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## 'For A Woman': The Fight for Pensions for Civil War Army Nurses

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“For A Woman”:  
The Fight for Pensions for Civil War Army Nurses

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Hannah Metheny

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Introduction*

The National Archives holds the pension applications of 2,448 Civil War nurses. These files represent a tremendous source of information on Civil War nurses: both their wartime experiences and their post-war lives. They also potentially document a significant shift in attitudes towards women's military service, making them perfect for an examination of social history from 1860 to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet no one has done an in-depth analysis of these pension records, the legislation that made them possible, or the process that nurses went through in their struggle for military pensions.

In this study, I examine a sample of 377 pension applications to address issues of race, gender and societal expectations, and the relationships between women, the U.S. military, and the federal government. The pension applications that make up this sample were the result of four years of false starts and failed compromises between Congress and two organizations, the Woman's Relief Corps (WRC) and the Army Nurses' Association (ANA). Their efforts resulted in the Army Nurses Pension Act, also known to its supporters as "The Bill Which Finally Passed."<sup>1</sup> Signed into law by President Benjamin Harrison on August 5, 1892, this bill entitled all women who served as nurses in the Union Army during the American Civil War to a pension of \$12 per month, provided they had served at least six months and had been hired by someone authorized by the War Department to engage nurses.

For the women involved in its passage, and the act's beneficiaries, the Army Nurses Pension Act (ANPA) was a tremendous achievement, the culmination of years of effort and compromise. Certain groups of women, such as spies, scouts, cooks, and

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<sup>1</sup> "Pensions to Army Nurses: The Bill Which Finally Passed," *The National Tribune*, August 11, 1892.

laundresses, were excluded, and southern women, though never explicitly denied access to pensions, were ineligible on principle. Yet, for the first time the federal government recognized women's service in the army during the Civil War on a large scale.

Not only was women's service during the war recognized, and thereby to some extent legitimized, the ANPA effectively endorsed women's financial independence from male bread-winners. This was a major shift in policy, as prior to 1892 Congress rarely supported women's struggles for financial independence. Between 1866 and 1892—a twenty-five year period—Congress passed approximately two hundred special acts granting pensions to women based on their own military service rather than that of a husband or son. In comparison, thousands of women drew dependents' pensions as the widow or mother of a deceased soldier, but this pension was only available as long as the woman remained unmarried. Once married, the government expected the new husband to provide for his wife.<sup>2</sup> With the passage of the ANPA, widows and mothers who had also served as nurses—and there were a surprising number of them—now had access to a source of income independent of their marital status, allowing them greater freedom in their personal lives.

The ANPA also implicitly acknowledged women's military service, since service pensions were reserved for military personnel. Less apparent, but still important, the ANPA and its turbulent history demonstrate to present-day historians the increasingly visible role women played in politics in the late 1800s as individual actors or as groups with their own political agendas, and how much political and social clout these women wielded.

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<sup>2</sup> Megan McClintock, "Civil War Pensions and the Reconstruction of Union Families," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 456-480.

The ANPA was, however, the most support and recognition army nurses achieved for several decades. A study of the legislative history of the ANPA reveals not only a sharp decline in interest in the welfare of Civil War nurses after the act's passage, but also what amounts to a dismissal of their plight. Surprisingly, the source of this rejection was not just Congress or the Pension Bureau, though both organizations certainly played a role. Rather, the dismissal came from the Woman's Relief Corps, the very group that had just spent four long years demanding that Congress pension army nurses. The Chairwoman of the WRC's Pension Committee, Kate B. Sherwood, had been undermining the movement for years. Under her leadership, and with the support of the numerous women in the WRC who had not served in the military, the welfare of former nurses that had previously been so central to the organization's mission took second place to the welfare of widows and veterans and the memorialization of the war. This left only one woman, Annie Wittenmyer, a former WRC President and army nurse herself, invested in the fight, which she waged almost single-handedly during the 1890s. However, the WRC's neglect, combined with the gendered expectations of Congress and the Bureau, as well as the effects of the Panic of 1893, meant that even Wittenmyer could not fix the gaps in the Army Nurses Pension Act, and the plight of former nurses was forgotten.

