

“DESIRVING OF A SMALL PENTION:” NAVIGATING THE CIVIL WAR PENSION  
SYSTEM

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## **ABSTRACT**

Laurie J. Medford: "Deserving of a Small Pension:" Navigating the Civil War Pension System  
(Under the direction of William L. Barney)

The vocal nature of Republican and Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) military pension campaigns publicly presented veteran beliefs about federal government obligation during the Gilded Era. However, the widely-publicized GAR views do not indicate how individual veterans viewed and engaged with the federal pension system during the period of major centralization, industrialization, and bureaucratization between 1880 and 1900. A thorough examination of pension files linked to members of the Union Army's Company C, Eighth Wisconsin Infantry reveals that the veterans formed loose, informal networks to provide testimony, at times appearing to engage in a tacit agreement to stretch the truth or refuse to do so based upon their judgements of the claimant's deservingness. Through the process of providing testimony, Company C members exhibited a nascent belief of entitlement to federal assistance and engaged in redefining beliefs about federal government obligations to soldiers during the period.

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## INTRODUCTION

Jacob Aaron, a farmer from the rural Chippewa Valley in Wisconsin and a veteran of the Union Army, found it difficult to make ends meet in 1880. The past year had been difficult for his family since as struggled with unemployment and a chronic digestive disorder “which greatly disables me for the performance of manual labor.”<sup>1</sup> His doctors had been treating him for chronic conditions for over fifteen years to little avail. Nearly two decades after the close of the American Civil War, Aaron sought assistance from the federal government through a veteran’s invalid pension.

Aaron submitted affidavits from neighbors and fellow veterans of his Civil War unit, Company C of the Eighth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, in support of his pension applications claiming that his inability to earn a living was a direct result of a disease he contracted during military service. He needed their testimony to establish “that prior to his entry into the service” of Company C, “he was a man of good, sound, physical health” who supported his family as a farmer. He claimed that as a result “of his injuries...received in the service of the United States,” “he was so disabled that he was unable to maintain “his subsistence by manual labor.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to addressing the facts of the case in their testimonies, Aaron’s fellow company

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<sup>1</sup>1880 United States Census, s.v. "Jacob Aaron," Anson, Chippewa County, Wisconsin, accessed through Ancestry.com. Jacob Aaron, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

members included their own assessments about his worthiness for a pension. First Lieutenant Thomas Butler concluded his reply to a letter of inquiry by the Commissioner of Pensions with an assertion about the government's role that had previously been absent from the American mindset before the Civil War, but which was becoming increasingly common among affiants in the 1880s: "He is entitled to a Pension and I trust he will get it."<sup>3</sup> Butler's plainspoken statement expressing his expectation of a positive outcome for Jacob Aaron's claim depicts the developing notion that the government owed its most recent volunteer veterans for their service instead of for disability alone.

The transitive verb "entitle" did not have its current politically-charged connotation when Thomas Butler and other Company C members were using it in the late-nineteenth century. In fact, Webster's dictionaries of 1853, 1867, and 1895 do not recognize the noun form of the word, "entitlement."<sup>4</sup> During the period in which Butler and his fellow Company C veterans were most active in providing testimony, to be entitled to property meant to have title to a claim or to "give a claim by the possession of suitable qualifications."<sup>5</sup> Although the word's definitions did not change significantly from the 1860s through the turn-of-the-century, its use in relation to governmental aid for veterans indicates a shift in Company C members' beliefs about the role of government. Affiants invoked the concept of entitlement through a variety of words that

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Butler Affidavit (1883) in *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language; Exhibiting The Origin, Orthography, Pronunciation, and Definitions of Words* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1853), 359. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language; Exhibiting The Origin, Orthography, Pronunciation, and Definitions of Words* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1867), 359. Noah Webster, *Webster's Academic Dictionary: A Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1895), 198.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

conveyed the same idea: that a claimant had a right to compensation from the federal government based upon Civil War military service rather than a disability.

The French and Indian War set precedent for service pensions a century before the Civil War, but awards were in the form of land grants. Revolutionary War veterans in need became eligible for monetary federal service pensions in 1818. Congress extended service pensions to all Revolutionary War veterans in 1832, 49 years after the close of the war. In total, the Federal Government provided 57,623 Revolutionary War pensions, aiding less than 20 percent of veterans.<sup>6</sup> Late-nineteenth century Congresses revised Civil War pension laws throughout veterans' lives to make benefits more widely accessible, just as their predecessors had done for Revolutionary Veterans. The scale of the Civil War, greatly liberalized laws, and centralization of the pension system allowed Civil War veterans' access to pensions in unprecedented numbers.

In *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, Theda Skocpol identifies the timing of Civil War veterans' calls for service pensions as the most notable way in which they broke from precedents set by earlier veterans. Some local posts from the veterans' organization the Grand Army of the Republic called for service pensions as early as the mid-1880s, less than twenty years after soldiers mustered out of service. In 1888, the national GAR joined the campaign, openly calling for congress to extend pension eligibility to all Civil War veterans who served more than 90 days.<sup>7</sup> However, the resulting legislation passed in 1890 did not accept the notion of service-based pensions, and instead expanded pensions to all disabled Civil War veterans.

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<sup>6</sup> William Henry Glasson, PhD Diss., *History of Military Pension Legislation in the United States* (Columbia University, 1900), 51. Despite the age of the work, Glasson's publications regarding pensions remain one of the most accurate sources for the history and data of government pension expenditures.

<sup>7</sup> Skocpol, 106, 112-14, 129.

Even though Pension Office bureaucrats evaluated applications for their adherence to evidence standards, Company C members continued to express their legally irrelevant beliefs of entitlement in testimonies throughout the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s. In the law under which Aaron applied, a veteran needed only to prove the origin of his disability in wartime military service and that it had developed into a chronic, debilitating condition.<sup>8</sup> Company C members' inclusion of personal judgments about comrades' deservingness of pensions and their conduct as soldiers indicate that Company C members had begun to develop and act according to a new, nuanced sense of government obligation. Affidavits and other forms of testimony from Company C members illuminate a loose network through which comrades attempted to influence Pension Office decisions. Members demonstrated exacting views of entitlement to government assistance in their support or rejection of their comrades' claims for federal benefits by providing testimony that stretched the truth or revealed falsehoods depending upon the perceived deservingness of the claimant.

