

Researching Your CIVIL WAR ANCESTOR

A Guide to Understanding Civil War
Pension Files and Legislation

J. L. D. (Laurie) Woodruff

Unedited Excerpt



Savas Beatie
California

© 2026 J. L. D. (Laurie) Woodruff

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Woodruff, J. L. D., 1951- author

Title: Researching Your Civil War Ancestor: A Guide to Understanding Civil War Pension Files and Legislation / by J. L. D. (Laurie) Woodruff.

Description: El Dorado Hills, CA : Savas Beatie, [2026] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "There is no better place to start researching the wartime experiences and postwar lives of your Civil War ancestors than the pension files held at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C. These pension files are essential for understanding your family history or the lived experiences of individual soldiers during and after the war. They reveal detailed information about the soldier, his wife, and his children. Once you begin exploring these files and notice how dramatically their contents vary from one veteran to the next, new questions emerge. Answering these questions and dozens of others require a solid grasp of the federal legislation that shaped the Civil War pension system from 1861 to 1958. This book provides all that and more. The key to unlocking your Civil War ancestor's history is waiting inside this book"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026009057 | ISBN 9781611217926 paperback | ISBN 9781954547803 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Military pensions--United States--Civil War, 1861-1865--Research | United States. National Archives and Records Administration | United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Registers--Research | United States--Genealogy | Survivors' benefits--United States--Legal research | LCGFT: Handbooks and manuals
Classification: LCC CS68 .W66 2026 | DDC 929.373--dc23/eng/20260428
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026009057>

First Edition, First Printing



Savas Beatie

989 Governor Drive, Suite 101

El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

916-941-6896 / sales@savasbeatie.com / www.savasbeatie.com

All of our titles are available at special discount rates for bulk purchases in the United States. Contact us for information.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi
Chapter 1: A Brief History of the Federal Civil War Pension System	1
Chapter 2: What Will You Find in the Pension Files?	12
Chapter 3: How to Find a Particular Pension File	53
Chapter 4: How to Access and Read Civil War Pension Legislation	59
Appendix 1: Pension Record Index Cards	64
Appendix 2: Individual Pension Acts, Joint Resolutions of Congress, and Other Documents	80
Appendix 3: How Many Civil War Pensions Were Issued?	215
Bibliography	217
Index	218
About the Author	222

Chapter 1

A Brief History of the Federal Civil War Pension System

Irene Triplett died May 31, 2020, at the age of 90. She was the last person to collect an American Civil War pension of \$73.13 per month. If you have ever wondered why your Civil War veteran ancestor or his descendants received the pensions you found in your family records, read on.¹

Like some aging veterans, her father, Mose (Moses) Triplett (February 4, 1846-July 18, 1938), secured care in his old age by marrying his much younger caregiver. On April 4, 1924, Moses, age 78, married Elida (Lydia) Hall (June 13, 1896-February 15, 1967), age 27, over 50 years his junior. Their daughter, Irene, was born on January 9, 1930. Both mother and daughter were mentally disabled, dependents in the jargon of Civil War pension legislation. On Mose's death, Elida became entitled to a pension based on her status as a widow, and upon her death, Irene became entitled to a pension because of her status as a physically or mentally helpless child.²

And the rate of \$73.13? Congress established that rate by the second last of the public acts and resolutions of Congress relating to Civil War pensions, the Act of May 23, 1958—An Act to increase the monthly rates of pension payable to widows and former widows of deceased veterans of the Spanish-American War, Civil War, Indian War, and Mexican War, and provide pensions to widows of veterans who served in the military or naval forces of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War.

Sec. 1. (4) of this Act amended the War Veterans' Benefits Act of June 17, 1957, Title IV, Part C, Subpart I, Sec. 433. This Act established a monthly pension rate of \$48.77 for children of veterans. The Act of May 23, 1958, increased this to \$73.13 per month.

1 *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2020; <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/210736348/irene-triplett>, accessed December 12, 2024.

