of the Bureau of Pensions’ Efforts to Combat Waste, Fraud, and Abuse, 1862–1933

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Before the American Civil War, the total number of persons placed on the federal government’s pension rolls was relatively small—some 25,000 Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary War veterans and widows. Annual expenditures for pensions totaled about \$1 million with claims handled by a 72-person workforce. By 1885, pension payments to veterans and widows had ballooned to \$36 million, with a workforce of 1,500 handling all aspects of the claims.¹

The opportunity to obtain free money from the government tempted some persons to commit fraud or fail to comply with legal procedures and requirements. Bureau policy was “to detect, in advance, any intended frauds, so far as possible,” and to promptly prosecute those who committed fraud despite its vigilance. Commissioner of Pensions Christopher C. Cox acknowledged in 1868 that “impositions are daily practiced upon this bureau” despite its best efforts at detection.² As a result, the Bureau of



Peter L. Cole in 1931. He was a special examiner for over 49 years.

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¹ Claire Prechtel-Kluskens, “A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude’: Civil War Pension Application Processing, 1861–1865,” *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 42, no.1 (Spring 2010): 26–35. The workforce numbers include all employees from the Commissioner of Pensions down to the lowliest charwoman, based on *Register of Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States, on the Thirtieth September 1859*. . . . (Wash., DC: William A. Harris, 1859), 96–97; *Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of Officers and Employés in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service on the First of July, 1885* . . . , 484–503 (Wash., DC: Government Printing Office, 1885).

² *Report of the Commissioner of Pensions for the Year 1868*. 40th Cong., 3rd Sess. Ex. Doc. No. 1, p. 449 (Serial 1366).

Pensions³ established two divisions, the Special Examination Division and the Law Division, to combat these ills.

This article will discuss several record series in Record Group 15, Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, in the custody of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC, that enable historians to study the work performed by federal employees from 1862 to 1933 to combat waste, fraud, and abuse. The series include records and correspondence documenting the supervision, assignment, and daily work of special pension examiners; pension files; case files; and records relating to investigation of the Ex-Slave Pension Movement. Overall, these largely underused records can enable researchers to gain a better picture of the pension investigation system, particularly the painstaking work of investigating fraud.

Special Examination Division

The granting of pensions to veterans for service-connected disability and to widows and other dependents of men who died while serving in land and naval forces during the Civil War, and later wars, was governed by an act of Congress approved July 14, 1862 (12 *Statutes at Large* 566), and subsequent legislation. To prevent fraudulent practices, this act also authorized the Secretary of the Interior to appoint a special agent in the Bureau of Pensions to assist in detecting and prosecuting pension fraud. When the Bureau was reorganized on November 15, 1876, a Special Service Division headed all investigations of suspected fraud, as well as issues relating to claim agents and notaries public. Finally, in the summer of 1882 a Special Examination Division was established.⁴

³ The Bureau of Pensions was established in the War Department by an act of March 2, 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 ca. 1810). It was transferred with bureau status to the Department of the Interior by the act creating the department, March 3, 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 as the Pension Service, on July 1, 1931, and was functionally absorbed into the VA on April 1, 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 March 15, 1989. Robert B. Matchette et al., *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States* (Wash., DC: National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], 1995), Vol. 1, Chapter 15.

⁴ Miranda Booker, National Archives Microfilm Publication M2110, *Correspondence and Case Files of the Bureau of Pensions Pertaining to the Ex-Slave Pension Movement, 1892–1922* (Wash., DC: 2006).

Initially, Bureau clerks stationed in Washington, DC, were assigned temporary duty to conduct in-person investigations in faraway locales. This was a “much sought for” assignment, for it was “customary to intrust this work to those who while on leave of absence desire to defray the expenses of the journey by some official occupation *in via*.”⁵ However, temporary investigative assignments were an inefficient means to combat questionable claims as the number of pensioners increased. Thus, beginning in 1882 the Bureau assigned “special examiners” to long-term duty in specific geographic territories. Their output was formidable. In 1898, for example, special examiners submitted over 41,000 reports, averaging 2.7 reports for each completed case.⁶