Although Company C members might have argued otherwise on a point of pride, Company C differed little from other rural western Civil War units with the exception that their color bearers carried a live eagle into battle. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls were nascent, but quickly-growing Wisconsin towns at the edge of the settled portion of the state. The area remained largely rural during the remainder of the nineteenth century and closely linked with the logging industry. The 101 enlistees who mustered-in when Company C was formed in August of 1861 were primarily single young men who had arrived in the region from Eastern states such as New York and Pennsylvania, migrated from Canada to

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions, *Orders Instructions and Regulations Governing the Pension Bureau* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1915), 110.



become loggers, or immigrated to the Chippewa Valley from Europe.<sup>9</sup> Some future Company C members worked together in the woods or sawmills as lumbermen, while others were neighbors in the same small farming villages throughout the area. Together they created a company that reflected the rural, newly-settled social groupings of its rural western origins. For example, Max Worth and Gabriel Gebhardt looked after one another in the army as they had while living as boarding house roommates and working in the lumber mills on the Chippewa River in Eau Claire.<sup>10</sup> Lieutenant Francis Schmidtmayer, a German immigrant and former German army artilleryman, found companionship with Gebhardt, Worth, and other Germans in Company C just as he had during the prewar period when he floated between seasonal jobs within the Chippewa Valley and Twin Cities regions.<sup>11</sup>

Company C members fought as part of the Eighth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry in major western theater battles at Corinth and Farmington, but saw most of their service trudging and skirmishing across Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Between the company's muster-in in 1861 and muster-out in 1865, 20 percent of members died of disease or in battle and seven percent deserted. Of the 86 early war recruits who survived their terms and

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<sup>9</sup> Muster rolls and pension files related to the company together indicate that 37 percent of Company C members whose place of origin is known were foreign born. Of the foreign-born, 45 percent were German.

<sup>10</sup> Max Worth and Gabriel Gebhardt, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. Worth and Gebhardt residence found in 1860 United States Census, s.v. "Max Worth," North Eau Claire, Eau Claire County, Wisconsin, accessed through Ancestry.com.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Brown, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

were not deserters, 36 percent reenlisted.<sup>12</sup> Company C survivors who remained with the unit until discharge experienced the hardships of soldiering together for three years, providing the opportunity for members to develop a strong sense of unity that may have contributed to the high rate of reenlistment.

Upon discharge from the military, 49 percent of the surviving Company C members who are represented in pension files elected to remain in the Chippewa Valley. The balance of members continued their prewar migration. A few returned to their state of birth, but most continued their travels to settle in the western United States and territories. Unskilled workers, which made up the majority of Company C's members, dispersed into the civilian world and mostly found work as lumbermen or tried their hand at farming.<sup>13</sup> Older men in the unit, like Victor Wolf who bought a livery stable, and a handful of their unskilled youthful counterparts, transitioned into skilled or professional occupations created by the growing population's needs.<sup>14</sup> Some men, including Wolf, found success, if not wealth, after resuming civilian occupations. Others who also stayed in the Chippewa Valley, like Jacob Aaron and his German fellow company member Francis Schmidtmayer, held a variety of jobs and struggled with debt, sometimes drawing upon local charity for indigent veterans.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Of the 120 men who served in Company C, 117 enlisted during the first two years. Eight of the 1861 and 1862 enlistees deserted and 23 died during service. Of the 86 surviving and accounted early war recruits, 31 members reenlisted.

<sup>13</sup> 53 percent of Company C members enlisted as unskilled laborers according to compiled data from company muster rolls and pension files.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Wolf, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>15</sup> *Eau Claire Leader*, April 9, 1907. Aaron received \$25.

During the postwar era, the Chippewa Valley's population grew rapidly but did not become urban in nature, not unlike the other newly-settled river towns of the Midwest. In his history of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), Stuart McConnell uses the James Cumerford Post #68 in Chippewa Falls as representative of a post serving a rural area, "one of thousands of 'country posts,' all organizations located in out-of-the-way county seats, typically in the Midwest or the West."<sup>16</sup> McConnell's selection of Post #68 emphasizes the role of Chippewa Falls as a representative rural county seat. Together, Chippewa Falls and its strikingly similar southern neighboring city, Eau Claire, formed the heart of the rural Chippewa Valley region from which Company C men enlisted and to which nearly half of surviving pensioned members returned.

Military pensions offered the opportunity for qualifying disabled Company C members to receive additional income starting in 1862. By the 1931 death of Jacob Aaron, the last living member of Company C, 82 company members had been affiliated with a Civil War military pension. Sixty-three percent of company members link to an accessible pension. Of the six inaccessible pension files, two were dependent parents' rejected claims listed in the custody of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) that were likely destroyed. NARA records indicate that the Veterans Administration holds the remaining four pension files. However, they could not be located through a Freedom of Information Act request. Company C's pension files, split postwar population of migrants and stayers, affiliation with a rural town as the place of enlistment, associated documents in the vast holdings of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, and records preserved by local archives in the Chippewa Valley identifies the

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<sup>16</sup> McConnell, 54.

unit as being ideal for the study of rural Gilded Era veteran beliefs regarding obligation and entitlement.

The microhistory of a single company's veterans is an entry point to understanding ways in which individual veterans from rural areas became personally involved in the national conversation about the obligations of the federal government during a period of government re-definition. Veterans' organizations such as the influential GAR fought for expanded pension legislation by using its immense lobbying power. Yet, the GAR counted only 41 percent of surviving Union veterans among its membership in 1890.<sup>17</sup> Despite GAR involvement in the highly political fight over pension expansion, the pension application process placed veterans of all economic and political affiliations in a direct relationship with the Pension Office over which the GAR had little, if any direct influence. Civil War military pension files such as Chippewa Valley farmer Jacob Aaron's give rise to questions regarding the beliefs and actions of individual men linked through loose community ties and past service during a period of pronounced ongoing centralization, industrialization, and bureaucratization: how did veterans frame their expectations of the government in pension claims? Did Civil War veterans' beliefs of entitlement to pensions indicate changing attitudes about federal aid? These questions remain outside the focus of Gilded Age scholarship even through their answers indicate a shift in soldiers beliefs and actions regarding the changing government structure and obligation during the last half of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Stuart McConnell, "Who Joined the Grand Army? Three Case Studies in the Construction of Union Veteranhood, 1866-1900" in Maris A Vinovskis, ed, *Toward A Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 141.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1967) describes the breakdown of "island communities," rural towns like Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin that functioned according to a local hierarchy and relatively little interaction with the outside world. Company C members' interactions with the federal government through the pension system were a part of the restructuring of

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the Chippewa Valley's "island communities." The pension system increased the flow of federal money and political influence into the Chippewa Valley. Pensioners like those of Company C placed an increasing volume of demands upon the Pension Office, requiring the rapid expansion of the office's bureaucracy. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) argues that expansion of the administrative system occurred as a result struggles over already-established governing arrangements. Veterans' increasing claims to pensions based upon a broadening set of criteria follow the general pattern of development described by Skowronek although *Building a New American State* does not discuss the pension system. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992) directly addresses the rise of the pension system and its limited connection to later welfare policy.

