

M2110

CORRESPONDENCE AND CASE FILES OF THE BUREAU OF
PENSIONS PERTAINING TO THE EX-SLAVE PENSION MOVEMENT,
1892–1922

Miranda Booker prepared the introduction and the records for filming.

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INTRODUCTION

On the single roll of this microfilm publication, M2110, are reproduced the records of the Bureau of Pensions pertaining to the ex-slave pension movement, 1892–1922. These records consist of letters sent and received, reports, circulars, large posters, petitions to Congress, depositions, pension bills, certificates of membership, fraud orders, and other records relating to pension activities. These records form the series Correspondence and Case Files Pertaining to the Ex-slave Pension Movement, which is part of the records of the Law Division, Bureau of Pensions, in Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group (RG) 15.

BACKGROUND

The concept of ex-slave pensions was modeled after the Civil War–era program of pensions for disabled veterans or families of deceased veterans, a program that included African Americans. An act of Congress approved July 14, 1862 (12 Stat. 566), governed the granting of pensions to veterans for service-connected disability and to widows and other dependents of men who died while serving in land and naval forces during the Civil War and after. To prevent fraudulent practices, this act also authorized the Secretary of the Interior to appoint a special agent in the Bureau of Pensions to assist in the detection of fraud in the administration of pension laws and to prosecute persons committing such frauds. When the Bureau was reorganized on November 15, 1876, a Special Service Division headed all investigations of suspected fraud and issues pertaining to claim agents and notaries public. Then in the summer of 1882, a Special Examination Division was established. This was followed by the creation of a Law Division on January 26, 1886, and the title of the adviser to the Commissioner of Pensions changed from Law Clerk to Chief of the Division.

The Bureau of Pensions did not find evidence to incriminate some of the influential officers and agents within the ex-slave pension movement whom they suspected of wrongdoing. The Bureau thus joined forces in the late 1890s with the Post Office Department to widen its search for fraudulent activity. During the mid 1860s and into the 1870s, the Postmaster General’s powers were enhanced and extended through a series of laws. These laws were designed to prevent the transport of obscene materials (publications or pictures) through the mails. By the 1880s, Congress extended the Post Office Department’s powers even further in order to prevent the public from becoming involved in what the Department deemed to be fraudulent schemes, such as lotteries. In 1895 the postal fraud laws were strengthened, and Postmasters continued to gain unprecedented powers through the early 20th century. In many instances, they identified activities as mail fraud even without concrete evidence, and their subsequent decisions to deny use of the mails were “virtually unreviewable by the courts.” Some considered the Postmaster’s extensive powers to be abusive and obstructive to civil liberties.¹

¹ Mary Francis Berry, *My Face is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 87.

When the 13th Amendment officially ended the practice of slavery in the United States, it made no stipulation for compensation for freedpeople. Frederick Douglass, the renowned abolitionist, orator, and human rights leader, was an early proponent of restitution. He expressed the following view in an early 1890s letter to Walter R. Vaughan: “The Egyptian bondsmen went out with the spoils of his master, and the Russian serf was provided with farming tools and three acres of [land] upon which to begin life, but the Negro had neither spoils, implements nor lands, and to day he is practically a slave on the very plantation where formerly he was driven to toil under the lash.”² With limited aid after emancipation and the hardships they faced under the sharecropping system, many ex-slaves remained in dire economic straits. As a result, ex-slave pension bills were introduced in Congress, and organizations and clubs were established in an attempt to secure compensation.

The first ex-slave pension bill was introduced in Congress in 1890 at the request of Walter R. Vaughan, a white Democrat and ex-mayor of Council Bluffs, Iowa. Vaughan did not believe that it, nor subsequent bills, should be identified as a pension bill, but instead as “a Southern tax-relief bill.”³ He conceived of the aid as not only a benefit and semblance of justice to formerly enslaved blacks, but ultimately, through their expenditures of the monies they would receive, a financial boost to the devastated Southern economy. Vaughan established an organization under various names including the Ex-Slave National Pension Club Association and Vaughan’s Justice Party. Government surveillance of the ex-slave pension movement began during Vaughan’s involvement and continued for nearly 30 years. After profiting considerably from his pamphlet entitled *Vaughan’s Freedmen’s Pension Bill, A Plea for American Freedmen* and ex-slave pension activities through his organization, Vaughan, for the most part, became involved in other ventures. His motives were questionable, and after 1903 he faded from the scene.⁴ Vaughan’s club was the first ex-slave pension organization, but others included the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association of the United States of America; the Ex-Slave Petitioner’s Assembly; the Great National Ex-Slave Union, Congressional, Legislative, and Pension Association of the U.S.A.; and the Ex-Slave Pension Association.