Law Division

After its establishment on January 26, 1886, with James M. Ward as its first chief, the Law Division worked with U.S. Attorneys to prosecute persons who committed fraud in pension matters, and also promoted improved compliance with legal requirements in cases in which criminal intent was lacking. Initially, the division was divided into three sections. “Section A” handled appeals. “Section B” kept records of attorneys, pension notaries, notaries public, justices of the peace, and others connected with the prosecution of pension claims. “Section C” investigated criminal charges, authorized attorneys to practice before the Bureau, disciplined attorneys, and certified fees owed to attorneys in disputed claims.⁷ Procedurally, if the Law Division discovered noncompliance with the law in a specific case, it would request the Special Examination Division to assign a Special Examiner to investigate the matter. After receiving the special examiner’s report(s), the Law Division would take appropriate action. In addition to the records it created, this division also inherited from the Special Examination Division extensive records dating back to the 1860s about attorneys and notaries public.

⁵ *Report of the Commissioner of Pensions for the Year 1868*, No. 1, p. 449 (Serial 1366).

⁶ Memorandum, A. B. Casselman, Chief Special Examination Division, to S. A. Cuddy and F. D. Stephenson, January 11, 1899; Correspondence with Merritt L. Dawkins, 1899–1931 (National Archives Identifier [NAID] 7432621); Box 74, Correspondence with Special Examiners, 1887–1931 (NAID 2538361) (hereinafter cited as CWSE); Record Group (RG) 15, Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs; NARA, Washington, DC.

⁷ Before that time, the “Law Clerk” and two copyists, known as the “appeal desk,” largely reported appeals in pension decisions to the Secretary of the Interior. James M. Ward, “Report of the Law Division,” in “Report of the Select Committee of the United States Senate, Appointed Under Senate Resolution of March 3, 1887, to Inquire into and Examine the Methods of Business and Work in the Executive Departments, Etc., and the Causes of Delays in Transacting the Public Business, Etc.,” 50th Cong., 1st Sess., Senate Report 507, Part 2, 168–70.

Correspondence with Special Examiners, 1887–1931

The record series “Correspondence with Special Examiners, 1887–1931” (National Archives Identifier [NAID] 2538361)⁸ enables historians to focus on particular special examiners. While the content of these files varies widely, they provide insight into the Bureau’s management of remote employees; each man’s personality, work habits, and government employment history; and local conditions.

Some correspondence relates to changes in the special examiner’s duty station. Although the Bureau could order the examiner to a new locale at any time, it gave consideration to individual preferences when possible. In 1908 Otto L. Sues and his colleague E. G. Hursh decided that Hursh would take a transfer from San Francisco to either Billings, Montana, or Sheridan, Wyoming, rather than uproot Sues and his family of five school-age children, who had recently transferred from Sioux Falls, South Dakota.⁹

Working away from the central office and direct control of a supervisor meant that special examiners exercised much discretion in planning and executing their work. When Charles F. Cain died in a single-vehicle automobile accident in Peoria, Illinois, in 1930, the U.S. Employees’ Compensation Commission was told that Cain “was officially employed at the time he was killed” even though the Bureau didn’t know which specific case Cain was working on since he died before sending his daily report.¹⁰

Special examiners constantly traveled and sometimes worked 18 hours a day.¹¹ Otto L. Sues traveled 183,063 miles on official business from 1903 to 1911 at a cost of \$16,390.¹² Writing from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on May 19, 1900, Sues said, “I can only get on mixed [freight and passenger] trains scheduled at about fifteen miles an hour and it takes all day long to get anywhere.” He spent \$3.29 on travel

⁸ The correspondence is arranged in four subseries (roughly 1887–1908, 1909–21, 1922–29, and 1930–31) and then alphabetically by name of special examiner. The examiners’ names are indexed in NARA’s online catalog at www.archives.gov/research/catalog. Additional vignettes are given in Claire Prechtel-Klusens, “Pension Office Correspondence with Special Examiners, 1887–1931,” *NGS Magazine* 39, no. 4, (Oct.–Dec. 2013): 43–47.

⁹ Letter, Otto L. Sues to A. L. Craig, Chief, Special Examination Division, Pension Bureau, Oct. 3, 1908; Correspondence with Otto L. Sues, 1896–1917 (NAID 7423770); Box 18, CWSE.

