

# Congress and Harriet Tubman's Claim for a Pension

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**Guiding Question:** To what extent, and for what services, did Congress officially acknowledge Harriet Tubman's Civil War service to her country?

**Summary:** Students will explore records from the U.S. House of Representatives to discover the story of Harriet Tubman's Civil War service to the government and her petition to Congress for compensation. Although her service as a nurse, cook, and spy for the federal government is less well known than her work on the Underground Railroad, it was on that basis that she requested a federal pension after the War. Using historical thinking skills, students will examine the evidence of Tubman's service and assess Congress's decision to grant her a pension. Despite the endorsements of a number of highly ranked Civil War officials indicating the breadth of her service, Tubman ultimately secured a pension only as a widow of a Civil War veteran, not on the basis of her own service.

**Rationale:** Documents submitted to Congress as part of Harriet Tubman Davis's pension application provide multiple perspectives on Tubman's legacy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Materials:** 5 facsimile records of Congress  
1 worksheet

**Recommended grade levels:** Grades 7-12

**Course:** U.S. History

**Topics:** Civil War, nurses, spies, pensions

**Time required:** 60 minutes

**Documents:**

1. General affidavit of Harriet Tubman relating to her claim for a pension, ca. 1898; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, ARC Identifier 306573. [Transcript](#)
2. Letter from Sereno E. Payne, on behalf of the claim of Harriet Tubman that she was employed as a nurse, cook, and a spy, February 5, 1898; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, ARC Identifier 306574.
3. H.R. 4982, a bill granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis, late a nurse in the U.S. Army, January 19, 1899; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, ARC Identifier 306578. [Transcript](#)
4. S. Rpt. 1619 to accompany a bill granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis, February 7, 1899; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives.
5. An Act Granting and Increase in Pension to Harriet Tubman Davis, February 28, 1899; 30 Stat 1539, Records of the General Government.

*The documents with ARC numbers are available online at <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/>*

**Learning Activities:**

By analyzing evidence in the documents, students will assess the strength of Tubman's claim of Civil War service and Congress's determination of her eligibility for a pension. Divide the students into four groups and assign one of the first four documents to each group to answer the questions on *Worksheet 1*. A spokesperson from each group should then report to the class summarizing their document and their analysis. The whole class will then discuss the fifth document and will seek an answer to the Guiding Question.

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1. Questions for the general affidavit of Harriet Tubman relating to her claim for a pension:
  - a. Whose actions are described in this affidavit?
  - b. Was the affidavit form filled out by the same person whose actions are described? How do you know?
  - c. What specific services to the nation are asserted as the basis for this claim?
  - d. What compensation is being requested by the petitioner?
2. Questions for the Letter from Sereno E. Payne:
  - a. What is the author of this letter trying to accomplish?
  - b. Why is Tubman already receiving a pension? On what ground is she requesting additional compensation?
  - c. What opinions are cited of those familiar with her case?
3. Questions for H.R. 4982, a bill granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis:
  - a. What does this document propose?
  - b. For what aspect of Tubman's service was the pension proposed?
4. Questions for S. Rpt. 1619 to accompany a bill granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis:
  - a. Who is the author of this report? Who is the audience?
  - b. What evidence is presented of Tubman's Civil War service?
  - c. Does the Senate committee support or oppose granting a pension to Tubman?
  - d. On what grounds does the report recommend decreasing the pension amount?
5. Questions for full class discussion of the Act Granting a Pension:
  - a. In the act that Congress ultimately passed which determined Tubman's pension, how much did she receive?
  - b. On what grounds was she granted the pension?
6. Questions for full class discussion of all five documents:
  - a. Based on examination of this evidence, what services to the nation did Tubman render during the Civil War?
  - b. What parts of Tubman's service were not acknowledged in the final act?
  - c. How does the pension amount recommended for Tubman in H.R. 4982 compare to the amount recommended in Senate Report 1619? In the final act?
  - d. Revisit the Guiding Question: To what extent, and for what services, did Congress officially acknowledge Harriet Tubman's Civil War service to her country? Hypothesize reasons that could explain the disconnect between the evidence about Tubman's service and the decision not to grant her a pension on that basis. Take into consideration the date of the final act and the context of other events in that time period.