## THE GAR AND PENSION POLITICS

Advocacy for liberalized pensions and a changing relationship with the federal government characterize GAR histories and analysis of the developing welfare system in the late nineteenth century. Stuart McConnell's history of the GAR, *Glorious Contentment*, describes the GAR's function at its peak strength in the 1880s as a politically active fraternal organization.<sup>19</sup> Men who had been honorably discharged from Civil War service, including veterans of Company C, formed GAR posts in cities and towns across the country. The posts were part of the national organization headquartered in Washington, DC. Though editorials in veteran publications reveal some internal disagreement about pension legislation, the GAR approached lobbying for expanded pension benefits with the force of a unified group.<sup>20</sup> As a result of the organization's success and strength in the political and public spheres, individual veterans fade into the body of the massive organization in most accounts.

In practice, GAR lobbying might have impacted Company C pensions only insofar as it encouraged members to apply for claims and exposed them to GAR proclamations about the government's duty to aid its volunteer soldiers, especially in the 1880s. In *To Die For: The*

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<sup>19</sup> Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), viii-xiv.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

*Paradox of American Patriotism*, Cecilia O’Leary notes: “Despite its belief in self-reliance, the Grand Army reworked notions of civic virtue to legitimate the concept of veteran entitlement and justify veterans’ demands for national solutions to their individual problems.”<sup>21</sup> Her treatment of the topic of obligatory federal aid to soldiers, however, is linked only with GAR activity and does not sufficiently address how the notion permeated veteran and non-veteran society. Histories of Civil War veterans have not adequately distinguished between the beliefs and aims of veterans as individuals and as a group or groups. Political histories of the late-nineteenth century depict veterans either as the body of the GAR or as voters whose thoughts and beliefs are visible only through their civic activities. In *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, Theda Skocpol’s veteran subjects appear as individual actors primarily as voters. She rejects the “pressure group thesis” presented by GAR historians such as Stuart McConnell, which credits the GAR’s lobbying with the increase in government spending on social policy. Instead, Skocpol asserts that liberalized Civil War pensions were the product of national-level political party competition leading politicians to use distributive policies as a way to recruit voters.<sup>22</sup> Rather than considering changing beliefs of veterans, Skocpol’s assessment of Gilded Age politics presents veterans as secondary actors overshadowed by the Republican Party.

James Marten’s short article, “Those Who Have Borne the Battle: Civil War Veterans, Pension Advocacy, and Politics,” is one of the few publications that explores how veterans understood their relationship to the pension system. He traces the origin of veterans’ entitlement

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<sup>21</sup> Cecilia O’leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45-46.

<sup>22</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992), 115.

to the common belief that President Lincoln had promised soldiers financial support when he pledged to “bind up the nation’s wounds” and “to care for him who shall have borne the battle” in his Second Inaugural Address.<sup>23</sup> Veterans are actors with their own beliefs and voices in Marten’s article, but they remain a large, unwieldy group that argues its views through newspapers. Both James Marten’s *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* and Brian Matthew Jordan’s *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* also struggle to identify individual-level actions and beliefs. They rely on newspapers and other purveyors of public opinion for the bulk of their evidence.<sup>24</sup>

Cases of individual veterans publicly expressing the belief that their disabled comrades were entitled to significant government assistance emerge as early as the 1870s but were limited to the relatively small population of former soldiers housed in veterans’ homes. Patrick Kelley’s article, “Establishing a Federal Entitlement,” places the beginning of the entitlement timeline earlier than the GAR’s campaign for expanded pensions in the 1880s in its examination of the founding of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (NHDVS). Kelley uses records conveying reasons for submitting relatives to the care of the NHDVS to examine entitlement in veteran history. “The institutional benefits awarded to citizen-veterans,” he summarizes, “required no less than a new discourse based upon notions of national obligation and federal entitlement.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> James Marten, “Those Who Have Borne the Battle: Civil War Veterans, Pension Advocacy, and Politics,” *Marquette Law Review* 93, no. 1 (2010), 1407.

<sup>24</sup> James Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and Brian Matthew Jordan, *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2014). Both books offer extensive explorations of veterans’ ground-level experiences and beliefs, but struggle to define veteran group and individual identity.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick Kelley, “Establishing a Federal Entitlement” in *The Civil War Veteran: A Historical Reader*, Larry M. Logue and Michael Barton, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 228.



The discourse about national obligation and federal entitlement surfaced in the words and actions of Company C veterans within ten years of the NHDVS's 1873 creation. Jacob Aaron, the struggling farmer from the Chippewa Valley, received support for his pension claim asserting his entitlement to benefits in 1883, well before the passage of the "New Law" of 1890 which expanded to include veterans with disabilities not originating in military service. The fine-grained detail available in the pension files of Company C members reveals how veterans understood their relationship to one another and to their federal government that fade out of view in large-scale studies. Through careful attention to the language and patterns of testimony in the pension file documents of Company C members, patterns emerge of veterans attempting to influence pension outcomes by invoking a language of entitlement and supporting each other's worthy applications with exaggerated testimony.

## THE PENSION SYSTEM

Jacob Aaron's pension claim, for which First Lieutenant Thomas Butler submitted an affidavit, was one of over one million filed between 1862 and 1890.<sup>26</sup> Each claim required review by a pension examiner and resulted in either a rejection or acceptance. When a veteran submitted additional information as part of an application for an increase in his claim, the Pension Office clerks and examiners would consider the new documents in conjunction with the old, making inquiries to the War Department and other government offices when needed. If discrepancies arose, the Pension Office would examine the case more deeply, at times sending a special examiner to question witnesses.<sup>27</sup>

In Francis Schmidtmayer's case, the Pension Office either discovered discrepancies in testimony or received a mysterious letter alleging that Schmidtmayer's leg was already diseased when he enlisted, calling the validity of his claim into question. Special Examiners Isaac Bull and R. A. Ety interviewed all persons that they could locate with knowledge of Schmidtmayer's prewar and wartime health.<sup>28</sup> The special examination of Schmidtmayer's pension claim resulted in the pension office revoking its approval and requiring him to pay back the money illegally received. Yet, the veteran successfully claimed a pension in 1890 without having to appeal the

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<sup>26</sup> Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 144.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *Orders Instructions and Regulations*, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Some pension files—including Schmidtmayer's—read more like the script to a soap opera than affidavits within government documents. The special examiners' reports in Francis Schmidtmayer's Pension File allude to a threatening letter sent to Schmidtmayer and another letter received by the Commissioner of Pensions. Both alleged letters were referenced in regard to Schmidtmayer's dispute with his former Company C Captain, Victor Wolf, who sided with Schmidtmayer's ex-wife during their divorce proceedings in a complicated tangle of interests.

special examination. The difference in Schmidtmayer's pension claims can be found in the laws under which he applied. His original application, which was accepted and then revoked, had been filed in 1880. Until 1890, Union Army veterans could file only under what became known as the "Old Law," instituted in 1862 and amended by Congress several times since. When Schmidtmayer again filed for pension in 1890, he applied under the "New Law" of 1890 which did not require proof of a disability's origin in the Army.