This conclusion emerges as well from a study of the pension files themselves. Examination of 377 nurses who applied for pensions before and after the passage of the ANPA reveals a significant amount about the pension process and the difficulties women faced trying to prove their service to the satisfaction of Congress or the Pension Bureau. These hurdles reflect the changing, or more frequently, the unchanging opinions of the

Bureau and congressmen towards the women who applied, and towards women's service in the military. The pensions also reveal a great deal about the applicants themselves and their own views on the pension system and their military service. It is difficult to know precisely how factual their claims were or how much these women may have exaggerated their circumstances with the idea of appealing to the sympathies of the Congressmen or Bureau employees examining their case, but by comparing the views towards women's service expressed in the pensions with those expressed thirty years earlier during the war, it becomes increasingly clear that while many nurses, including Wittenmyer, pushed for a more inclusive view of women's military service, Congress, the Pension Bureau, and the Woman's Relief Corps were not willing to alter or challenge expectations regarding women's military service.

Other scholars have examined the importance of the pension system in social history. Skocpol, McClintock, and Logue and Blanck have all noted the power that the government, particularly the Republican Party, exercised in defining eligibility for pensions based on culturally-specific definitions of moral behavior and gendered or racial views.<sup>3</sup> Such work however has focused either on different groups of pensioners, or on a broader time frame.

Analysis of Civil War nurses' pensions specifically has been limited to two small-scale studies: Mercedes Graf's article, "For Pity's Sake: Civil War Nurses and the Pension System," and Jane Schultz's *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America*. While Graf notes the difficulties nurses faced during the pension process, her

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<sup>3</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1992); McClintock, "Civil War Pensions," 456-480; Larry M. Logan and Peter Blanck, "'Benefit of the Doubt': African-American Civil War Veterans and Pensions," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 38, no. 3 (2008): 377-399.

small sample size prevents her from addressing the complexity of these issues: she notes, for instance, that the process of acquiring a pension was centered on definitions of morality and service, but does not examine how these were defined by the Bureau. Graf further argues that many of the difficulties nurses encountered during the pension process can be traced back to social class. While social class certainly played a role in the pension process, it was not the overwhelming factor that Graf makes it out to be. Graf's analysis also makes no mention of the various groups involved in securing pensions for army nurses—something that, had she analyzed more pension files, she would not have missed.<sup>4</sup>

Schultz's analysis of army nurses' pensions is more comprehensive. She not only studies the pensions themselves, but also the legislative history of the ANPA and the involvement of the WRC. Like Graf, Schultz argues that social status was a critical factor in the pension process, but specifies that its main impact can be seen in "the valuing and devaluing of specific forms of domestic work on which pension eligibility would be judged."<sup>5</sup> She also links success to literacy and race. While these are sound arguments, Schultz's sample size is depressingly small—she cites fewer than forty nurses in her study. Schultz also argues that the Bureau was flexible in granting pensions to nurses who deviated from the standards established by women in Dix's nursing corps. This study, however, tends to prove the opposite.

In order to understand the change that these pensions and the ANPA represent, it is essential to understand the attitudes regarding nurses and their service during the Civil

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<sup>4</sup> Mercedes Graf, "For Pity's Sake: Civil War Nurses and the Pension System," *Prologue* 40, no. 2 (2008): 28-35.

<sup>5</sup> Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 186.

War. Since white Southern women rarely appealed to the federal government for aid and, there is only one Confederate nurse in this sample, their experiences are not covered here.<sup>6</sup> Instead, this study will focus on women who served with or alongside the Union Army, and their diverse, gendered experiences. The history of pension legislation is also central to any understanding of the importance of the ANPA within the larger scheme of American history and the debate over female military service.

*Women's Service in the Military: 1775-1865*

Women in the military were certainly not unheard of at the time of the Civil War. One of the most famous Revolutionary War heroines was Molly Pitcher, who brought water to the wounded at the Battle of Monmouth until her husband was wounded by a British musket ball. When he was carried off the field, Molly took his place at the gun and continued firing it until the end of the battle. While the Molly Pitcher story is probably more folklore than fact, the Revolutionary Army did have a significant number of women attached to it.<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Leonard estimates there were as many as three to six women attached to any given company, typically soldier's female relatives, who often

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<sup>6</sup> While the government openly denied former Confederate soldiers pensions, it does not appear to have done the same for Southern women. Nor does it appear that Southern women tried to avail themselves of this oversight. Only one of the 377 pensions in this sample was put forward by a woman with Confederate sympathies, but she was applying based on later service with the US Regular Army, not the Confederacy (Mary J. Doherty Pension File, App. 1141584). It was also not unheard of for southern states to pension Confederate veterans, and occasionally widows. I have, however, found only one case of a pension being extended to a Confederate nurse by the state: Delity Powell Kelly who was pensioned by Florida in 1930 (<http://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/173331>, accessed March 20, 2013). According to Schultz, this is most likely due to the fact that there was no centralized women's organization in the South (the Southern equivalent of the Woman's Relief Corps) to push these claims on a state level, and that many Southern women expressed a strong sense of resentment and sectional separatism towards their former opponents, particularly the federal government, which kept them from applying for federal aid (Schultz, 185).