Extending the Lesson: Direct students to read the Harriet Tubman Special Resource Study Act; Nov. 13, 2000, Pub. L. 106-516, 114 Stat. 2404 (available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-106publ516/pdf/PLAW-106publ516.pdf>). Have students draw upon their reading and their work in this lesson to answer the following question:

How does Congress's action in this act compare with its action in regard to the act of 1899? What aspects of her service are addressed in the 2000 act which were not addressed in the previous one? Why might have Congress decided to pass this act 135 years after her Civil War service?

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## Worksheet 1: Decoding the Documents

1. Questions for the general affidavit of Harriet Tubman relating to her claim for a pension:
  - a. Whose actions are described in this affidavit?
  - b. Was the affidavit form filled out by the same person whose actions are described? How do you know?
  - c. What specific services to the nation are asserted as the basis for this claim?
  - d. What compensation is being requested by the petitioner?
2. Questions for the Letter from Sereno E. Payne:
  - a. What is the author of this letter trying to accomplish?
  - b. Why is Tubman already receiving a pension? On what ground is she requesting additional compensation?
  - c. What opinions are cited of those familiar with her case?
3. Questions for H.R. 4982, a bill granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis:
  - a. What does this document propose?
  - b. For what aspect of Tubman's service was the pension proposed?
4. Questions for S. Rpt. 1619 to accompany a bill granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis:
  - a. Who is the author of this report? Who is the audience?
  - b. What evidence is presented of Tubman's Civil War service?
  - c. Does the Senate committee support or oppose granting a pension to Tubman?
  - d. On what grounds does the report recommend decreasing the pension amount?

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5. Questions for full class discussion of the Act Granting a Pension:
  - a. In the act that Congress ultimately passed which determined Tubman's pension, how much did she receive?
  - b. On what grounds was she granted the pension?
  
6. Questions for full class discussion of all five documents:
  - a. Based on examination of this evidence, what services to the nation did Tubman render during the Civil War?
  - b. What parts of Tubman's service were not acknowledged in the final act?
  - c. How does the pension amount recommended for Tubman in H.R. 4982 compare to the amount recommended in Senate Report 1619? In the final act?

Revisit the Guiding Question:

To what extent, and for what services, did Congress officially acknowledge Harriet Tubman's Civil War service to her country? Hypothesize reasons that could explain the disconnect between the evidence about Tubman's service and the decision not to grant her a pension on that basis. Take into consideration the date of the final act and the context of other events in that time period.

# GENERAL AFFIDAVIT

State of \_\_\_\_\_, County of \_\_\_\_\_, ss:

In the matter of \_\_\_\_\_

ON THIS \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, A. D. 18\_\_\_\_, personally appeared before me \_\_\_\_\_ in and for the aforesaid County, duly authorized to administer oaths

aged \_\_\_\_\_ years, a resident of \_\_\_\_\_ in the County of \_\_\_\_\_, and State of \_\_\_\_\_

whose Post-office address is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ , aged \_\_\_\_\_ years, a resident of \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ , in the County of \_\_\_\_\_,

and State of \_\_\_\_\_, whose Post-office address is \_\_\_\_\_

well known to be reputable and entitled to credit, and who, being duly sworn, declared in relation to aforesaid case as follows: \_\_\_\_\_

(NOTE.—Affiants should state how they gain a knowledge of the facts to which they testify.)

*My claim against the U.S. is for three years service as nurse and cook in hospitals, and as commander of General Men (Eight or nine) as scouts during the late war of the Rebellion, under directions and orders of Edwin M. Stanton Secretary of War, and of several Generals.*

*I claim for my services above named the sum of Eighteen hundred dollars.*

*The annexed copies have recently been read over to me and are true to the best of my knowledge information and belief.*

I further declare that I have ~~no~~ interest in said case and ~~am~~ *am* not concerned in its prosecution. and allowance.

*Ann M. Carty*  
*W. Elsie M. Carty*

*Harriet Davis*  
*Sate Harriet Tubman*  
*mark*

(If Affiants sign by mark, two witnesses who write sign here.)