The Civil War Pension Law of 1862 under which Schmidtmayer originally applied followed precedents set in 1776 for the compensation of disabled Revolutionary War soldiers. The reach of pre-1862 pension law, however, remained comparatively limited in scope. Early pensions provided some relief, but did not aim to provide long-term support an entire generation of veterans. Rewards, when received, could reach \$8.00 per month for total disability after the increase from \$5.00 per month in 1818. The early pension system's organization reflected its place within government priorities. The lack of a cohesive government structure during the Revolutionary War made early pension files simple collections of affidavits confirming that a soldier had indeed served in the conflict. By the War of 1812, the government had made efforts to standardize the pension process and implement the use of forms. Subsequent military campaigns resulted in an increasingly efficient pension system capable of easily handling the number of claims.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> William Henry Glasson, PhD Diss., *History of Military Pension Legislation in the United States* (Columbia University, 1900). Recent scholarship has found little reason to address the intricacies of the prewar pension systems in the United States because the post-Civil War pension system eclipsed the scale of the antebellum system so completely. Glasson, who was writing about a current political issue at the time of his publication, sought to trace its development from its infancy during the Revolutionary period. Carefully researched and frequently cited, Glasson's scholarship treats the United States' military pension system with exceptional thoroughness.

The Old Law's total disability rate of \$8.00 per month continued to provide substantial financial support to disabled veterans. The wage economy that had developed during the Market Revolution of the early-nineteenth century required cash for participation. Although some of the Company C veterans continued to engage in subsistence farming, even the most self-sufficient company members regularly hired wage workers or engaged in producing, buying, and selling necessary items created by wage labor as a part of their everyday lives. The \$96 per year of a total disability pension provided over two-thirds of a farm laborer's annual income in 1900 and over a fourth of the income earned by daring lumbermen such as Company C's David McLain.<sup>30</sup> Since pension law defined total disability as the fixation of a wrist or equivalent limitation, most pensioned veterans were able to perform some labor or otherwise contribute to their households. Congress added special rates at \$24 or more per month for severely limiting disabilities such as the loss of a hand or foot and \$72 per month for veterans who required a caretaker during the 1870s.<sup>31</sup> For impoverished Company C veterans like Jacob Aaron, a full federal pension provided a guarantee of income and some financial security. Arrears collected by applicants who claimed back pay on a disability pension from the moment of discharge provided additional benefit.

When Company C Captain Victor Wolf applied for a pension in 1856 for a back injury incurred while on drill in the Regular Army's Company "H," Fourth U. S. Artillery, he submitted a straightforward, standardized claim that was quickly processed by the War Department. Unlike

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<sup>30</sup> Samuel H. Preston and Michael R. Haines, *Fatal Years: Child Mortality in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 212-213. Preston and Haines imputed annual incomes from the 1900 Federal Census, finding that farm laborers earned about \$255 per year and lumbermen/raftsmen earned approximately \$356 annually. For an in-depth discussion of the impact of region, industry, and inflation upon wages during the nineteenth century, see also Robert A. Margo, *Wages & Labor Markets in the United States, 1820-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). *Wages & Labor Markets* uses data from civilians hired at military fortifications to adjust regression equations for the complex array of variables and unavailable data.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions, *Orders Instructions and Regulations*, 85.

his Civil War pension file and the files of his Company C comrades, Wolf's "Old War" file contained only a few documents. His company commander completed a form at the time of his discharge on October 10, 1856, establishing the origin of Wolf's disability in service. Pension office clerks added a few forms while processing his claim but did not require additional testimony from company members, neighbors, or examination by a physician.<sup>32</sup> Wolf's later Civil War comrades in Company C, for which he had served as captain, had to navigate a sea of former army officers, surgeons, and spotty records in order to establish their claims. Since many veterans applied more than ten years after discharge, they had to assemble evidence without the benefit of consulting an intact army structure. Soldiers such as Edward Homiston, a wounded eagle bearer of Company C who claimed to have avoided staying in the regimental hospital when wounded, found pension navigation especially difficult because the War Department had no record of his wartime medical conditions.<sup>33</sup> Without supporting records, pension applicants faced the difficult task of locating army personnel who were still living and able to remember events twenty years in the past.

The immense scale of the Civil War and its unexpectedly long duration created a crisis in the pension system. While the Law of July 14, 1862 differed little from the "Old War" pension laws related to the Mexican War and other conflicts, the Civil War quickly brought a greater volume and complexity to the system. Instead of a small staff of pension examiners, the office

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<sup>32</sup> Victor Wolf, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Homiston, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

quickly expanded to encompass multiple departments with a force of over two thousand clerks at its command. Pension legislation quickly escalated in complexity as legislators attempted to fix inadequacies in the system's administrative structure.<sup>34</sup> While the Pension Office slogged through thousands of cases, an increasing torrent of claims flooded into its mailboxes from aging veterans.

By 1890, veterans who had enlisted in 1861 at age 20 were just shy of 50 years old and were beginning to show the effects of age and hard labor. Aging veterans, such as Company C First Lieutenant Thomas Butler, who were not receiving a pension under the Old Law of 1862 could apply for a general disability pension under the "New Law," the Act of 1890. Under the New Law, veterans could receive a pension for disabilities not incurred in the military. By far the most liberal piece of pension legislation to date, the New Law radically expanded the pool of possible pension applicants, and drastically increased the volume of pension requests flowing into Washington, D.C.<sup>35</sup>

Between the Old Law and New Law, members of Company C had a variety of options for pursuing pension claims. Those who qualified for smaller half or quarter disability ratings of \$2 or \$4 per month under the Old Law could apply under the New Law if they believed they could prove a greater degree of impairment unrelated to their military service. Francis Schmidtmayer, whose Old Law certificate had been revoked as a false claim, received a pension under the New Law for rheumatism. Of course, since he owed money collected from his illegal

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<sup>34</sup> Theda Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System: The expansion of Benefits for Civil War Veterans," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 1 (1993): 52. For additional information regarding pre-Civil War pension laws in the United States, see William Henry Glasson, PhD Diss. (1900) *History of Military Pension Legislation in the United States*, Columbia University.

<sup>35</sup> Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 114.

claim, Schmditmayer never received the money because it was used to reimburse the government.<sup>36</sup> His fellow company member, First Lieutenant Thomas Butler, did not apply under the Old Law but sought a pension in 1892.<sup>37</sup>

The expanded legislation of 1890 did not make pursuing a claim easy, however, and the Pension Office rejected requests that failed to meet the new criteria. Thomas Butler struggled to establish that he had any ratable disability. His original claim filed in 1892 was rejected. Between 1892 and 1898, Butler submitted three separate applications. An internal-use form generated by the Pension Office in 1898 detailed Butler's claim history:

Declaration filed July 22, 1892 alleges permanent disability, not due to vicious habits, from disease of rectum and eyes.  
Declar. Apr. 28, 1896: loss of sight and hearing and ulcer of rectum.  
Declar. Nov. 18, 1898: disease of eyes, deafness, chronic diarrhea, piles, and general debility.<sup>38</sup>

Although his condition may have slightly worsened between 1892 and 1898, his approach is more characteristic of an attempt to present a sufficient combination of disabilities in his claim so that he might receive a pension and pay at a greater amount. Physicians' examination reports indicate that Butler was unable to see or hear at normal levels; however, his disabilities did not change significantly during the six years.<sup>39</sup> By adding "general debility" to his file, Butler

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<sup>36</sup> Francis Schmidtmyer, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Butler, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>38</sup> Invalid Pension in Thomas Butler, Case Files of Pension Applications.