2 Dates for Moses and Elida are from their death certificates and marriage certificate. Dates for Irene are from the records of the Triplett-Hall Cemetery in Elkville, Wilkes County, North Carolina. The Act of April 1, 1944, established that where a person was "insane, idiotic, or otherwise physically or mentally helpless" at the date of their 16th birthday and the helpless condition existed at the time of the death of the veteran or his widow, payment will continue during the period of helplessness, unless the person marries. It is this provision that applied to Irene Triplett and allowed her to collect a pension on the death of her mother. See Appendix 2 for wording of the Act of April 1, 1944.

The first military pension authorized by the United States was through a resolution of the Continental Congress on August 26, 1776. Numerous acts implemented military pensions thereafter. Before the Civil War, there were specific pension plans for veterans of the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Mexican-American War, as well as a separate regular army pension plan. The Act of April 30, 1790, established the first pension for the regular army, and by the time of the Civil War, the pension was based on half pay for life for commissioned officers, and up to \$5.00 per month for enlisted men. These rates were the basic pensions approved by the Act of July 22, 1861—An Act to authorize the employment of volunteers to aid in enforcing the laws and protecting public property—which was the first congressional act establishing pensions for Civil War veterans and their dependents.

The Federal American Civil War Pension System began in 1861 and comprises three distinct systems: the Disability Pension System (1862-1890), the Service-Based Pension System (1890-1907), and the Service and Age-Based Pension System (1904-1958). And yes, the Service-Based and Service- and Age-Based Pension systems overlapped as discussed below.³

THE DISABILITY PENSION SYSTEM 1861–1890

The Act of July 22, 1861, provided for pensions for disabled soldiers, and for widows and minor children less than 16 years old, of slain soldiers. The General Law System, created by the Act of July 14, 1862—An Act to Grant Pensions, established a medical screening system for rating disabilities and determining compensation. Officers suffering total disability received \$30.00 per month, while privates and non-commissioned officers received \$8.00 per month. Pensions decreased proportionately where disability was not total. Over the years between 1862 and 1890, a series of laws, rulings, and orders codified and expanded the system, with payments varying by rank in the service and by the nature and degree of disability. Remarried widows lost their right to a pension. Inability to perform manual labor determined disability, regardless of whether the veteran worked in that capacity. The Act of March 3, 1873—An Act to revise, consolidate, and amend—the Laws relating to Pensions—known as the Consolidation Act, sought to consolidate all the earlier legislation into a single comprehensive law. It also made veterans with disabilities incurred after the war, but caused by disease or injury during the war, eligible for pensions. Legislation established processes for examination of veterans by surgeons (the Civil War term for doctors), set requirements regarding length of service, proof of marriage, testimony of officers instead of insufficient War Department records, and much more. The Act of January 25, 1879, the Arrears Act, also offered lump-sum payments for the period from when the disabled veteran left the service to when he began receiving pension payments, a significant increase in cost to the treasury. In addition to all the public acts of Congress, there were thousands of special acts granting pensions and pension increases to soldiers and their dependents who did not otherwise qualify for pensions under the public legislation, a process that continued long after 1890.

³ The concept of three systems comes from Peter Blanck, "Civil War Pensions and Disability," in *Ohio State Law Journal* 62 (2001): 109-238. The only authoritative book on the Civil War pension system is William H. Glasson, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States* (New York: 1918). Though obviously dated and published partway through the evolution of the pension system to its final form in 1958, it is an excellent source for understanding the development of pension legislation and administration from 1862 until the early 20th century.

19.47

✓

WAR OF 1861.
ACT JULY 14, 1862.

Brief in case of Jesse Woodruff, a Private
of Company I., 55th Regiment Ohio Vol.

POST OFFICE ADDRESS OF APPLICANT:
Marion, Huron Co. Ohio.

Enlisted December 7, 1861, Discharged December 5, 1862

CLAIM FOR AN INVALID PENSION.
Declaration and Identification in due Form.
PROOF EXHIBITED.