(Signatures of Affiants.)

SERENO E. PAYNE, Chairman.  
 George D. Perkins. William S. Boeze.  
 Albert J. Hopkins. John F. Fitzgerald.  
 John Simpkins. W. Jasper Talbert.  
 Philip B. Low. Henry D. Clayton.  
 James R. Young. Samuel T. Baird.  
 Archibald Lybrand. Levin Irving Handy.

Committee on  
 The Merchant Marine and Fisheries,  
 House of Representatives U. S.,

Dict. by S. E. P. to B. Washington, D. C., Feb. 5, 1898.

Hon. George W. Ray,

Chairman Com. on Invalid Pensions,

City.

Dear Sir:-

I hand you herewith papers in the claim of Harriet Tubman Davis,  
 a Bill for the relief of <sup>Whom</sup> ~~a woman~~ before your Committee. Mrs. Davis  
 is now receiving a pension at \$8. per month as widow of her husband.  
 Claim for increase is because of her own personal services in the war.  
 She was employed as nurse, ~~cooking~~ in the Hospital, and ~~spy~~ during  
 nearly the whole period of the war. I know her personally, and she  
 is a most interesting old colored woman, I should judge nearly eighty  
 years of age; having been born a slave, she does not know her age.  
 And about the year 1876, as well as prior thereto, a bill for her  
 relief went to the Committee on War Claims, and all her papers,  
 copies of which are presented herewith, were referred to that  
 Committee by Gen. McDougall, who then represented our District in  
 Congress. The history of her case was written up by Charles P.  
 Wood, <sup>now deceased</sup> of Auburn, N. Y., and is presented herewith. Her affidavit is  
 also presented as to the truth of the history written out by Mr. Wood.  
 For all her services she only received about \$200. during the entire  
 war. She rendered very valuable aid as the letters, copies of  
 which are herewith presented, will show. I am told by Gen. McDougall  
 that he filed the originals of these papers and he believes the  
 account of her services is correct. It seems to be a very deserving  
 case. I thought it much better to introduce a bill for the in-

SERENO E. PAYNE, Chairman.  
George D. Perkins. William S. Booze.  
Albert J. Hopkins. John F. Fitzgerald.  
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James R. Young. Samuel T. Baird.  
Archibald Lybrand. Levin Irving Handy.

Committee on  
The Merchant Marine and Fisheries,  
House of Representatives U. S.,  
Washington, D. C.,

G. W. R. #2.

crease of her pension, that she might have the enjoymeny of it during the remainder of her life, which certainly, in the course of nature, cannot last long, instead of asking a lump sum and trying to get it in as a claim on account of money equitably due her from the Govern-ment for services. I think her case is exactly parallel to one passed in the House yesterday for a war nurse increasing her pension although the case of Mrs. Davis seems to me much stronger. If this case can have the early attention of the Committee, I shall be very much gratified.

Yours very truly;



# H. R. 4982.

[Report No. 1774.]

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## IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

DECEMBER 14, 1897.

Mr. PAYNE introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Invalid Pensions and ordered to be printed.

JANUARY 19, 1899.

Reported with an amendment, committed to the Committee of the Whole House, and ordered to be printed.

[Amend the title.]

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## A BILL

Granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis, late a nurse in the United States Army.

1       *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
2       *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*  
3       That the Secretary of the Interior be, and he is hereby,  
4       authorized and directed to place upon the pension roll of the  
5       United States the name of Harriet Tubman Davis, late a  
6       nurse in the United States Army, and pay her a pension at  
7       the rate of twenty-five dollars per month in lieu of all other  
8       pensions.

Amend the title so as to read: "A bill granting an increase of pension to Harriet Tubman Davis."

HARRIET TUBMAN DAVIS.

FEBRUARY 7, 1899.—Ordered to be printed.

Mr. SHOUP, from the Committee on Pensions, submitted the following

REPORT.

[To accompany H. R. 4982.]

The Committee on Pensions, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 4982) granting a pension to Harriet Tubman Davis, have examined the same and report:

The report of the Committee on Invalid Pensions of the House of Representatives is as follows:

The effect of this bill is to increase from \$8 to \$25 per month the pension of the beneficiary, Harriet T. Davis, of Auburn, N. Y.