<sup>39</sup> Physicians' Affidavits in Ibid. Butler's left eye did change some; it decreased from a rating of 30/100 to 20/100 between 1892 and 1896.

indicated his desperate attempt to receive a pension. The Pension Office clerk wrote to Butler, explaining that the office did not recognize general debility as a pensionable medical condition.<sup>40</sup>

In order to prove his case through appeals and re-applications, Butler relied upon the testimony of his fellow company members just as they had relied on him for evidence in their own cases. Butler had testified multiple times in several cases, including Jacob Aaron's, Francis Schmidtmayer's, and Victor Wolf's. Company members testified for each other so regularly that affidavits contained in pension files for Company C create a map of relationships between company members.

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<sup>40</sup> Claim for Original Pension Summary Form, Ibid.



## ENTITLEMENT AND COMPANY C RELATIONSHIPS

Company C members' testimonies indicate that the men frequently resurrected old acquaintanceships from the war in a way that required little interaction but created a network of mutual support for pension claims. Their solidarity served veterans by assisting them in navigating the pension system's increasingly complex red tape and in invoking language of entitlement. John Hill frequently testified in Francis Schmidtmayer's pension case, which is not surprising since, according to Hill, the men had been neighbors since discharge. Schmidtmayer testified to the same relationship.<sup>41</sup> However, Victor Wolf's affidavit for Schmidtmayer's application under the New Law stating that the burly ex-artillerist from Germany was the best soldier in the company and well-respected by field officers suggests that forces stronger than close friendship prompted testimony. In the earlier special examination of Schmidtmayer's first pension claim for a sore leg, Victor Wolf made clear his dislike of Schmidtmayer.<sup>42</sup> Wolf, the second captain of Company C, had not provided Schmidtmayer with an affidavit in his original 1884 claim for a sore leg because of a bitter disagreement between the two and his knowledge of Schmidtmayer's prewar medical condition. Although both men were German immigrants with pre-Civil War military experience, their comrades noted that the men did not see eye-to-eye on many matters. Schmidtmayer was charismatic and well-known among his former comrades and neighbors as a beefy, heavy-drinking man in a period when temperance was becoming

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<sup>41</sup> John Hill Affidavit in Schmidtmayer, Case Files of Pension Applications.

<sup>42</sup> Victor Wolf Affidavit in Ibid.

progressively more popular. Wolf, a stickler for rules, order, and company loyalty, answered Special Examiner Isaac Bull's question about whether the men were on speaking terms with the curt reply, "No we have not I dont want anything to do with him."<sup>43</sup> Wolf did his best to skewer Schmditmayer's character by alleging that company gossip had it that he had purposely prevented his leg from healing so that he could receive discharge from his position as a non-commissioned officer and become a commissioned officer in another unit.<sup>44</sup>

Although Wolf's sudden change of attitude toward Schmidtmayer in pension documents may have had some relation to the settling of their dispute, the glowing words with which Wolf testified about Schmidtmayer suggests that more than personal relationships contributed to the type of testimony provided. While Wolf needed only to establish the severity of Schmidtmayer's disability from rheumatism in his affidavit, he provided an entire paragraph regarding Schmidtmayer's exemplariness as a soldier. He testified that, "the said Schmidtmayer was an excellent soldier and I could depend on him...and he performed some noble work for his adopted country. And was the best in the Regiment. And he was respected by all of the Field Officers in said Regiment"<sup>45</sup> Victor Wolf's praise for Schmidtmayer follows the almost-formulaic pattern for entitlement-laced testimony found throughout Company "C's" pension files.

Despite the pension law requirements that claimants needed to prove only that they had either a ratable disability from the service or, after 1890, a disability of any origin other than intemperate behavior, Company C members frequently spoke about their comrades' conduct as soldiers. In addition to Wolf's praise for his former enemy, the captain endorsed David McLain's

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<sup>43</sup> Victor Wolf Deposition (1884) in Schmidtmayer, Case Files for Pension Applications.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Victor Wolf Affidavit in Schmidtmayer.

worthiness for pension: “Before said sickness at Young’s Point said soldier was a remarkable strong healthy man, and an excellent soldier.”<sup>46</sup> Victor Wolf again offered praise for a comrade when he declared Dighton Smith, “A good, faithful soldier” in his 1887 affidavit.<sup>47</sup> J. B. Demarest’s affidavit employs exactly the same four words to describe Smith’s service.<sup>48</sup>

The pension office did not require any indication of whether a soldier’s comrades believed that he was a good soldier or even entitled to a pension. Just as witnesses offered their uninvited thoughts about a veteran’s conduct while in the Army, they also expressed the belief that claimants were entitled to a pension. Although he had no way of knowing if the pension examiners would consider his personal opinions about the case, Myron Briggs added in his affidavit for Homiston’s Old Law application: “I will say that he is in bad Shape on account of something and I think entitled to a pension.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, after offering details regarding the extent of Dighton Smith’s postwar incapacitation, J. B. Demarest closed his affidavit with the statement that “I have known the [claimant] well and personally and know he is a very worthy applicant for pension.”<sup>50</sup> Most vividly, Thomas Butler, the First Lieutenant of Company C, expressed frustration in his reply to a letter from the Commissioner of Pensions requesting

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<sup>46</sup> Victor Wolf Affidavit in David McLain, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>47</sup> Victor Wolf Affidavit (1887) in Dighton Smith pension file, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>48</sup> J. B. Demarest Affidavit (1887) in Dighton Smith, Case Files for Pension Applications.

<sup>49</sup> Myron Briggs Reply (1888) in Edward Homiston, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>50</sup> J. B. Demarest Affidavit (1887) in Dighton Smith, Case Files for Pension Applications.

clarification in Edward Homiston's case: "I see that it is very hard to establish his claim to a Pension But in my opinion he is deserving one."<sup>51</sup> Butler's statement implies that the pension office had not dispensed justice in Homiston's case and indicates a belief that his comrades, rather than the pension office, would be better judges. By 1888, when Butler penned his reply to the Commissioner of Pensions, veterans across the country were voicing their frustration with the Old Law pension system. The rising tide of entitlement, an active party patronage system, and an embarrassingly large federal surplus culminated in passage of the 1890 law, which established the precedent that the government owed any soldier, regardless of the origin of his disability, assistance if he required it.<sup>52</sup>

Civil War pension file references to entitlement often blend into testimony oriented toward legal questions. Men usually testified in stilted, somber language that addressed the questions required for proof of pensionable disability. Non-notarized testimonies written by the soldiers in their own handwriting without a witness' signature contain some of the most direct petitions for a fellow company member's entitlement to pension. When the pension office required additional information from a veteran about his fellow company member, responses were not made as sworn statements but as a reply to correspondence. Replies offer some of the most unguarded language present in the pension files and tend to include judgments about the claimant's ailment that do not appear in the formulaic legalese typical of affidavits.