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 155.

served as nurses, laundresses, or cooks.<sup>8</sup> In 1802, Congress actually attempted to limit the number of women attached to the army by declaring that the army's Subsistence Department would only provision four women, or laundresses, per company.<sup>9</sup> This rule was still on the books when hostilities broke out in 1861.<sup>10</sup>

The onset of the Civil War, however, opened up new military occupations for women. Several hundred women worked at federal arsenals like those in Washington, Pittsburgh, and Springfield, Massachusetts, rolling cartridges for the army. Others served in the military as scouts, smugglers, and spies. Some even disguised themselves as men and formally enlisted. In her 1888 memoir, Mary Livermore, an agent for the Sanitary Commission, estimated that four hundred women soldiers were known to have served in the Union Army, "but I am convinced that a larger number of women disguised themselves and enlisted in the service."<sup>11</sup> One recent study identified 250 female soldiers fighting on both sides, all disguised as men—with varying degrees of success.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, another study estimated there were at least one thousand women who were in military service, possibly even several thousand.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, female nurses were much more commonplace. The best estimates come from the Carded Service Record, which was created by the US Record and Pension

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. War Department, *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1861. With a Full Index. By Authority of the War Department* (Philadelphia: George W. Child, 1862), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Mary A. Livermore, *My Story of the War: The Civil War Memoirs of the Famous Nurse, Relief Organizer and Suffragette* (Hartford: A.D. Worthington & Co. Publishers, 1887), 119-120.

<sup>12</sup> DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2002), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Richard H. Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 11. Hall defines female soldiers as "women who actively participated in military affairs, especially those who 'soldiered' with the men and shared the same hardships and dangers. Frontline nurses who were pioneering a new field for women fit this category, as do scouts, spies, and smugglers" (8). While I take no issue with placing the service of nurses on the same level as soldiers, I define soldiers in this case as women who disguised themselves as men and picked up a rifle. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, Hall's estimate is treated with a degree of caution.

Division in 1890 to estimate how many women would qualify for the Army Nurses Pension Act. Hapless clerks poured over old hospital muster rolls and payrolls and recorded the name of each female employee they came across, along with the nature and length of her service as exhibited by the records. According to this exhaustive search, approximately 21,208 Northern women served in hospitals as nurses, matrons, laundresses, and cooks.<sup>14</sup> However, many women were reticent about signing the payroll or the muster roll. Many middle- and upper-class nurses prided themselves on working without compensation, and looked askance at other women who accepted pay for their services. Others simply never had the opportunity to sign. Women like Maria Abbey, Phebe Farmer, and Mary E. Buckey opened their own homes for use as hospitals, but as these were informal hospitals no muster roll was ever made.<sup>15</sup> Amanda Smyth was never added to the muster roll at the New Albany hospital where she worked because her husband wanted her to be free to return home at any time to look after their year-old son.<sup>16</sup> Muster rolls were also taken infrequently and were often incomplete. These gaps in the record suggest that the number of women who served as nurses was probably significantly higher.

Nursing at home was traditionally part of the female domestic (i.e. private) sphere; nursing injured soldiers was in many ways a natural extension of that duty. Yet, when women stepped into the military sphere, which was a distinctly public and male area, they immediately came under attack. Some detractors worried that the masculine environment might give women more masculine qualities. One woman taunted a

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<sup>14</sup> Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Maria A. Abbey Pension File, App. 691950, Cert. 425084; Phebe Farmer Pension File, App. 1138498; Mary E. Buckey Pension File, App. 1129426.