Most prominent among the ex-slave associations, claiming a membership in the hundreds of thousands, was the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association of the United States of America (MRB&PA, hereinafter, the Association), with headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee. The Association was highly organized and had a strong grassroots following. Two of its most notable leaders were Isaiah H. Dickerson and Callie D. House. Dickerson was an educator and minister who became the General Manager and national lecturer of the organization. A widower, laundress, and mother of five, Callie House was elected as the Assistant Secretary of the Association. House and other officers and agents in the Association established a charter, drafted a constitution

² Walter R. Vaughan, *Vaughan’s Freedmen’s Pension Bill: A Plea for American Freedmen* (Chicago, 1891), p. 184.

³ Adverse Congressional Report from Jacob H. Gallinger, Committee on Pensions, “Pensions for Freedmen, Etc,” 56th Cong., 1st Sess., Jan. 16, 1900, S. Rept. 75, 2.

⁴ Walter Hill, “The Ex-Slave Pension Movement: Some Historical and Genealogical Notes,” *Negro History Bulletin* 59, no. 4 (1996): 9.

and bylaws, held annual conventions, started local chapters, established enrollment fees and dues, advertised through circulars and posters, and advocated unity of purpose. The Association also adopted a pension payment scale based upon the age of the beneficiaries. Ex-slaves 70 years and older at the time of disbursement were to receive an initial payment of \$500 and \$15 per month for the rest of their lives; ex-slaves aged 60–69 years would receive \$300 and \$12 per month; ex-slaves aged 50–59 years would receive \$100 and \$8 per month; and those ex-slaves less than 50 years old would receive a \$4-per-month pension. If formerly enslaved persons were either elderly or too ill to care for themselves, their caretaker was to be compensated. Once a freedperson reached an age that would thrust him or her into another pension category, he or she would then be eligible for the higher pension.⁵

The Association's goal was twofold: to petition Congress for the passage of legislation that would grant compensation to ex-slaves, particularly elderly ex-slaves, and to provide mutual aid and burial expenses. As its membership grew, government surveillance intensified. The substantial increase in membership was due not only to the agents' recruiting efforts but to ex-slaves' and their allies' belief that they were entitled to compensation. However, Dickerson, House, and other Association officers were not privy to the Federal Government's intense interest in their organization and plans to undermine it and the larger movement.

Three offices and departments of the Federal Government started working collectively in the late 1890s to investigate individuals and groups and to stifle the movement: the Bureau of Pensions, the Post Office Department, and the Department of Justice. The Law Division of the Bureau of Pensions sent Federal inspectors to ex-slave pension association meetings to determine whether ex-slave pension agents were posing as officials of the United States Government. The Bureau also sent letters pertaining to fraudulent activity to various organizations, agents, and known affiliates of these organizations in order to procure information. Although the Bureau's cease and desist orders (found in the general correspondence of the Law Division) sometimes carried the disclaimer, "While any class of citizens has an unquestioned right to associate for the purpose of attempting to secure legislation believed to be advantageous," it often served simply as a formality in the Government's investigations of the ex-slave pension movement. The Post Office Department freely used its extensive antifraud powers against the movement, issuing fraud orders to organizations and officers. Callie House, for instance, was issued a fraud order by Harrison Barrett, Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Post Office Department in Washington, DC, in September 1899. When House adamantly defended the Association's mission and objectives, she became a focal point of the Government. In an effort to prove that it was legitimate and substantive, the Association gave investigators a list of its local agents and their addresses. The Justice Department used the information to probe the activities of the officers, not to counteract any fraudulent beliefs. Through their various activities, the Bureau of Pensions, the Post Office Department, and the Department of Justice gathered information to monitor ex-slave pension organizations and build cases against them.