Dighton Smith's letter to the Commissioner of Pensions dated March 13, 1888, answered the commissioner's questions about Charles Wheeler's illnesses while in the army. In phonetic

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Butler Reply (1888) in Edward Homiston pension file.

<sup>52</sup> For more information regarding the radical nature of the 1890 law, see Skocpol (1992) and (1993).

spelling, Smith closed his letter: “As long az I can recklect he never recoverd from the Dezez. Charley waz agood soldier and left hiz wife in poor surcumstance I think she aut to have sum help.”<sup>53</sup> His inclusion of Wheeler’s soldiering abilities within testimony about the veteran’s condition and his widow’s poverty indicate that Smith was invoking the language of entitlement within his testimony while appealing to the sympathy of the Commissioner who was himself a veteran. Notions of the federal government’s obligation to care for veterans who sacrificed their strong masculine bodies for the benefit of the nation ring throughout Smith’s proclamation. In his understanding of justice, the government had a duty to serve as breadwinner for Wheeler’s widow in the soldier’s absence.

A veteran’s impending death similarly resulted in witnesses urging the pension office to consider a soldier’s entitlement to a claim. In cases in which a veteran’s physical condition had deteriorated alarmingly, testimonies appeal to the human emotions and reasoning of pension office examiners—many of whom were also veterans—as well as addressing the legal burden of proof. Since pension examiners adjudicated claims by comparing them to a standard of criteria set forth within pension legislation, witnesses’ editorializing about a fellow veteran’s worthiness for pension served no legal purpose. Yet, Thomas West chose to include a statement about the urgency of his neighbor and fellow Company C veteran, Charles Phillips’ near-death condition. Following the proclamation that Phillips’ family had called upon West at least once to lay him out for a wake because they thought he was dead, he noted the urgency of the situation: “I do not think he will last many days I would not be surprised to be called in any time to lay him out. I am

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<sup>53</sup> Dighton Smith Statement in Charles McFait (A.K.A. Charles Wheeler), Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

look for it any time now.”<sup>54</sup> West’s statement follows from the widespread belief among Company C veterans that a dying former soldier ought to receive the official promise of a pension before his death.

Because Company C members regarded their peers as being entitled to pensions and frequently struggled to establish their claims through military records, they assisted one another in pursuing claims, even to the extent of offering testimony without any exact personal knowledge of the case. Most Company C pensioners applied at least fifteen years after discharge and, in many cases, could rely only upon fellow company members’ recollections for proof that their disability originated in the service. Official company records did not always reflect the reality of soldiers’ experiences due to inadequate preservation of records, clerical errors, or omission. In Company C, Edward Homiston incurred a hernia as a result of a hard fall while carrying the company’s famous live eagle Old Abe in a charge on Vicksburg in 1863. Homiston’s position as eagle bearer exempted him from some of regular soldiers’ duties such as serving as a picket or guard. Whereas another soldier may have been required to report to the hospital so that he could be excused from hard duty, Homiston was allowed to ride in the company’s support wagon during marches and did not have to serve the remainder of his term in the unpleasant confines of the hospital as an attendant. Unfortunately for Homiston, his special duty meant that he had no hospital records to provide in his claim decades later and had to rely upon the evidence provided in Company C members’ testimonies.

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas West Affidavit in Charles Phillips, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

Thomas Butler and other Company C members' recollections of Homiston's fall seem plausible because, as eagle bearer, he was a highly-visible man in the line of battle. Yet, when Company C members testified about their comrades' less visible and less memorable injuries or illnesses, their affidavits contain information as specific as in Homiston's case. With 120 men serving in Company C during the war, and pension claims associated with 83 of them, Company C members testified as if they had exceptional memories.

The case of Jacob Aaron's damaged finger, which was sent for review by a special examiner, indicates that Company C members did freely testify to incidents beyond their direct memory or knowledge. Just nine days shy of 34 years after an alleged wound to Jacob Aaron's finger, former Company C Sergeant Myron Briggs recalled exactly how Aaron received the wound "while crossing a deep trench near Jackson Miss." In the confusion of attempting to maintain a line of battle while making a charge, Briggs continued, "he recd [received] a bayonet wound through his left hand between first and second fingers of said left hand." Furthermore, Briggs maintained "that he was not aided by any written or printed statement made by any other person."<sup>55</sup> After more than three decades, Briggs alleged that he could not only remember the small injury received by one man of over one hundred in the company, but the exact place where the bayonet had jabbed him. Former Private Charles Strasburg and First Lieutenant Thomas Butler echoed Briggs' detail in their own statements, with Strasburg adding that Aaron had taken three weeks to recover and Butler citing a "deformity and loss of power" as a result.

Special Examiner Etty's report offers an explanation for Briggs, Strasburg, and Butler's remarkably detailed memories. Etty advised the Commissioner of Pensions that "I am pretty well

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<sup>55</sup> Myron Briggs Affidavit in Jacob Aaron, Case Files of Pension Applications.

satisfied that most of their information as to origin of wound has been gained from claimant in recent years.” Through his investigation, Etty found that Jacob Aaron had regaled his former company members with the story about his finger scar when he met them in Eau Claire.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Etty concluded that none of Aaron’s fellow soldiers who were still living in 1897 had seen the incident occur.

The most telling piece of evidence addressing how Company C members regarded their testimony is the deposition of Thomas Butler taken by Special Examiner Ernest Young during his investigation. After Butler explained to Young that he had seen the wound only after the unit converged on the other side of the ditch, Young inquired about how he knew exactly how Aaron was wounded in his earlier affidavit. The initial portion of Butler’s response to the question appears unremarkable. Aaron and his pension agent, F. M. Buck, both wrote to Butler requesting an affidavit related to Aaron’s finger injury. However, when Young showed Butler his old affidavit, Butler’s response was illuminating.

I see the affidavit in this case made September, 1897, and signed by me. It is not in my hand-writing....It is in the hand-writing of Buck of Eau Claire. I had made one and sent Buck, but it did not suit him. Was not specific enough or something like that. And then he wrote this one and sent it to me. I do not remember the details now, but as he had it in I left it. And I may have remembered it then.<sup>57</sup>

When Butler provided his affidavit to Aaron and Buck, he was working as a hotel book keeper and responding to an unending stream of requests for testimony from his fellow Company C veterans. Re-writing his testimony for N. M. Buck or refusing to do so would have taken more of

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<sup>56</sup> R. A. Etty Report in Jacob Aaron pension file.