<sup>16</sup> Amanda B. Smyth Pension File, App. 1130631, Cert. 899523.

potential nurse, saying her work would make her “a perfect amazon, and some day you will reappear in buttons and epaulettes, singing the Marseillaise in a bass voice.”<sup>17</sup>

Innuendo was also common in public and private critiques of military nurses, in particularly those complaints lodged by soldiers and surgeons. Their concerns ran the gamut from forbidden hospital romances to potential exposure to male nudity to women who intentionally served with the sole purpose of finding a husband—or just a temporary liaison. One unhappy surgeon wrote to Surgeon General William Hammond in May, 1863, pleading, “My Dear General, in behalf of modesty do I beseech you to issue an order prohibiting Feminine Nurses—throwing themselves into the Arms of Sick & wounded Soldiers and Lasciviously Exciting their Animal passions.”<sup>18</sup> Others had more practical concerns. When Elizabeth Aiken and Mary Sturgis tried to offer their services as regimental nurses to the 6<sup>th</sup> Illinois, its future colonel lectured them on the dangers. “The rebels... will not be liable to show you any particular favors or mercy in consideration of your being *women*. Men who can strip and tar and feather school-mistresses, as they have done, would not show nurses in our army much respect. My opinion is that unless you can jump over a ten rail fence, run a mile, and swim a river, you had better not go.”<sup>19</sup>

The surgeons who dealt with female nurses on a regular basis expressed other qualms as well. They frequently complained about nurses’ lack of medical training (despite the fact that many surgeons had just as little training), and fumed at the lack of

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<sup>17</sup> Harriet Terry to Harriet Foote Hawley, January 5, 1863, Hawley Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 54.

<sup>18</sup> A. Bolus to Surgeon General Hammond, May 24, 1863, Letters Received, 1818-1870, Union Surgeon General’s Office, National Archives and Records Administration, quoted in Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Galusha Anderson, *The Story of Aunt Lizzie Aiken* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1880), 71.

control they had over these women.<sup>20</sup> According to army regulations, nurses were supposed to be taken from amongst the invalid privates in the hospital, and as such were subject to military discipline. Surgeons chose the least injured men and appointed them to help in the kitchens, tend to their comrades' injuries, and in general mind the wards. When female nurses arrived at the hospitals, they began to take over these positions. Since most of these women worked for non-governmental organizations, like the United States Sanitary or Christian Commission, and were appointed with little or no input from the hospital surgeon, their presence could easily be read as a threat to a surgeon's authority in his own hospital, and it made many surgeons uncomfortable. When Surgeon C.C. Byrne agreed to allow several US Christian Commission nurses to open a Special Diet Kitchen at his Chattanooga hospital, he insisted that "a rigid system of noninterference, and subordination in all things concerning the hospital will be expected and required."<sup>21</sup> The Christian Commission nurses agreed to Byrne's condition, but other nurses were not so accommodating, and ignored or circumvented military protocol in their mission to help their patients. In one famous example, Mary Ann Bickerdyke angrily dismissed a ward surgeon when he reported late for duty after "a night's debauch"—apparently this was his fourth repeat performance—swearing she would have his shoulder straps off in three days. Within a week, the surgeon was officially dismissed.<sup>22</sup>

Many nursing organizations were aware of these complaints against their nurses and took steps to allay the public's and the army's concerns. Dorothea Dix, a pioneer in

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<sup>20</sup> Jane E. Schultz, "The Inhospitable Hospital: Gender and Professionalism in Civil War Medicine," *Chicago Journals* 17, no. 2 (1992): 371-373.

<sup>21</sup> C.C. Byrne to Annie Wittenmyer, March 20, 1864, in Carrie Pollard Pension File, App. 1141411, Cert. 871309.

<sup>22</sup> Livermore, *My Story of the War*, 510-511.

treatment for the insane prior to the war, was appointed Superintendent of Army Nurses by the War Department shortly after the Battle of Bull Run in 1861. Neither the government nor the military had ever sanctioned women's military service on such a large scale before. Dix was very aware of the novelty of allowing women to formally serve in the army, and that critics would scrutinize the actions of every woman she hired, searching for any trace of loose behavior. If this new nursing corps was to become a reality, Dix had to nip such criticism in the bud. To that end, her nurses were chosen with very stringent requirements in mind. "Matronly persons of experience, good conduct, or superior education and serious disposition, will always have preference," Dix asserted in a circular she published outlining the conditions she expected her nurses to meet. "Habits of neatness, order, sobriety, and industry, are prerequisites. All applicants must present certificates of qualification and good character from at least two persons of trust, testifying to morality, integrity, seriousness, and capacity for care of the sick."<sup>23</sup> Dix wanted women who were too old to arouse worries about sexual impropriety or immorality, and though she made some exceptions, she generally adhered to these standards. Other relief groups, like the United States Sanitary and Christian Commissions, followed similar guidelines, though they were much more flexible on the age requirement. These standards are reflected in the pension records. The vast majority of nurses who worked for Dix, the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), or the United States Christian Commission (USCC) were white, middle-class, and middle-aged spinsters (late twenties to early thirties was generally deemed the threshold of spinsterhood), married women, or widows.