¹⁰ Letter, E. W. Morgan, Acting Commissioner of Pensions, to W. R. Carpenter, Chief Claim Examiner, U.S. Employees’ Compensation Commission, Sept. 15, 1930; Correspondence with Charles F. Cain, 1930 (NAID 7432612); Box 73, CWSE.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Annual Report, Otto L. Sues to Chief, S. E. [Special Examination] Division, Bureau of Pensions, Dec. 31, 1911; Correspondence with Otto L. Sues, 1896–1917 (NAID 7423770); Box 18, CWSE.

to Ellsworth, Minnesota, to investigate the case of veteran Frederick Griffith, but had no results since three witnesses he expected to find had left town.¹³ Interviews frequently occurred after normal business hours and sometimes at odd locations. Ernest L. Howard noted in 1919 that one “strenuous day’s work ended at ten [p.m.] in a [railroad] crossing flagman’s shanty” where he got useful testimony to help close a case.¹⁴ Writing from Utah in May 1919, T. Quinn Jones said it was a good time of year “to find witnesses rambling around the fields and deserts.”¹⁵

San Francisco, Cal. December 31, 1911.

The Chief,
S. E. Division, Bureau of Pensions,
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

I have the honor to submit herewith, my annual report for the year 1911. While there does not appear to be a great falling off in receipts, it must be remembered that the territory is now much larger than originally. Work on Agency slips probably accounts for the difference in depositions and reports.

| Month. | Depositions. | Cases Reported. | Credibility. | Miscellaneous. | Total Reports. | Cases Received. | Without Report. | Final Action. | Days in Court. | Agency Slips Rptd. | Total number of Miles Traveled. | Per Diem and Expenses. |
|----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| January. | 48 | 9 | 0 | 9 | 10 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2,331 | 192.04 | |
| February. | 42 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 28 | 1,452 | 150.85 | |
| March. | 41 | 11 | 0 | 1 | 13 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 2,251 | 167.45 | |
| April. | 34 | 12 | 0 | 1 | 13 | 13 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 3,794 | 215.96 | |
| May. | 31 | 11 | 0 | 2 | 13 | 12 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 2,115 | 197.10 | |
| June. | 58 | 12 | 0 | 1 | 13 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 17 | 2,428 | 208.79 | |
| July. | 49 | 15 | 0 | 1 | 14 | 11 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 1,832 | 174.40 | |
| August. | 62 | 13 | 0 | 1 | 14 | 13 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 1,837 | 195.95 | |
| September. | 58 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 2,859 | 212.59 | |
| October. | 42 | 11 | 0 | 2 | 13 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 2,859 | 195.05 | |
| November. | 35 | 7 | 0 | 3 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 2,283 | 178.90 | |
| December. | 42 | 8 | 0 | 1 | 9 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1,710 | 175.55 | |
| Totals. | 544 | 123 | 0 | 16 | 139 | 127 | 18 | 55 | 5 | 71 | 26,716 | \$232.55. |
| 1910 | 302 | 124 | 2 | 28 | 154 | 158 | 19 | 64 | 5 | 0 | 24,588 | \$220.11 |
| 1909 | 342 | | | | 161 | 160 | | | | 0 | 24,045 | \$233.55 |
| 1908 | 588 | | | | 159 | 139 | | | | 0 | 15,479 | \$186.10 |
| 1907 | 615 | | | | 156 | 140 | | | | 0 | 20,789 | \$175.59 |
| 1906 | 689 | | | | 162 | 182 | | | | 0 | 18,188 | \$154.91 |
| 1905 | 658 | | | | 165 | 177 | | | | 0 | 16,322 | \$1708.95 |
| 1904 | 608 | | | | 154 | 181 | | | | 0 | 17,940 | \$1798.20 |
| 1903 | 1068 | | | | 195 | 191 | | | | 0 | 15,076 | \$1427.06 |

Respectfully submitted,
Otto L. Sues
Special Examiner.

* To Mr. Hursh.
15 Days on criminal work not shown herein.
The work is gradually being scattered over a much larger territory.

Special Examiner Otto L. Sues summarized his work from 1903 to 1911 in a December 1911 report.

