A New Voice

The Undiscovered Histories of the Frederick C. Douglass Ledgers

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HIST 4000

December 7, 2011

Frederick C. Douglass, an African American lawyer in late 19th century Eastern North Carolina, kept meticulous records of his Union Soldier pension applicants’ claims. These records included the personal testimonies of widows, family members and surviving veterans. While at the time these testimonies were viewed as just one requirement in the process of attaining a pension, Douglass was actually creating a collection of histories, that a century and a half later, would provide a window into the lives of the Unites States Colored Troops and the slave community in pre and post-war Eastern North Carolina.

In 1862 the United States government began to realize the staggering number of casualties that the Civil War was bringing. It established a pension system providing money for widows of fallen soldiers, or mothers who had been dependent on their sons. After the war the government expanded the program to allow dependent children, as well as living soldiers who had been injured as a cause of their service in the Union army to apply for pensions. An important part of the process of applying for a pension involved providing proof that a soldier had indeed fought as a Union soldier, and that he had died, or had become disabled as a result of his service. Mothers, wives and children who applied for pensions were required to prove their relations to fallen soldiers in addition to providing proof of their relatives’ service and death. The pension program was designed to be equal for both black and white soldiers, but the burden of providing proof created a strong disadvantage for black soldiers and their relatives when applying for pensions.

In 1890 the government expanded the pension program by nullifying the requirement that a soldier’s disability had to be a result of his time in the service.[[1]](#footnote-1) The largest problem facing black applicants in the pension process was that they generally had a difficult time producing evidence of their claim when the Pension Bureau required it in an official, documented form. [[2]](#footnote-2) This could include documents such as marriage licenses or birth certificates which many former slaves had never acquired. In addition to the obstacles created by the absence of documentation, black pension applicants also had to contend with government officials and officers of the court who had lived their entire lives in a world that believed slaves were unreliable and dishonest. Because of this, black veterans and their families started the pension application process with the cards stacked against them. This would cause many black soldiers not to apply at all.

One of the problems African American veterans had when establishing their service in the Union army or navy was that they had often changed their last names from the time they enlisted to the time of application for a pension. Former slaves typically enlisted under their former masters’ last names. After the war was over they took other surnames to create their own identities as freemen.[[3]](#footnote-3) This also became a problem for members of the same family who took different last names after the war when trying to establish proof of relation in cases of a son or father of a soldier claiming their pensions. Another problem with proving identity was that illiterate African Americans could not correct enlistment clerks when they misspelled their names. This created false identities that had to be explained when applying for pensions.[[4]](#footnote-4) In some cases slaves who had run away to join the army or navy had enlisted under false names to avoid being captured by their owners, making it almost impossible to prove they had served in a war that had no record of their real names.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When applying for pensions applicants were required to provide documentation of medical treatment for their injuries or illnesses if they had been sustained while in service. This proved a greater burden for black veterans who had been in regiments with poor medical service. During the Civil War few black regiments had a full staff of medical attendants. Policy stated that “each regiment should have one surgeon and two assistant surgeons.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Most available medical attendants were already in use in the U.S army in 1863 when most black regiments were first being formed.[[7]](#footnote-7) Some assistant surgeons applied for transfer to the new black regiments in order to gain promotion to full surgeon. However, there were often not enough applicants, and the surgeons placed in black regiments were men who had not been given positions in white regiments because of their “poor qualifications.”[[8]](#footnote-8) As it became more difficult to fill the positions of medical attendants in black regiments, the standards and requirements were lowered. In some cases positions of surgeons and assistant surgeons were filled by medical students who had not yet earned their degrees. Even worse, some positions were filled by hospital stewards whose only medical experience was “maintaining and dispensing drugs.”[[9]](#footnote-9) These conditions led not only to poor treatment of black soldiers, but also to poor documentation of the treatment they did receive.