⁵ H.R. 8479, 55th Cong., 2nd Sess., Feb. 21, 1898; H.R. 11404, 57th Cong., 1st Sess., Feb. 17, 1902; and S. 1176, 56th Cong., 1st Sess., Dec. 11, 1899, all found in the ex-slave pension bill case files filmed on this roll.

In 1901 Isaiah H. Dickerson was found guilty of “swindling” in Georgia. The press reported that he would have to pay a \$1,000 fine or be sentenced to one year on the chain gang. However, Dickerson’s conviction was overturned later that year by the Georgia State Supreme Court. In 1902 Special Examiner A. W. Roome conducted an inquiry with Dickerson and drafted an affidavit of the investigation. When Dickerson died in 1909, Callie House’s role in the Association became even more pivotal, and the Post Office Department continued to search for means to limit her influence and curtail the movement. After a long investigation, House was arrested and indicted on mail fraud charges. Following a three-day trial, she was convicted of mail fraud in September 1917 and sentenced to one year in jail. Unlike Vaughan, who the Commissioner of Pensions estimated collected at least \$100,000 and reportedly used only \$20,000,⁶ there is no evidence to show that Mrs. House profited from the movement.

A number of ex-slave pension bills were introduced in Congress in the several years following the initial bill of 1890, but no law was ever passed, largely because Congress deemed the ex-slave pension movement fraudulent. There were indeed those individuals, such as Charles H. Dixon, who operated under the guise of ex-slave pensions and took advantage of elderly ex-slaves. However, there were legitimate associations earnestly seeking pensions from the United States Government on behalf of freedpeople.

RECORDS DESCRIPTION

These records consist of an array of documents from correspondence to circulars related to the ex-slave pension movement. The Bureau of Pensions received numerous letters from ex-slaves and their descendants who inquired about a bill’s status, sought information on the movement or how to apply for pensions, provided information on their former slave status, urged the Government to pay pensions, or expressed suspicion of individuals advocating the ex-slave pension fund. In the appendix below is a select list of documents that provides a sampling of what will be found in this series. When the records were originally transferred to the National Archives from the Veterans Administration they contained general correspondence and case files for the period 1892–1922.

GENERAL CORRESPONDENCE

The general correspondence from the Law Division of the Bureau of Pensions and the Veterans Administration is arranged chronologically. The correspondence also includes a miscellaneous file with undated documents and documents of unknown origin or purpose (including numerous illegible and blank forms, and undated newspaper clippings).

The general correspondence files are arranged by date spans as follows: 1892–98, 1899–1904, 1905–9, 1910–17, and 1918–22.

⁶ Walter Fleming, “Ex-Slave Pension Frauds,” *University Bulletin Louisiana State University* Vol. I-N.S., No. 9 (Sept. 1910): 6. First published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, April 1910.

CASE FILES

The case files are arranged by subject. Indexes are included in each case file, providing a general description of the documents. The case files appear to have been removed, during the investigation of the movement, from a larger series titled Case Files of Attorneys, Agents, Pensioners, and Others Relating to the Prosecution of Pension Claims and the Investigation of Fraudulent Practices, 1862–1933 (in Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15). For example, documents pertaining to Callie D. House are exclusively in the ex-slave pension movement files. However, some ex-slave pension movement documents did remain in their original location in the larger series. The records pertaining to I. H. Dickerson are located in both the ex-slave pension movement files and in the larger series of case files for the years 1862–1933. Records on other agents, such as W. H. Southhall, are located only in the latter series.

The following case files have been identified in the ex-slave pension movement records:

- National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association of the United States
- Great National Ex-Slave Union, Congressional, Legislative, and Pension Association of the USA
- Fraud Orders Issued by the Post Office
- Ex-slave Bill Case File
- Ex-Slave Pension Movement Case Files (General Index)
- Walter R. Vaughan
- Callie D. House
- Charles Mercer

RELATED RECORDS

Further records relating to the ex-slave pension movement may be found in the following National Archives and Records Administration record groups and series:

RECORDS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, RECORD GROUP (RG) 15

Law Division of the Bureau of Pensions and the Veterans Administration, 1862–1933
Case Files of Attorneys, Agents, Pensioners and Others Relating to the Prosecution of Pension Claims and the Investigation of Fraudulent Practices, 1862–1933 [Entry 1]

Administrative Records of the Bureau of Pensions and the Pension Service;
Miscellaneous Records; Criminal and Civil Registers, 1875–1914 [Entry 60]

The registers contain summaries of proceedings and judgments in cases involving fraud in pension cases. There are numerous cases against ex-slave pension movement agents and those using the movement as cover to defraud.