The best special examiners showed unbounded dedication to the job. In 1931 Peter L. Cole celebrated his 79th birthday and 49th year as a pension examiner by declaring his intent to not retire for “at least” two more years. “Ever since I was 21 years old I’ve eaten, slept, and thought pensions,” he declared to a writer for the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, and noted that 50–60 percent of the approximately 4,000 pension claims handled through the Brooklyn office had been allowed.¹⁶

Loyalty and dedication to the work occasionally caused financial hardship. In 1931 T. Quinn Jones traveled on official business in his personal automobile in southwestern Missouri. During the return trip in the dark, Jones crashed into a car that “roving gypsies” had illegally parked on the road without any warning

¹³ Letter, O. L. Sues to Commissioner of Pensions, May 19, 1900; Correspondence with Otto L. Sues, 1896–1917 (NAID 7423770); Box 18, CWSE.

¹⁴ Letter, E. L. Howard to M. L. Dawkins, Chief of [Special Examination] Division, Dec. 17, 1919; Correspondence with Ernest L. Howard, 1910–19 (NAID 7431504); Box 39, CWSE.

¹⁵ T. Quinn Jones to Mr. Dawkins, ca. May 5, 1919; Correspondence with T. Quinn Jones, 1912–23 (NAID 7431514); Box 40, CWSE.

¹⁶ “Agent of Pension Bureau Postpones His Own Pension,” *Brooklyn Daily Times*, June 10, 1931, clipping in Correspondence with Peter L. Cole, 1931 (NAID 7432615); Box 73, CWSE.

lights. It cost Jones \$250 to repair a car he had purchased for \$300, and he had no insurance. His supervisor, M. L. Dawkins, regretfully informed Jones that there was no law allowing compensation for his repairs.¹⁷ Otto L. Sues sold furniture worth over \$1,000 for less than \$300 when he was transferred from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to San Francisco.¹⁸

Examiners whose work and conduct was subpar were chastised in writing for “faulty work” or officially investigated for misconduct.¹⁹ Sometimes even good special examiners had problems completing work because of personal or family illness.²⁰ The government made sure the examiners filled out reports properly, sent them in on time, and refrained from extravagant and improper expenses. Franklin Canaday was reminded in March 1905 that he could not be reimbursed for the five-cent trolley fare between his home and office in Fort Scott, Kansas.²¹

Assignments of Special Examiners to the Field Service, 1871–1905

Two volumes provide the date(s) of appointment of special examiners to the field service from 1871 to 1905, along with dates of recall, transfer, or dismissal. Although no specific cases are mentioned, these records should be useful in studying staffing patterns and practices. This series is catalogued under the title “Register of Appointments and Assignments of Special Examiners to the Field Service, 1871–1905” (NAID 1766567).

Correspondence by A. L. Craig, 1902–1912

Alvin L. Craig, who served for over a decade as chief of the Special Examination Division, kept carbon-copy typescripts of important outgoing correspondence that may assist historians in parsing the policies and procedures of this division. This series, which consists of volumes numbered 2–6, is catalogued under the title “Letters Sent by A. L. Craig, Chief of Special Examination Division, July 1902–September 1912” (NAID 17166582).

¹⁷ Two letters, T. Quinn Jones to M. L. Dawkins, Chief of [Special Examination] Division, Jan. 3, 1931, as well as letter, M. L. Dawkins, Chief of Division, to T. Quinn Jones, Joplin, Missouri, Jan. 6, 1931, in Correspondence with T. Quinn Jones, 1930–31 (NAID 7432644); Box 76, CWSE.

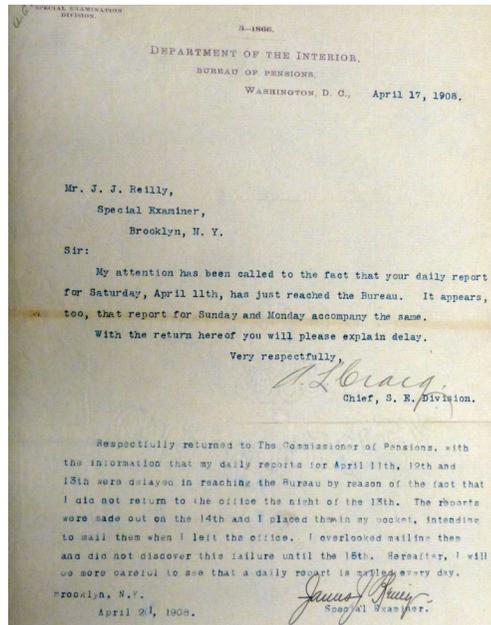
¹⁸ Letter, Otto L. Sues to A. L. Craig, Chief, Special Examination Division, Pension Bureau, Oct. 3, 1908, Correspondence with Otto L. Sues (NAID 7423770); Box 18, CWSE.