1. Discharged for: "Gunshot wound of both thighs, producing abscesses, which have resulted in muscular contractions."
2. His Lieutenant testifies: "In the 2^d Battle of Bull Run was wounded in both thighs".
3. Pension Surgeon, Feb. 24 1863 says: "Wounded in both thighs one of the balls yet remains in the thigh. The other thigh has not yet recovered its usual strength."
Disability total and probably temporary.

Admitted Nov. 12, 1862, to a pension of \$ 8.00 per month, commencing December 5, 1862

Disability Total & Temporary Disabled by Gunshot wounds of thighs

Stickney Ex. Straton
Name and Residence of Agent. Huron Co. Ohio.

H. H. Hines EXAMINING CLERK.

Single surgeons will not this blank, changing "w" to read "l", and "our" to read "my". They will erase the words "I read", "I read", and "I read", and "I read" where the words appear, and sign at the foot of the certificate, and sign on the back of the same.

SURGEON'S CERTIFICATE

Joseph M. Hart
 of *55 Regt. A.V.C.*

Applicant for Quarters

No. *19,473*

DATE OF EXAMINATION:
March 5th, 18*90*

J. M. Hart, Pres.,
A. J. Hart, Sec'y,
 Board.

Post office, *Norman*
 County, *Heaton*
 State, *Ohio*

P. S.—Write your Post-office address plainly and in full.

Provided FURTHER, That all examinations shall be thorough and searching, and the certificate contain a full description of the physical condition of the claimant at the time, which shall include all the physical and rational signs and a statement of all the structural changes. [Excerpt from Section 4, Act of Congress approved July 25, 1882.]

Back of a Surgeon's Certificate illustrating the wounds suffered by the pension claimant. NARA

Langston. 3-101

PRIVATE NO. 357

APPROVED FEB 13 1929

✓ *we 2/9/29*
we 3/7/29 WIDOW

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of the Interior be, and he is hereby, authorized and directed to place on the pension roll, subject to the provisions and limitations of the pension laws--

The name of Minerva A. Woodruff, widow of Charles E. Woodruff, late of Company L, Second Regiment New York Mounted Rifles, and pay her a pension at the rate of \$50 per month in lieu of that she is now receiving.

I hereby certify that the above is a true copy of that part of act relating to beneficiary named, as it appears in copy certified by Department and on file in Law Division.

MAK 23 1929

J. B. Wilkinson
Chief Clerk.

DEPARTMENT PENSION OFFICE

THE SERVICE-BASED PENSION SYSTEM 1890–1907

The 1890s saw an explosion in the costs of pensions with the introduction of the Act of June 27, 1890—An Act granting pensions to soldiers and sailors who are incapacitated for the performance of manual labor, and providing pensions to widows, minor children, and dependent parents—known as the Disability Pension Act. This Act marked the change from the Disability Pension system to the Service-Based Pension system. Under the new system, pensions were granted to men who had served during the Civil War, regardless of whether the disabilities they suffered were the direct result of their service. Disability could not be on account of vicious habits (a catchall term used in pension legislation and regulations to denote chronic alcoholism or drug dependency). Service of at least 90 days and an honorable discharge were prerequisites. Claimants were required to undergo a medical examination to prove their disability. As with the previous regime, a series of laws, rulings, and orders clarified and codified the pension system, thereby increasing its complexity. On March 15, 1904, under increasing political pressure in an election year, the Bureau of Pensions issued Order Number 78, which broadened the definition of disability under the Disability Pension Act of June 27, 1890, to include old age as a disability with pension entitlement starting at age 62, and graduated increases in pension amounts paid as veterans aged beyond 62. Congress soon codified this regulation into statutory law.