It became especially difficult for African American veterans to obtain pensions in cases of chronic illnesses. There was a “degree of trust” in place when awarding pensions to veterans with illnesses such as rheumatism, malaria or chronic diarrhea because there was often a lack of medical documentation to prove that they had been contracted while serving.[[10]](#footnote-10) The majority of white government officials and clerks of court that African American veterans had to convince of their chronic illnesses believed that blacks and former slaves were unreliable and not trustworthy. The lack of documentation meant that the officials had to base the approval of the veteran’s pensions on their word. This was an issue of honor, a sign of character most southern, and one that many northern officials did not attribute to blacks. White veterans were also much more likely to have documentation of being treated for an illness than blacks. Frustrated with the increasing number of ill soldiers and high mortality rates, “some medical officers accused blacks of feigning sickness in much the same way that masters and overseers accused slaves of shirking work.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Obtaining pensions for chronic illnesses became somewhat easier after Congress passed a bill in 1890 allowing pensions for disabilities and illnesses contracted after a veteran’s service had ended, because they only had to provide medical evidence that the they had the illness, not that they had contracted it while enlisted.

The Frederick C. Douglass papers are spread throughout three different collections in East Carolina University’s Special Collections at Joyner Library. They include ledgers of recorded statements made by African American pension applicants and witnesses, taken in the years 1887-1896.[[12]](#footnote-12) The first collection of Frederick C. Douglass’s ledgers was found at an antique shop in Greenville, N.C. The man in charge of Special Collections at ECU at the time, Donald R. Lennon, was able to persuade the shop’s owner, Richard E. Rogers, to give them to East Carolina University. Later on, Mr. Lennon was able to obtain a few more of Douglass’s ledgers from an antiques dealer in Kinston, N.C, named William L. Horner. After donating the Douglass ledgers to East Carolina University’s special collections Mr. Horner explained that he had obtained the ledgers from a vacant house in New Bern, N.C. Mr. Lennon found an address for Frederick Douglass and traveled to New Bern, only to find the house vacant and unlocked. He actually found a few more ledgers that had been abandoned at the house. He then did some research and found that the woman who owned the house had lived in Brooklyn, N.Y and had passed away. He was later contacted by her nephew, Thomas A. Johnson, who donated the final collection of Frederick C. Douglass’ ledgers to the Special Collections at East Carolina University’s Joyner Library.

Most applicants lived in Craven county and surrounding North Carolina counties before the Civil War. They fled to Union-occupied New Bern after it fell to Union forces in 1862 where they enlisted in the United States army. All of the testimonies recorded are of African American applicants or witnesses, and they are all represented by the attorney Frederick C. Douglass. Douglass was a black lawyer, minister and teacher in New Bern, North Carolina during the late 19th century. During the 1880s and 1890s he handled the pension applications of many blacks who had served in the U.S army and navy during the Civil War. The majority of pension applicants dealt with a “claims agent” throughout the process of their claim. These agents served as intermediaries between the claimants and the attorneys representing them. They were usually local attorneys representing larger law firms in Washington, D.C that specialized in Civil War pension claims.[[13]](#footnote-13) Claims agents would sometimes misrepresent, falsify, or conceal facts in an effort to secure a claim for an applicant who might not actually be eligible, or to gain a larger pension than was actually warranted. This would usually hinder the application, and was only done to try and gain more money for the claims agents or law firms themselves. Douglass does not appear to have been a claims agent, but a private attorney. No records in Frederick C. Douglass’ ledgers appear to be initial applications. All applicants already have claim numbers, and many testimonies make mention of how many years they have been waiting to receive their pension. Because they were illiterate, many black applicants would have been unable to apply for a pension at all without the help of a claims agent or an attorney. These testimonies provide examples of the effort African American veterans and their dependents made to prove they were worthy of a pension.