¹⁹ Some examples include John Camden Gall, Joseph Hall, George W. McKean, A. B. Parkey, Ivan Powers, R. D. Redfern, Clark Stanton, and Joseph R. Tedrow.

²⁰ Examples include Franklin Canaday, E. C. DePutron, Edwin B. Olmsted, Henry N. Snyder, and Charles H. Weschler.

²¹ Letter, Commissioner [of Pensions] to Franklin Canaday, Mar. 21, 1905, Correspondence with Franklin Canaday, 1904–12 (NAID 7423743); Box 3, CWSE.

Most correspondence relates to personnel matters, including territories worked by special examiners and instructions in special cases. On February 5, 1908, for example, Craig informed E. E. Hoge, who was stationed in Baltimore, Maryland, that it was “not improbable” that he would be assigned to work in Philadelphia “for a month or two.”²² Later that year, when illness had caused Hoge’s production to fall, Craig expressed sympathy and said he hoped Hoge would soon return to work and noted that “the Commissioner [of Pensions] presses hard on me [Craig] for results, and I must in turn insist that the members of the field force keep moving as rapidly as possible.”²³ On June 3, 1908, Special Examiner H. L. Williams was given lengthy instructions for investigating whether Special Examiner T. R. Hardwick of Knoxville, Tennessee, was treating pension claimants unfairly, or whether a campaign of attacks against his credibility was being orchestrated by attorney E. S. De Lany.²⁴



An April 1908 exchange of letters between A. L. Craig, Chief, Special Examination Division, and Special Examiner James J. Reilly.

Some correspondence discusses the division as a whole. For example, a copy of Commissioner Vespasian Warner’s letter to the Secretary of the Interior, January 20, 1909—which was likely drafted by Craig—noted that “this Bureau maintains no secret service force and that the criminal work performed by Special Examiners is inconsiderable in comparison with the merit work, i.e., that which relates to the examination of pension claims proper.” Warner continued, “Generally, it is through and in connection with the examination into the merits of pension cases

²² Chief, S. E. Division to E. E. Hoge, Special Examiner, Baltimore, Maryland, February 5, 1908; Letters Sent by A. L. Craig, 1902–1912 [hereinafter, “Craig”] (NAID 17166582), Vol. 5, p. 20.

²³ Chief, S. E. Division to E. E. Hoge, Special Examiner, Baltimore, Maryland, October 24, 1908; Craig, Vol. 5, p. 288.

²⁴ Commissioner [of Pensions] to H. L. Williams, Special Examiner, Johnson City, Tennessee, June 3, 1908; Craig, Vol. 5, pp. 153–55.

that irregularities are developed, and it is my judgment that the investigation of irregularities so brought to light, does not result in the expenditure of 3% of the appropriation.” Finally, to drive his point home, Warner concluded, “I wish to accentuate that this Bureau maintains no secret service; that the special examination of pension cases, the duty to which Special Examiners are assigned, is fair and open to claimants or parties in interest, and it is only when fraud is attempted or irregularities disclosed that ex parte inquiry is permitted under the practice.”²⁵

Civil War and Later Pension Files, 1861–1934

Most special examiners’ official reports and correspondence about the validity of specific veteran’s or widow’s pension applications were placed in the applicant’s pension file. This filing system makes it easy for genealogical researchers to locate reports about kin, but more difficult for historians who want to focus on particular special examiners or geographic areas. As these reports become digitized and available online, however, locating reports by particular special examiners or geographic locales may become easier.²⁶

The most common issue investigated by special examiners was whether a veteran’s disability was service-related, but there were also investigations into whether a claim by a mother, father, or alleged widow was valid. While the Bureau liberally accepted numerous forms of proof of marriage, there were numerous cases in which either the veteran or his widow had not been legally married to each other, due to lack of divorce by either from a previous spouse, or some other reason. Investigation would sometimes find that a parent applicant had not been dependent upon the son who died during the war and was therefore not eligible for a mother’s or father’s pension. For example, Special Examiner Joseph W. McCoy’s 1889 investigation of the mother’s pension claim by Mercy Ives, age 83, found that she and her husband, Giles, had not been dependent upon son Harrison P. Ives, who had died during the Civil War, but upon son Lewis Ives, who had died in 1873.