<sup>57</sup> Deposition of Thomas Butler in Jacob Aaron, Case Files of Pension Applications.



his time and could have impacted how other company members testified in Butler's case. After all, Aaron had provided evidence in Butler's case more than a decade earlier.<sup>58</sup>

Etty and Young's discovery of veterans' exaggerating their recollections or testifying to events not within their personal knowledge impacted only two claims and did not involve the scrutiny of other company members' applications. Because there are only a few cases among Company C members in which the pension office chose to follow up affidavits by questioning the witnesses, there is no indication from pension office records how widespread members' exaggerated or unfounded testimony may have been. Its frequency and scale often must be inferred based upon examination of the language veterans used when they testified for one another.

Most of the 29 Company C members who returned to Eau Claire and Chippewa counties after discharge were aware of one another's presence in the area and encountered each other occasionally even if they did not associate on a regular basis. When Victor Wolf explained to Special Examiner Bull why Francis Schmidtmayer's not asking him for an affidavit was indicative of intentional fraud, he immediately referenced their residence in Eau Claire. Wolf told the examiner that Schmidtmayer had gone to him about his leg before enlistment and therefore "never asked me to sign his papers although we both lived in Eau Claire at the time and was near enough so he could have seen me most any day."<sup>59</sup>

A core of Company C men lived in the Chippewa Valley and regularly provided evidence for their comrades' applications. As the captain, Victor Wolf was the most frequent affiant, with

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Butler, Case Files of Pension Applications.

<sup>59</sup> Deposition "G" of Victor Wolf (1884) in Francis Schmidtmayer, Case Files of Pension Applications.

First Lieutenant Thomas Butler as the second, but their fellow Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls residents frequently provided their assistance in cases. Jacob Aaron, John Hill, and Myron Briggs each testified in over a dozen separate cases and received testimony from other Eau Claire men in support of their own applications. Thomas Butler and Martin Dickersheid worked together, according to Dickersheid, who noted, “we were discharged at the same time and came home together. Have seen him every day since until he moved to Minnesota [in the late 1870s].”<sup>60</sup> Unlike Butler, Stephen Canfield of the Union Township in Eau Claire County returned home in such poor health that he could not venture into Eau Claire under his own strength on a regular basis. None of the Company C members who testified in his case mentioned keeping in regular contact with him, yet, at least four Eau Claire men provided evidence and indicated that they were vaguely aware of his poor condition. Myron Briggs knew Canfield prior to enlistment, but between Canfield’s discharge and Briggs’ 1885 affidavit, Briggs explained that “i have nown little about him.” Neither Briggs nor his fellow witnesses indicated any interest in rekindling the past friendship. Still, Briggs invoked language of entitlement on Canfield’s behalf: “while in the servis i thought him a good Soldier in all respects and i think desirving of a small pention.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Martin Dickersheid answer to questionnaire in Thomas Butler, Case Files of Pension Applications.

<sup>61</sup> Myron Briggs Affidavit in Stephen Canfield, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

## THE GAR AND COMPANCY C

Grand Army of the Republic histories concentrate upon Civil War veterans supporting one another in the postwar period by political lobbying, fraternal ties, and charity within the organization rather than aid through individual relationships. Company C members flocked to the GAR in the 1880s when the organization experienced a resurgence in membership. In 1879, five Company C men, Myron Briggs, Thomas Hill Victor Wolf, J. B. Demarest, and George Lenz were among the chartering members of Eagle Post 52 in Eau Claire.<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, Company C Eagle Post members frequently supported each other's pension claims and received support from other post members.

GAR participation, though useful, was not a requirement for receiving supporting testimony from fellow company members. While inclusion in Chippewa Valley or Department of Wisconsin posts did provide Company C members with regular access to one another, the opportunity to bond through the fraternal culture, and the use of the GAR's *National Telegraph* newspaper to find lost connections, it was not a prerequisite for pension application support. Company C itself became a reunion organization which met starting in 1887, and, unlike the GAR, did not require any formal application process or dues.<sup>63</sup> Service in the Eagle Company of the Eighth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry determined membership. With few exceptions, Company C survivors gathered in Eau Claire in selected years to take part in several days of

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas J. McCrory, *The Grand Army of the Republic: Department of Wisconsin* (Black Earth, Wisconsin: Trails Books, 2005), 155.

<sup>63</sup> "Veterans Meet Again: Survivors of C Company, Eighth Wisconsin, Join In A Social Reunion," *The Eau Claire News*, October 15, 1887.

eating, parades, and reminiscing. Men swapped stories of their injuries, a favorite being John Hill's remarkable survival after he was shot in the chest and landed sprawled for hours under a firing cannon during the battle of Corinth because his comrades presumed him dead.<sup>64</sup> If not already familiar with the reason for Hill's deafness, any company member present at the reunion would have heard the tale, and possibly been able to recount it in an affidavit if needed.

In an area where many company members encountered one another as neighbors, individuals conducting business, and going about daily life, many different aspects of their identities informed pension file testimony. Martin Dickersheid and Thomas Butler worked together daily for nearly twenty years after the war. Their burial in the same Catholic cemetery in Chippewa Falls suggests that Andrew Brown and J. B. Demarest were acquainted with another as members of the close-knit Catholic community.<sup>65</sup> The establishment of GAR posts in the Chippewa Valley in 1879 and early 1880s, the formation of a permanent Company C reunion organization, and the resurrection of national interest in the war prompted members to invoke veteran status as part of their public identity. The resurgence of interest in the Civil War and liberalizing pension legislation spurred an increase in pension applications from Company C members during the same period. However, Company C members provided testimony for each other earlier during the 1870s and began to invoke language of entitlement during the same period.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Full story in John Hill pension file.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Dickersheid, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. Butler, Case Files of Pension Applications. Brown, Case Files of Pension Applications. J. B. Demarest, Case Files of Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

Testimony indicates that many veterans did not remain active in one another's lives beyond the 1865-1870 period in which Company C members settled into civilian life, forming families, and establishing careers. The daily concerns associated with career and family overtook veterans' lives as they reintegrated into society during the years immediately following the war. Although some continued close friendships and visited with one another multiple times per week as they had in the prewar period, most fell into casual acquaintanceships or ceased contact before the early 1870s. Ties created among Company C members through the common experience and culture of soldiering faded in the civilian world. Company C members' participation in the network of pension evidence required an effort to reconnect with former comrades to ask for support. Veterans, influenced by a rising sense of entitlement, helped one another pursue pension claims by providing affirmative testimony after many years without permanently resurrecting wartime ties or forming new friendships.