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<sup>23</sup> Dorothea Dix, *Circular No. 8 Regarding Requirements for Female Nursing Applicants, July 14, 1862*. [Online version, <http://docsteach.org/documents/3819334/detail?menu=closed&page=29&sortBy=era>, National Archives and Records Administration, March 20, 2013.]

Though not all nurses filled Dix's requirements (according to the Carded Service Record, Dix only hired 361 nurses of the 6,284 listed on the rolls), women spoke of their new positions in domestic terms, transforming the hospitals into domestic spaces.<sup>24</sup> As they settled into the hospitals, many nurses began to refer to their wards as "home," and to the men they nursed as their adopted "family." Nurses also played surrogate mother, sister, or loved one, drawing on the notion of women as nurturers. Mary Ann Bickerdyke, who was greatly loved by Northern troops, was known alternately as "the calico whirlwind" and "Mother Bickerdyke." "Aunt" Lizzie Aiken earned her title during the beginning of her tenure as a nurse after a long day in a hospital tent. The soldiers wanted to know the names of the women who had tended them, and asked for "some appellations less formal than Madam" to call them. The surgeon promptly dubbed Aiken "Aunt Lizzie" and her co-worker Mary Sturgis "Mother Sturgis."<sup>25</sup> Nurses also used material culture to give hospitals a more domestic ambiance. Nurses frequently decorated their wards with prints or cabinets to remind their patients of home.<sup>26</sup> Amanda Aiken Stearns, a nurse at Armory Square Hospital in Washington, rented a piano, which she placed in the center of her ward and played in dozens of concerts and performances for the soldiers in her care.<sup>27</sup> Pianos were not only a feminine instrument, they also traditionally occupied the center of the parlor, which was the center of the home—a woman's sphere of influence.

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<sup>24</sup> Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *Aunt Lizzy Aiken*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Elvira Powers, *Hospital Pencillings: Being a Diary While in Jefferson General Hospital, Jeffersonville, Ind., and others at Nashville, Tennessee, as matron and visitor* (Boston: Edward L. Mitchell, 1866), 128-129.

<sup>27</sup> Amanda Akin Stearns, *The Lady Nurse of Ward E* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1909), 40.

Women also spoke of their service in benevolent and religious terms.

Benevolence had been an established part of feminine ideology for several decades, resulting in the creation of hundreds of charity and relief organizations. The first generation of women who had instituted the movement was slowly bowing out, and their daughters quickly merged their mothers' old ideas of benevolence with a new emphasis on efficiency and professionalism as they founded hundreds of aid societies.<sup>28</sup> The largest of these groups by far was the US Sanitary Commission, a private organization endorsed by the War Department, which coordinated the efforts of hundreds of aid societies by collecting their supplies and then distributing them to the military units that needed them the most. The Sanitary Commission also hired hundreds of paid nurses, including famous nurses like Mary A. Bickerdyke, Katherine Wormeley, and Mary Livermore, who were driven by a desire to help the unfortunate men on the front lines in any way possible.

Other nurses, like Iowa's Mary Shelton, saw their work as the work of the Lord. "When duty calls and so much can be done for the Master I must not waiver," she wrote.<sup>29</sup> Others, like Maine's Harriet Eaton, felt redemption or conversion were as important as healing the body. Women like Eaton and Shelton dispensed tracts, read from the Bible or sang hymns, and tried to ensure a soldier's soul was prepared to face eternity at the last. Eaton actually spent several weeks doggedly pursuing one soldier under her care in an attempt to convert him. She attended services with him, wrote him long letters, and had long, "deeply solemn" conversations with him. "Oh! How gladly I

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<sup>28</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 134.

<sup>29</sup> Mary E. Shelton Diary, January 9, 1865, Special Collections, University of Iowa, Iowa City, quoted in Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 76.

would direct him aright,” she confessed in her diary.<sup>30</sup> Concern for the religious welfare of the soldiers was so widespread that the United States Christian Commission was organized late in 1861 specifically to address this issue, and hundreds of women volunteered their services to the newly formed Commission.