Many of the records in the Frederick C. Douglass papers contain several different witness testimonies for one applicant.[[14]](#footnote-14) Most of these testimonies were recorded on the same day, sometimes by people who lived in towns ten miles away or further. The majority of black veterans living in North Carolina after the Civil War were former slaves. They were mostly very poor, and had to work long hours to support themselves and their families. It would have been a large monetary burden on family and friends to travel to another town to give testimony. Veterans and their dependents often hired local attorneys to handle their pension claims. These attorneys would sometimes travel to take down the different witness testimonies, but the applicant would be charged for the travel expenses. Either way, it ended up being a financial burden on the applicant or those acting as witnesses for them.

One witness’s account is taken for the claim of Lewis Herring who served in Company E. 35th Regiment of the U.S.C.R. The Witness, a Mr. Davis, made a sworn statement of Lewis Herring’s service, injury, and illness. He states:

I knew him (Herring) before he came of age 8 or 10 years before the war. I have seen him pretty much all the time since. He enlisted the same time that I did…..he had diarrhea and piles from drinking bad water…..and rheumatism from laying out all night in snow and ice…he was shot in the shoulder….had smallpox very bad...he is 2/3 disabled from manual labor.[[15]](#footnote-15)

There are two more testimonies from men that had enlisted with him providing almost identical facts. It becomes clear in reading the testimonies in this collection that the large majority of living black veterans applying for pensions claim to have diarrhea and piles, as well as rheumatism, all from “drinking bad water” or being exposed to the cold all night. These are examples of the chronic illnesses that were so difficult for black veterans to prove they had contracted while serving. The witness accounts are meant to provide proof in place of medical documentation that most likely did not exist.

The claimants and those that provided testimonies for them had no way of knowing that the information they were providing would one day be a valuable historical source. Many of the soldiers provide firsthand accounts of their time in service. One of these soldiers was Dennis Wordsworth. Dennis’s testimony tells the story of how he came to be wrongly imprisoned for the majority of his service. He enlisted a free man, as a Sergeant of Co. A 14th Regiment U.S.C Heavy Artillery.[[16]](#footnote-16) He makes the following testimony:

I had run a farm two years prior to my enlistment on one George Perry’s land about 4 miles from New Bern, N.C. I enlisted Sergeant in Company A 14th Regiment U.S.C Heavy Artillery. I hired a man to take charge of my crop and attend to it and when Mr. George Perry found out that I had enlisted in the Union army he stopped my man from work and told him that “No damn Negro that enlisted the Union army should farm on his land.” I went to my officers and asked to give me a pass or permission to go and get my horses and produce and farming utensils, and they gave me permission to go to Perry with six of my men of my company under the order of my Capt. Mr. George Perry ordered me off his plantation and attempted to shoot me. I went back and told my officers. Mr. George Perry came down and saw General Palmer and I was ordered before him. Next morning Palmer asked me what I was doing there. I told him I had got orders from my officers to go and get my things. He told me not to go out there anymore. I beg him to get my things, he would not do it. My L.M Hubbard wrote to General Butler and he sent back to Capt. James to take charge of the matter. My Captain sent me to Palmer to carry a letter to him. Capt J.H Hudson was in the office lying down drunk and he rose and taken the letter and ordered the guard to take me to jail and said that I was the damned Negro that was causing all this trouble. I was then sick just could walk and was placed and kept away from my company and regiment until……I was taken out of prison and carried home by order Major Burnstead….this was on about June 1865. I am confident that Capt. J.H Judson would not have had me placed in prison if he had not been misinformed and drunk. I never did receive any trial, just kept me there for nothing.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This account provides evidence that free blacks received a hostile reaction from the white men they rented land from when they enlisted in the Union army. It also provides evidence that white, superior officers were not likely to offer help to colored soldiers who had problems with white men outside the army. Dennis Wordsworth was kept in jail without a trial, and it appears, without ever actually being accused of anything. There are no records of Dennis Wordworth’s arrest, or the events that led to it, in the Official Records of the Union and Confederate armies. His testimony for a pension is the only evidence of his wrongful imprisonment that exists today.