²⁵ Commissioner to the Secretary of the Interior, January 20, 1909; Craig, Vol. 5, p. 388.

²⁶ As of December 2015, several thousand approved widow’s pension files (widow’s certificate [WC] files) have been digitized and are online at Fold3.com. National Archives Microfilm Publication T288, *General Index to Pension Files, 1861–1934* (544 rolls) (available on Ancestry.com) indexes these files by veterans’ names, while National Archives Microfilm Publication T289, *Organization Index to Pension Files of Veterans Who Served Between 1861 and 1900* (765 rolls) (partially available on Fold3.com) indexes these files by military unit. Generally, the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, holds pension files with SO, SC, WO, WC, and XC prefixes that became inactive before ca. 1928, while most files having an XC prefix are at the National Personnel Records Center, 1 Archives Drive, Saint Louis, MO 63138.

Old age and increasing frailty induced her to apply for a pension for which she was not eligible. McCoy's report included depositions from six witnesses along with copies of Ives family financial records.²⁷

Law Division Case Files, 1862–1933

This series contains files relating to attorneys; notaries public, justices of the peace, postmasters, and other officers permitted by law to administer oaths; pensioners; and imposters. It includes correspondence with these persons and others, as well as numerous reports by special examiners. The series has been given the rather lengthy formal title “Case Files of Attorneys, Agents, Pensioners, and Others Relating to the Prosecution of Pension Claims and the Investigation of Fraudulent Practices, 1862–1933” (NAID 2538355).²⁸

There are many case files relating to attorneys. A person who wished to represent pension claimants before the Bureau either as a pension attorney or pension agent was required to apply for admission to practice, and so there are oaths of allegiance filed by such persons from the 1860s to July 4, 1884. (After that time, admission to practice was handled by the Bureau's parent agency, the Department of the Interior.) Attorneys were disbarred from practice before the Bureau, as well as the entire Department of the Interior and all its bureaus, for collecting, or attempting to collect, illegal fees from pensioners or for other ethical or procedural violations. Sometimes, a case file exists because an attorney inquired about specific cases or procedures. There may be correspondence about the acceptability of an attorney's advertising material, since the Bureau deemed the use of “U.S. pension attorney” and similar terms inappropriate because “U.S.” or “United States” suggested the person was an officer of the federal government.

There are also many files relating to notaries public, justices of the peace, postmasters, and others authorized to administer oaths who committed either inadvertent or intentional misconduct in executing pension vouchers. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to receive a pension payment, the pensioner (veteran or widow) had to personally present the pension certificate to an officer

²⁷ Harrison P. Ives (Mercy Ives, mother), Private, Co. E, 39th Ohio Infantry; Mother's Original 264599, Civil War and Later Pension Files; RG 15, NARA.

²⁸ Information about more than three thousand case files has been added to NARA's online catalog at www.archives.gov/research/catalog. Similar files relating to the Philippine Islands are filed separately under the series title “Case Files of Attorneys and Agents in the Philippine Islands Relating to the Prosecution of Pension Claims and the Investigation of Fraudulent Practices, 1925–1938” (NAID 2538357).

authorized to administer an oath on or after the fourth day of the month. If the voucher was executed before the fourth of the month, the voucher was invalid. Frequently, because the pensioner was eager to get his money quickly, vouchers were executed on the third of the month, but postdated to the fourth. Then the pensioner dropped the envelope with the voucher into the nearest mailbox (to return it to the pension payment agent), and the efficient post office postmarked the envelope the third! Thus, the postdating was easily detected. Sometimes a pensioner went to the officer without bringing the pension certificate because it was lost or forgotten. An elderly pensioner might stay at home while a younger relative took the voucher to the notary on his behalf. Most persons committing these irregularities were usually admonished to not repeat the error, but some were prosecuted.

Some individuals tried to obtain a pension to which they were not entitled, usually by claiming to be a deceased relative who would have been entitled to a pension if living. Others falsely claimed to be a serviceman's widow. Once discovered, these imposters were prosecuted.