THE SERVICE- AND AGE-BASED PENSION SYSTEM 1904–1958

Following Bureau of Pensions Order #78 of March 15, 1904, The Act of April 24, 1906—An Act making appropriations for the payment of invalid and other pensions of the United States for the fiscal year ending June thirtieth, nineteen hundred and seven, and for other purposes—marked the first legislated step in the evolution of the pension system into its third stage, from a Disability-Based Pension System to a Service-Based Pension System to a Service- and Age-Based Pension System. It was superseded almost immediately by the Act of February 6, 1907—An Act granting pensions to certain enlisted men, soldiers, and officers who served in the Civil War and the War with Mexico, which fully converted the system to a service-based and age-based system. Most veterans transitioned from the 1890-based system to the 1907-based system as the latter was more generous. Once again, from 1907 until 1958, a series of laws, rulings, and orders clarified and complicated the Civil War pension regime.

PENSION RECORD INDEX CARDS

Researchers are most likely to encounter Civil War pensions through Pension Record Index Cards (hereafter Pension Cards) available at FamilySearch, Ancestry.com, and Fold3. There are eight versions of these cards, but researchers are most likely to encounter three versions, as shown below. For an understanding of these eight different types of Pension Cards, and for complete details of Pension Cards, see Appendix 1. For instructions on how to find and use Pension Cards, see Chapter 3.

After the Civil War, the constant use of original military records, such as regimental muster rolls, regimental descriptive books, hospital rolls, and the like, by the War Department and the pension bureau led to increasing deterioration of the documents. From the 1870s through the early 1900s, War Department clerks began producing Compiled Military Service Records (CMSRs) for military personnel who served from 1775 to 1902. These CMSRs are 7”x 3” index cards prepared from original military records for each soldier, sailor, or marine covering each two months of their service, including mustering in, mustering



Act of June 27, 1890.

A

DECLARATION FOR INVALID PENSION.

A

To be executed before a Court of Record or some officer thereof having custody of its seal, a Notary Public or Justice of the Peace, whose official signature shall be verified by his official seal, and in case he has none, his signature and official character shall be certified by a Clerk of a Court of Record, or a City or County Clerk.

STATE OF *Pennsylvania*
COUNTY OF *Crawford* }

On this *24* day of *March*, A. D. one thousand eight hundred and ninety-one
personally appeared before me, a *Clk. of Record Courts*
within and for the county and State aforesaid *Henry S. Woodruff*
aged *44* years, a resident of the Township of *Troy*
county of *Crawford*, State of *Pennsylvania*, who, being
duly sworn according to law, declares that he is the identical *Henry S. Woodruff*
who was ENROLLED on the *15* day of *January*, 18*65*, in *Co. "D" 39*
Regt. Ohio vol. [there state rank, company and regiment]

in the service of the United States, in the War of the Rebellion, and served at least ninety days, and was HONOR-
ABLY DISCHARGED at *Louisville Ky.*, on the *9th* day of *July*
18*65*. That he is unable to earn a support by manual labor by
reason of *Pneumonia, Catarrh & Asthma, Stiver & Kidney Trouble*
[Here name the disease or injuries from which disabled.]

That said disabilities are not due to his vicious habits, and are to the best of his knowledge and belief
permanent. That he has applied for pension under application No. *741,228*

That he is a pensioner under certificate No. _____
[If a pensioner, the Certificate number only need be given. If not, give the number of the
former application if one was made.]

I was in no other Military or Naval service than as above stated

That he makes this declaration for the purpose of being placed on the pension roll of the United States under
the provisions of the Act of June 27, 1890.

He hereby appoints *B. B. Pickett*
of *Meadvile*, State of *Pennsylvania*, his true and lawful attorney
to prosecute his claim and receive a fee of \$*10.00*. That his post-office address is *Diamond*
county of *Venango*, State of *Penn.*

Henry S. Woodruff
[Claimant's signature]

Attest: (1) *Wesley B. Best*
(2) *W. W. Ellsworth*

3-014.
ACT OF FEBRUARY 6, 1907.
DECLARATION FOR PENSION.

THE PENSION CERTIFICATE SHOULD NOT BE FORWARDED WITH THE APPLICATION.

State of Nebraska)
County of Pawnee) ss.