As explained earlier, former slaves were unlikely to possess documents such as birth certificates or marriage licenses. In Douglass’s ledgers, Mary Sanders provides testimony for the claimants, Lewis H. Smith and Martha Clark. They were the children of the soldier Stephen Smith, but each had a different Mother. Mary Sander’s testimony shows just how complicated the families of former slaves could become. She states:

I have been personally acquainted with L.H Smith and M.E Clark from their birth. The soldier Stephen Smith, deceased, was born in Washington N.C and raised in Hyde Co. N.C. I was married to Stephen Smith, Feb. 1853 and M.C Clark was born Oct. 14 1855 and two years after marriage Stephen was sold to Currituck, Hyde Co. N.C and one year afterward I married Nathan Sanders, and Stephen married Cassandra Marm and by that marriage L.H Smith was born and his mother sold away and then married John Lucas. Stephen Smith came to Washington N.C and enlisted in U.S Army and died in army leaving two minor children to wit M.C Clark and L.H Smith. These are the only surviving children of Stephen Smith the soldier under 16 yrs of age at the time of the soldier’s death.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Mary Sander’s testimony shows how the families of former slaves could become complicated by the sale of husbands, wives, mothers and fathers. Slaves would remarry and create new families on different plantations. Not only does her testimony provide an example of how slave families were often complicated by being torn apart, it also provides a family history. Many African Americans tracing their ancestry hit a wall once their research extends back past when the census first included African Americans. Several testimonies in the Frederick C. Douglass ledgers, similar to Mary Sanders’, provide family histories that extend into the past much farther than the census records, containing information that cannot be found anywhere else.

Some of the claims in the Douglass ledgers are for bounty claims. These claims are for the pay that a soldier never received for his service. Sometimes widows would claim these on behalf of their deceased husbands, or Mothers on behalf of deceased sons. One of these Mothers was Rhoda Sparrow. To aide her claim she had a Mrs. Emily Claypool provide testimony on her behalf. Mrs. Claypool’s statement was as follows:

Rhoda Sparrow and her children belonged to my Grandmother Henrietta Sparrow of Swift Creek, Craven Co. N.C with whom I lived from early childhood up until before the late war. That said, Rhoda Sparrow had a large number of children among whom was one man, Matthew Sparrow who, during the late war, fell into the hands of the Union army.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Emily Claypool’s testimony is proof that there were circumstances when former slave owners, or members of their families reached out to help their former slaves. Another example of former owners helping their former slaves can be found in the testimony of pension applicants Laura and Louisa Simmons. They were the surviving children of the deceased soldier, Robert Simmons. In their testimony they state:

We were born on the plantation of George W. Ward, Swansboro N.C. Our mother Caroline Simmons also lived their till she died, belonging to G.W Ward. An affidavit of his is on file in the Pension Department dated June 26, 1889. Mr. G.W Ward told us that father and mother married in 1850 by his consent, lived together, and were considered man and wife by owner and neighbors till the death of mother. Five children of the soldier by Caroline Simmons to wit Jane, Louisa, Stephen and Thomson Simmons only legitimate children of the soldier. Our father died near Ft. Harrison V.A Sept. 8, 1864. We are unable to give the age of father but were told by our owners that he was 38 at enlistment, 5 ft. 9 in. high, black and a farmer.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This testimony provides another example of the family histories these ledgers contain as well as the historical evidence of the former slave owners coming to the aide of their former slaves.