Other imposters pretended to be U.S. pension examiners (special examiners) who would, for a small fee, assist a pensioner in getting his pension more quickly. Some eager claimants fell for the trick, but the imposter usually aroused enough suspicion that someone in the community would bring the matter to the attention of the Bureau. Some imposters were caught, prosecuted, found guilty in federal court, and spent time in jail, but others disappeared from sight into anonymity.

In Bradford and Wayne Counties, Pennsylvania, in 1884, the typical modus operandi of imposter "Charles Baker" (who also used other names) was to insist that a pension claimant or a close relative of the claimant accompany him by train, ostensibly to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or Washington, DC, to sign papers. Then, at a railroad depot en route, "Baker" would disappear after demanding money from his victim in lieu of being jailed. Sometimes he demanded money without requiring the person to travel with him.²⁹

In 1914, Ralph Atwood of Galatia, Illinois, who operated under various aliases, was indicted for impersonating a United States officer and defrauding several female pension claimants by procuring lodging and board from them. He also

²⁹ Case File of Charles Baker (imposter) (NAID 7585367), Case Files of Attorneys, Agents, Pensioners, and Others Relating to the Prosecution of Pension Claims and the Investigation of Fraudulent Practices, 1862–1933 (NAID 2538355); RG 15, NARA.

persuaded five women to allow themselves to be physically examined by him under false pretenses. He was never captured, apparently disappearing into the transient world of traveling circuses, and was still a fugitive in 1921.³⁰

Correspondence about the Ex-Slave Pension Movement, 1892–1922

William R. Vaughan of Alabama was the primary proponent for giving pensions to ex-slaves as an act of justice. Between 1890 and 1903, nine ex-slave pension bills were introduced in Congress at his behest, but none were enacted. Vaughn wrote a book, published a newspaper, and established ex-slave pension clubs to promote the legislation. His efforts were undermined by both rival and fraudulent groups that sprung up to take advantage of ex-slaves.³¹

The Bureau's correspondence about the ex-slave pension movement consists of letters sent and received, reports, circulars, large posters, petitions to Congress, depositions, pension bills, certificates of membership, fraud orders, and other records relating to pension activities. This material has been microfilmed as National Archives Microfilm Publication M2110, *Correspondence and Case Files of the Bureau of Pensions Pertaining to the Ex-Slave Movement, 1892–1922* (1 roll) (NAID 1103570). In addition to this series, however, there are also numerous files in the Law Division Case Files that relate to imposters who took advantage of the ex-slave pension movement by claiming to be federal officers authorized to sign up ex-slaves for pensions for a small fee.

Conclusion

Administrative and case file records created by the Bureau of Pensions from 1862 to 1933 are an untapped resource for studying the federal government's efforts to combat waste, fraud, and abuse in a major entitlement program. In addition, they provide insights into local personalities and circumstances across the United States.

The Special Examination Division investigated questionable pension claims; noncompliance with pension payment procedures by pensioners, notaries public, and other individuals; and excessive fees demanded by attorneys from their clients. The division's employees toiled in numerous locales across the United States, but

³⁰ Case File of Ralph Atwood (NAID 7580948), Case Files of Attorneys, Agents, Pensioners, and Others Relating to the Prosecution of Pension Claims and the Investigation of Fraudulent Practices, 1862–1933 (NAID 2538355); RG 15, NARA.

³¹ Walter B. Hill, Jr., "The Ex-Slave Pension Movement: Some Historical and Genealogical Notes," *Negro History Bulletin* 59, no. 4 (1996): 7–11.

were managed remotely from Washington, DC, with all the attendant difficulties such an arrangement creates. Staffing decisions, personal hardships, and working conditions are revealed in correspondence files that show differing perspectives between Washington management and remote staff.

The Law Division, which relied heavily on the investigations conducted by the Special Examination Division, implemented the appropriate sanctions to be taken against wrongdoers. These actions ranged from chastising “warning” letters for first-time offenders or those whose misconduct was minor or inadvertent, to coordination of prosecution with U.S. District Attorneys for repeat offenders or those whose misconduct was serious, flagrant, or egregious. The division’s case files reveal the Bureau’s earnest determination to ensure meticulous compliance with the law and to punish unscrupulous attorneys and con artists who took advantage of gullible and uneducated persons.

Finally, they include nuggets of local history information. Among other things, they may provide descriptions of individual persons, social relationships between persons, economic circumstances, and conditions of railroad travel in more populous areas. Historians will find these records rewarding on many levels.