On this 12th day of March, A. D. one thousand nine hundred and Seven,
personally appeared before me, a Notary Public within and for the county
and State aforesaid, Leri E. Woodruff who, being duly sworn according to law,
declares that he is 63 years of age, and a resident of Stemmer
county of Pawnee, State of Nebraska; and that he is the
identical person who was ENROLLED at Rosford, Nebraska under the name of
Leri E. Woodruff on the 14 day of August, 1862,
as a Private in Co-E-74th Regiment Ill. Infantry
(Here state rank, and company and regiment in the Army, or service in the Navy.)

in the service of the United States, in the Civil war, and was HONORABLY DISCHARGED
at Leicester, Kentucky on the 14 day of December, 1862.
That he also served in the Ill. 15th Regt. Volunteer Infantry
at Fort Pitt was discharged by reason of being underage
for the war in May 1861
(Here give a complete statement of all other services, if any.)

That he was not employed in the military or naval service of the United States otherwise than as stated
above. That his personal description at enlistment was as follows: Height, 5 feet 7 1/4 inches;
complexion, fair; color of eyes, blue; color of hair, brown; that his occupa-
tion was farming; that he was born June 23rd, 1843,
at Orleans, New York.

That his several places of residence since leaving the service have been as follows: to
Bellevue, Iowa in 1862 to Pawnee, Neb. in 1865
to Windsor, N. Dak. in 1885 to Pawnee, Neb. in 1895
to Pawnee, Neb. in 1895 to Pawnee, Neb. in 1895
That he is not a pensioner. That he has never heretofore applied for pension
Number 62 02 52
(If a pensioner, the certificate number only need be given. If not, give the number of the former application, if one was made.)

That he makes this declaration for the purpose of being placed on the pension roll of the United
States under the provisions of the act of February 6, 1907.

That his post-office address is Stemmer, county of Pawnee,
State of Nebraska. Leri E. Woodruff
(Claimant's signature in full)

Attest: (1) F. A. Kehmmer
(2) Carl W. Heng

Also personally appeared F. A. Kehmmer, residing in Stemmer, Neb.
and Carl W. Heng, residing in Stemmer, persons whom I
certify to be respectable and entitled to credit, and who, being by me duly sworn, say that they were
present and saw Leri E. Woodruff, the claimant, sign his name (or make his mark)
to the foregoing declaration; that they have every reason to believe, from the appearance of the claimant
and their acquaintance with him of 24 years and 35 years, respectively, that he is the identical
person he represents himself to be, and that they have no interest in the prosecution of this claim.

F. A. Kehmmer
Carl W. Heng
(Signatures of witnesses.)

SUBSCRIBED and sworn to before me this 12 day of March, A. D. 1907,
and I hereby certify that the contents of the above declaration, etc., were fully
made known and explained to the applicant and witnesses before swearing,
including the words _____, erased;
[L. S.] _____, and the words _____, added;
and that I have no interest, direct or indirect, in the prosecution of this claim.

Notary Public
(Official Signature.)
Vand W. E. H. Law

COMM. EX. JULY 20/1907

Declaration for Pension under the Act of February 6, 1907. NARA

NAME OF SOLDIER:		Woodruff, Albert O.		
NAME OF DEPENDENT:		Widow, Woodruff, Frances A. Minor,		
SERVICE:		Batt. D 5 U.S. Art.		
DATE OF FILING.	CLASS.	APPLICATION NO.	CERTIFICATE NO.	STATE FROM WHICH FILED.
1864 June 23	Invalid,	47,392	34,338	Mich.
1913 July 3	Widow,	10,10,765	762,622.	
	Minor,			
ATTORNEY:		M. J. B.		