An example of the claim of the son of a deceased veteran is found in the record of a Mr. Armeny (first name is illegible).[[21]](#footnote-21) He is seeking the pension of his deceased father, Chester Armeny. His mother is deceased and he is the only living child. Henry James provides a testimony stating that Mr. Armeny is Chester Armeny’s son. A Mr. S. Johnson also provides the following sworn statement as witness for Mr. Armeny:

Under Special Act of Legislature I remarried Chester and Frances Armeny Sept. 1866, and Dec. 10, 1869 a child was born to them they named him (illegible) Armeny. Chester Armeny married Frances Armeny before the war by consent of owners and they have always lived together as man and wife and were regarded as such by all who knew them. They had no other children.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This is an example of a situation where there was most likely a lack of documentation of the marriage of Chester Armeny and his wife, as well as the birth of their son. There is no mention of how long this claim had been pending, but it is possible that it had been marked for special examination. A large percentage of African American pension files “contain at least one instance of ‘special examination’”.[[23]](#footnote-23) This examination occurred when the Pension Bureau felt they needed more evidence than had been provided by the applicant. The Bureau would send a “special examiner” to record sworn testimony of witnesses and applicants, and would then have them send their findings back to Washington to be reviewed.[[24]](#footnote-24) The sworn statement in Armeny’s claim about his parent’s marriage and his birth may have been the result of such an examination. This is also one of many claims in the Douglass ledgers that provide historical evidence of slaves being married by consent of their owners.

There are also several examples of witnesses making sworn statements attesting to the marriage of deceased soldiers to their. Most slaves were not allowed to marry unless they obtained permission from their owners, as Chester and Frances Armeny did. Even with the permission of owners, there was typically no legal documentation of the marriage. Family and friends provided the only proof that the marriage had existed. Peggie Moore, a widow applying for her husband’s pension had two witnesses make sworn statements to having known “Mr. Moore and Peggie while they were married before the war at Blount’s Creek N.C”.[[25]](#footnote-25)

A particular testimony that helps fill in a gap of the records of the Civil War was made by the former soldier, James Lawrence. His testimony reads as follows:

I enlisted in Co. A 5th Reg. at Rhode Island May 1863 and was healthy. On May 5th 1864 me and all of my company were captured by rebels and taken to Andersonville Georgia remaining there for 3-4 months. I took rheumatism one 1 month after arriving at Andersonville prison, exposed to the weather. 1/3 of the time had nothing to eat. My teeth and gums are rotten and I suffered from diarrhea and piles. All but 4 of my company starved to death in prison.[[26]](#footnote-26)

There is a record in the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies of Company A 5th Regiment of the Rhode Island Troops getting into a skirmish with rebels on May 5th 1864 in Croatan North Carolina.[[27]](#footnote-27) It is also recorded that the troops of Company A were captured by the rebel forces.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, there is no record of what happened to the soldiers once they were captured. This testimony by James Lawrence may be the only record that explains that the soldiers were taken to Andersonville prison and that only four of them survived. This not only fills in a gap in the official record of the Civil War, but it also may provide the only explanation of how the soldiers of Company A 5th Regiment of the Rhode Island Troops died. If families have been tracing their history, and have been running into a dead end when searching for what happened to a relative who fought in this company, this may be the answer they have been looking for.

There are several things that can be learned from the Frederick C. Douglass ledgers. It appears that it was common for owners in eastern North Carolina to grant their slaves permission to marry each other. There are examples of this found throughout many of the applicant testimonies. It is also evident when looking at the testimonies that several of the people testifying as witnesses appear in more than one claim, making it clear that the majority of the applicants knew each other personally. This shows the sense of community that existed among the former slaves in eastern North Carolina. There are also examples of testimonies made by former slave owners on behalf of their former slaves. This reveals that, in at least some cases, the relationship between former slaves and their owners was not hostile. It provides evidence that they actually had, at the minimum, a positive enough relationship for the former slaves to feel comfortable asking their former owners for help. These records also provide portions of the history of the Civil War that have never been recorded. Perhaps the most important contribution the Frederick C. Douglass ledgers makes to the historical record are the many testimonies that provide family histories of former slaves that date to well before the census record included African Americans.

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