

Congress and Harriet Tubman's Claim for a Pension

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 19th 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?