Mrs. Davis is the widow of Nelson Davis, who served under the name of Nelson Charles as a private in Company G, Eighth United States Colored Infantry, from September 25, 1863, to November 10, 1865, and was honorably discharged. She also served long and faithfully as an army nurse.

Soldier died October 14, 1888, and the widow filed a claim as such July 24, 1890, under the act of June 27, 1890, and is now pensioned under said act at \$8 per month. It is not shown that the soldier's death was due to his military service. It is shown, however, by evidence filed with this committee, that the claimant was sent to the front by Governor Andrew, and acted as nurse, cook in hospital, and spy during nearly the whole period of the war.

The following is a copy of the letter from Secretary Seward:

WASHINGTON, D. C., July 25, 1865.

MY DEAR SIR: Harriet Tubman, a colored woman, has been nursing our soldiers during nearly all the war. She believes she has claims for faithful service to the command in South Carolina with which you are connected, and she believes you would be disposed to see her claim justly settled. I have known her long as a noble high spirit, as true as seldom dwells in the human form. I commend her, therefore, to your kind attention.

Faithfully, your friend,

WILLIAM H. SEWARD.

Major-General HUNTER.

Gen. Rufus Saxton, in a letter referring to Mrs. Tubman, says:

"She was employed by General Hunter, and I think both by Generals Stephens and Sherman, and is as deserving of a pension from the Government for her service as any other of its faithful servants."

In a letter to Brigadier-General Gilmore, from Headquarters Colored Brigade, St. Helena Island, South Carolina, July 6, 1863, Col. James Montgomery, commanding brigade, said:

"I would respectfully recommend to your attention Mrs. Harriet Tubman, a most remarkable woman, invaluable as a scout."

These testimonials sufficiently show the character and value of the service rendered by Mrs. Davis during the war.

She now is about 75 years of age, physically broken down, and poor.

This woman has a double claim on the Government. She went into the field and hospitals and cared for the sick and wounded. She saved lives. In her old age and poverty a pension of \$25 per month is none too much.

The bill is reported back with the recommendation that it pass.

The papers in this case show that a claim for this woman was once presented to the House of Representatives and referred to the Committee on War Claims. Manifestly that would be the better way to reimburse her for her alleged services to the Government, but her advanced years and necessitous condition lead your committee to give the matter consideration. There is, however, a strong objection to the bill in its present form. The number of nurses on the pension roll at a rate higher than \$12 per month is very few indeed, and there are no valid reasons why this claimant should receive a pension of \$25 per month as a nurse, thus opening a new avenue for pension increases. She is now drawing pension at the rate of \$8 per month as the widow of a soldier, and in view of her personal services to the Government Congress is amply justified in increasing that pension.

The passage of the bill is recommended after being amended as follows:

Strike out all after the enacting clause and insert:

That the Secretary of the Interior be, and he is hereby, authorized and directed to place on the pension roll, subject to the provisions and limitations of the pension laws, the name of Harriet Tubman Davis, widow of Nelson Davis, late a private in Company G, Eighth Regiment United States Colored Infantry, and pay her a pension at the rate of twenty dollars per month in lieu of that she is now receiving.

*Handwritten initials*



DEPT. OF STATE

MAR-1, 3.03 PM 1899

CHF. CLKS. OFFICE

*Private No 188*

Fifty-fifth Congress of the United States of America;

At the Third Session,

Begun and held at the City of Washington on Monday, the fifth day of December, one thousand eight hundred and ninety-eight.

AN ACT

Granting an increase of pension to Harriet Tubman Davis.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of the Interior be, and he is hereby, authorized and directed to place on the pension roll, subject to the provisions and limitations of the pension laws, the name of Harriet Tubman Davis, widow of Nelson Davis, late a private in Company G, Eighth Regiment United States Colored Infantry, and pay her a pension at the rate of twenty dollars per month in lieu of that she is now receiving.

*Thomas B. Reed*

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

*Garret A. Hobart*

Vice-President of the United States and

President of the Senate.

*Approved  
February 28, 1899*

*William M. McKinley*