RECORDS OF THE POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT, RG 28

Register of Fraud Orders, Nov. 1879–June 30, 1951 [Entry 51]

Fraud Order Case Files, 1834–79, 1881–96, 1912–47 [Entry 50]

Case files 1321, 1796, 3286, and 3839 are cases against members of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association.

Additional related series can be found in these record groups:

Records of the District Courts of the United States, RG 21

Records of the U.S. Senate, RG 46

General Records of the Department of Justice, RG 60

Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, RG 233

APPENDIX SELECT DOCUMENTS

This list provides descriptive titles of some documents found in the ex-slave pension movement records.

- The National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association of the U.S.A. (MRB&PA) Charter, dated 1898
- Constitution and By-Laws booklet of the MRB&PA, dated 1898
- Senate Bill S1176 introduced in the 56th Cong., 1st Sess., to provide pensions for freedmen, dated December 11, 1899 (duplicates)
- Petitions to Congress that include the name, age, name of master, state and county and present post office of formerly enslaved persons
- Large printed MRB&PA circular containing two pictures [embellished] titled “M’Nairy’s [*sic*] Master Stroke for the Ex-Slaves” (duplicates)
- Large printed MRB&PA circular containing two pictures [embellished] with the heading “Onward to Victory!” (duplicates)
- Large printed Great National Ex-Slave Union, Congressional, Legislative, and Pension Association of the U.S.A. circular with five pictures
- Large circular with the heading “Notice of the National Ex-Slave MRB&PA”
- Adverse Congressional Report, “Pensions for Freedmen, Etc.,” 56th Cong., 1st Sess., January 16, 1900, S. Rept. 75
- *Congressional Record*, Washington, DC, dated January 27, 1905, pp. 1505–6 and 1509–10
- Minutes of the Third Convention of the MRB&PA held in Gay Street Christian Church, Nashville, TN, November 28, 29, 30, and December 1898
- Minutes from the Fifth Annual Convention of the MRB&PA convened in Montgomery AL, at the Old Ship A.M.E. Zion Church, October 29, 30, 31, and November 1, 1900
- Affidavit of Isaiah H. Dickerson, General Manager of the MRB&PA, May 12, 1902
- Depositions (in the case of Charles Mercer) of the following persons: Peter Knox, Amanda Sublet, Harriet Sublet, and John Sublet

- The MRB&PA Certificates of Membership (Duplicates)
- Letters from Callie D. House to officials in Washington, DC, explaining the objectives of the MRB&PA
- Letters sent and received between the Department of Interior Bureau of Pensions, Washington, DC, and the Special Examination Division (Special Examiners) in Nashville, TN
- Letters sent and received from the Post Office Department in Washington, DC, to various persons and Federal agencies
- Letters sent from the Department of the Interior Law Division to former slaves responding to their inquiries
- Circular No. 260 (Duplicates), n.d., sent by Acting Assistant Attorney General Harrison Barrett to post offices throughout the country
- Walter R. Vaughan’s “caution” circular
- Cease and Desist Orders, Bureau of Pensions
- Certified copies of fraud orders issued by the Post Office Department in Washington, DC, to agents and officers of the Ex-Slave MRB&PA of the United States and other ex-slave pension organizations
- The case against Rev. Augustus Clark in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Texas (*The United States v. Rev. Augustus Clark, of Bon Weir, Newton Co., Texas*)—signed and dated at the top left corner, October 3, 1916
- Memorandum from the Pension Bureau regarding *United States v. Callie D. House and others, Nashville, Tenn.*, in U.S. District Court, dated March 21, 1917
- List of appointed state agents filed with I. H. Dickerson on May 13, 1902
- Ex-Slave Cases File Indexes (name accompanied by city or county and state or district)
- Telegrams (Western Union and the Postal Telegraph Cable Company)
- Receipts showing where members paid dues, fees, and other related expenses, MRB&PA
- Ledger recording monthly payments of ex-slave members, MRB&PA