NAME OF SOLDIER:		Woodruff, Henry E.		
SERVICE:		Late rank, Co. D, 23 Reg't Ohio Eng.		
TERM OF SERVICE:		Enlisted May 18, 1861 Discharged trans. Mar. 10, 1864		
DATE OF FILING.	CLASS.	APPLICATION NO.	LAW	CERTIFICATE NO.
1869 Mar. 12	Invalid,	10,82,913	0 8	945,380
1892 Mar. 18	Widow,	1714461	5-1-20	A-4-25-32
1932 Mar. 17	Minor,			
ADDITIONAL SERVICES:		20 23 Ohio Eng.		
REMARKS:		Died Mar 8, 1932, at Oakland, Calif.		

(Top) Alpha Pension Card; (Bottom) Regimental Pension Card. Ancestry.com

565179 (3-H-4)

INVALID	Orig.	Name	Sam
		Serv.	Ill
		Ctf. No.	596203
	Ctf.	Name	Boyd, Spencer
		Serv.	4 Ind Batty Iowa L A
DEPENDENT	Orig.	Name	Aus
		Serv.	
		Ctf. No.	
	W Ctf.	Name	Woodruff, Martin N.
		Serv.	E 147 Ill. Inf.

6-1303

Numeric Pension Card. Fold 3

out, descriptive books, casualty sheets, prisoner-of-war records, and so on. The CMSRs for each soldier are kept together in an envelope and filed in alphabetical order by last name, grouped by regiment or other organizational unit. Examining the CMSRs provides the researcher with a complete history of the individual's service, with the caveat that misfiling, misspelled names, transcription errors, lost cards, and so on may require reference to the individual's original military records.

As the War Department and pension bureau used the CMSRs to manage the pension processes, for example, establishing that the soldier had served the required minimum of 90 days, they created pension files. The number of pensions awarded, and the number of files grew enormously. As researchers began accessing pension files, these too began to deteriorate from constant use, just as the original military records had. The pension bureau decided that creating Pension Cards, as with CMSRs, would minimize the handling of pension files and enable researchers to easily identify which files contained the information they were interested in. After their creation, the pension bureau microfilmed the various Pension Cards. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) kept the microfilm records. Unfortunately, the pension bureau destroyed the original Pension Cards. Because the microfilm quality is often poor, using it can be difficult.

In 1916, the pension bureau published a book describing the complex card record-keeping system then in use. The Pension Cards were only a few of the dozens of cards used by the pension bureau for various purposes. Researchers will encounter many of these other pension bureau cards as they conduct research in the pension files.⁴

4 Card Records in Use in the Bureau of Pensions 1916 (Washington, D.C.: 1916). Note that what the pension bureau calls cards includes what we would today recognize as pre-printed forms of various sizes and types, as well as small cards such as the Pension Cards.

“The card records in use in the Bureau of Pensions have grown to such proportions and serve such important yet different purposes that it is very desirable to have them published, both because of their great value to the employees of the bureau, who are required to make daily use of the information contained therein, and also because of their importance to the general public as an index to vast and varied information.”⁵

“The card index system of this bureau is something more than an index to the records of the bureau; it is, indeed, a complete system of card records, which has taken the place of all the heavy and cumbersome book records formerly in use. This system consists of many kinds of card records embracing all the activities of the bureau and is believed to be one of the largest card-index and record systems in existence. All the divisions of the bureau have cards appropriate to their particular work which are herein described in logical order, sample cards being shown in their proper place as described.”⁶

This book is eighty-eight pages long and contains descriptions of dozens of card types, most of which are no longer available for public viewing. Card systems for the finance division, surgeons appointed to judge pension claims, file circulation, the law division, and much more are described in the book. The book did not state when the pension bureau introduced the card system.

The record division of the pension bureau produced the Pension Cards, which are normally accessed today. The record division cards provide information on the letters of enquiry received daily concerning “particular claims for pension, lost relatives who, the writers think, can be located by the bureau, the whereabouts of former comrades, sometimes the expression of opinions, favorable or unfavorable, regarding pension matters, and numerous other things.”⁷

“After many years of experience it is believed that this system of records is as nearly perfect as can be established when dealing with records of such immense magnitude.”⁸

End of Unedited Excerpt

5 Ibid., foreword.

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.