## LIMITS TO TESTIMONY

Despite a mutual interest in aiding each other's pension claims, the members of Company C did set limits to their willingness to testify for one another. Blatantly spurious claims and repeated requests for non-existent additional information provoked ire or led to loss of support from company members. In his 1900 reply to a letter from the Commissioner of Pensions requesting additional information regarding Jacob Aaron's hand injury, J. B. Demarest exasperatedly scrawled back:

The only way I can fix the matter any different from what I did before is to get some one else to write it for me. It was all in my own hand writing before and it is in my hand writing now and all that I knew about it then is all I know about it now and that is that. He jabbed his Bayonet in his hand during the charge before Jackson Miss when crossing a deep ditch – the date I don't remember but if you will look up the Co records I think you will find all the dates much easier than I can remember them.<sup>66</sup>

Jacob Aaron's finger case also provoked a trivializing response and lost support from Thomas Butler who had previously offered to his comrade an affidavit complete with declaration of Aaron's worthiness as a soldier as support for his pension claim for chronic diarrhea. In the first case, Butler's letter of reply to the Commissioner of Pensions' 1883 inquiry vouched that he had "known him since he came home most of the time, having lived within six miles of his place He is now and has been for the last thirteen years an invalid and still suffering with his old complaint Chronic Diarhoe."<sup>67</sup> He emphasized the validity of Aaron's application, proclaiming,

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<sup>66</sup> J. B. Demarest reply to Commission of Pensions' letter (1900) in Jacob Aaron pension file.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Butler Reply to Letter from Commissioner of Pensions (1883) in Jacob Aaron pension file.

“I have before made affidavit in this matter. I now think as I then stated that he is entitled to a pension and trust he will get it.<sup>68</sup> However, Butler’s willingness to vouch for Aaron ceased when questioned thoroughly by Special Examiner Etty regarding another of Aaron’s requests for pension increase. The ex-officer’s tone turned surprisingly dismissive as he answered a question about his knowledge of Jacob Aaron’s finger wound claim:

Ohh his finger – yes, he hurt his finger. It was when we were making our advance on Jackson, Miss., and I think in 1863. He carelessly scratched it in some way....It was not a matter apparently of any consequence at that time. I do not recollect whether it was his finger or his hand, nor do I remember which hand it was. I do not remember whether he suffered with it after that or whether it kept him off duty.<sup>69</sup>

As a result of Butler’s deposition, the special examiner concluded that Aaron’s claim was spurious and lacked merit. The reviewer in Aaron’s 1903 appeal case cited as much in his decision, writing, “If it occurred in the service, he must have regarded it of very little importance and as not having any disabling effects from the fact that when he filed his first application for a pension June 9, 1880.”<sup>70</sup> Through his summary, the assistant secretary implied that Aaron’s claim was little more than an effort to extract extra money from the pension system.

Likewise, the clear lack of merit in Francis Schmidtmayer’s claim for a sore leg prompted several of his fellow company members to show no inclination to conspire in his support when the pension office considered revoking his certificate. As shown in the many cases of affiants exhibiting remarkable abilities for memory, Company C members had some toleration for exaggeration, but Francis Schmidtmayer’s special examination indicated that his claim exceeded that tolerance for several company members. While John Hill, a good friend and

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Butler Reply to Letter from Commissioner of Pensions (1883) in Jacob Aaron pension file.

<sup>69</sup> Deposition of Thomas Butler by Ernest Young in Jacob Aaron pension file.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. (Appeal regarding claim, Jacob Aaron).

neighbor of Schmidtmayer's who saw him several times per week, asserted to Special Examiner Etty that Schmidtmayer was "sound and able bodied," his brother, Thomas Hill, explained otherwise. He replied to Special Examiner Etty that at the time of enlistment, he had heard second-hand that Schmidtmayer would be rejected for a sore on his leg if the mustering officer chose to inspect recruits carefully.<sup>71</sup> Gabriel Gebhardt recalled seeing the ulcerated leg during their time together as lumbermen and described its location and size for Special Examiner Etty.<sup>72</sup>

Company C members' testimonies for one another contain evidence that the veterans' reputations benefited from assisting their comrades if they did not push the truth so far as to discredit themselves. Close personal connections, such as John Hill's with Francis Schmidtmayer may have raised the stakes of loyalty and prompted him to "forget" about any discussions he might have had with his brother about Schmidtmayer's prewar leg wound. The pension office placed greater credibility upon Thomas Hill's and Gabriel Gebhardt's statements, rating them as having "fair" reputations.<sup>73</sup> All three men provided affidavits in other cases, and their answers in Schmidtmayer's case could have had an impact upon how the pension office judged their other statements.

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas Hill Deposition (1884) in Francis Schmidtmayer pension file.

<sup>72</sup> Gabriel Gebhardt Deposition (1884) in Francis Schmidtmayer pension file.

<sup>73</sup> R. A. Etty Special Examination Report (1884) in Francis Schmidtmayer pension file.



## CONCLUSION

Postwar interactions among the Civil War veterans of Company C, Eighth Wisconsin Infantry pension files reflect the unique brand of fraternal patriotism which grew out of the Civil War and rapidly changing beliefs about the federal government's obligations to its veterans. Prior to the liberalizing Civil War pension legislation first enacted in 1879, veteran pensions provided compensation as part of a system in which soldiers risked their lives for the good of the country with only a basic financial safety net in return. The scale of the Civil War and the postwar redefinition of citizenship, nationhood, and government obligation created a perfect storm of pension demands. Former volunteer soldiers of Company C began to view their enlistment as part of a reciprocal relationship in which the federal government would provide benefits based upon service rather than as insurance for families whose breadwinner died or became incapacitated in conflict.

When Stephen Canifield's comrades readily pronounced him a good soldier and deserving of a pension without having witnessed his physical condition in years, they revealed and acted according to a nascent belief of government obligation held by many veterans. The belief of entitlement to pensions based upon service was prevalent enough among Company C veterans that those who had lost connection in the postwar period did not hesitate to invoke its perceived power in their testimonies or stretch the truth to ensure justice according to their new individual views of obligation. While GAR ties and the postwar company organization formed a web of support for pension applications that relied heavily upon testimony from acquaintances,

neighbors, and former comrades, language played a larger role in the pension process. By tacitly agreeing to support applications with exaggerated evidence for worthy applicants and to invoke language declaring government obligation, Company C members redefined their relationship with the federal government via the pension system and, in some cases, effectively used stretched testimony to place otherwise ineligible men in pensionable circumstances.

As interest groups, politicians, bureaucrats, voters, and members of society struggled to make sense of the new duties which the government held toward its people, the question of who deserved assistance remained hotly debated. Ultimately, Civil War veterans refused to expand their notion of veteran organization membership and government obligation to include Spanish-American War and World War One veterans, arguing that their Civil War service marked them differently. The beliefs of entitlement with which Civil War veterans pursued pensions for themselves and their comrades created a moment in American history in which members of a large, vociferous, and politically powerful group redefined the meaning of government obligation at the individual level, adding variegation and nuance.

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