Despite couching their service in terms of domesticity and benevolence, as the war progressed, some women increasingly spoke of themselves in military terms, describing themselves as veterans and the soldiers they tended as comrades. When Louisa May Alcott’s *Tribulation Periwinkle* found a position as a nurse, she “tore home through the December slush as if the rebels were after me, and like many another recruit, burst in upon my family with the announcement—‘I’ve enlisted!’”<sup>31</sup> Alcott was writing for popular consumption—in fact, *Hospital Sketches* was her first successful published work—but nurses frequently spoke of themselves as soldiers in private letters and diaries as well. Cornelia Hancock wrote to her family, “A soldier’s life is very hardening, you do not care where you are so you can eat or sleep.”<sup>32</sup> Many nurses also felt that they had formally enlisted in the military, and that over the course of their work, they had exposed themselves to many of the same dangers as men in the field, including disease, bad food, and horrendous living conditions. This service, they argued, made them not only soldiers, but veterans.

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<sup>30</sup> Harriet Eaton, *This Birth Place of Souls: the Civil War Nursing Diary of Harriet Eaton*, ed. Jane E. Schultz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 175.

<sup>31</sup> Louisa M. Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (Boston: James Redpath Publisher, 1863), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Harriet S. Jacquette, ed., *South After Gettysburg: Letters of Cornelia Hancock from the Army of the Potomac, 1863-1865* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 28.

*History of Pension Legislation*

Just as the service of women in the army was not new, military pensions were not a novelty. Veterans began drawing pensions shortly after the Revolutionary War, widows after the War of 1812. Under this system, pensions to widows and dependent children consisted of five years of half-pay. In early 1861, Congress discarded the old system in favor of a lifelong pension equivalent to what the soldier would have received had he been totally disabled rather than killed: a private's widow, for instance, would draw \$8 a month, while a lieutenant-colonel's widow received \$30. This system expanded in 1862 to include dependent mothers and orphan sisters. Veterans' pensions were likewise revised. Congress established a graded pension system, which determined pension rates for veterans based on the degree of their disability, ranging from three to four dollars for the loss of a few fingers to \$72 for full disability.

During and immediately after the war, only those veterans disabled in the service were eligible for pensions. Yet the term "veteran" was not limited simply to the men who had shouldered a musket. All army medical personnel—surgeons, assistant surgeons, and hospital stewards—were also considered veterans and eligible for pensions. Male nurses were not strictly army medical personnel since, per army regulations, all male nurses came from the ranks.<sup>33</sup> As a result, these men were considered soldiers first and nurses second. Soldiers who served as nurses overwhelmingly applied for pensions based on their military services. The few male nurses who applied for pensions based on their medical service were most likely men who were disabled during their medical

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<sup>33</sup> U.S. War Department, *Revised Regulations*, 284.

service, like Aminah Cumins, who had at least one limb amputated as a result of an illness he contracted while at the hospital.<sup>34</sup>

In the post-Civil War years, pension legislation expanded at an extraordinary rate. First, fathers and brothers of veterans were added to the list of potential dependents in 1868; then when the Arrears Act passed in 1879 veterans and dependents were allowed to apply for arrears and back pay. The most sweeping legislation came in 1890, when, after a long campaign by the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans' organization, the federal government approved the Dependents' Pension Bill. Under this bill, any veteran who had served ninety days and was now disabled, regardless of whether or not the disability was linked to his service, was eligible for a pension. Likewise, widows whose husbands had served for ninety days were also entitled to a pension, and no longer had to prove their spouse died as a result of war-related injuries. That same year, pensions cost the federal government \$106 million—roughly forty percent of the federal budget.<sup>35</sup> It was welfare on a massive scale, and it was within this arena that army nurses began to make their voices heard.

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<sup>34</sup> Aminah Cumins Pension File, App. 131970.

<sup>35</sup> Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 186.

*Chapter 1: “A Tribute to Woman’s Unselfish Devotion”: Debating the Army Nurses Pension Act<sup>36</sup>*

The fight for the Army Nurses Pension Act waged in the halls of Congress for four long years, involving three separate veterans’ organizations and several members of Congress, but it had its roots in a small, auxiliary group of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) formed in 1883 called the Woman’s Relief Corps, or the WRC. Originally proposed by the commander of the GAR, Paul Van Der Voort, the WRC was composed of loyal Northern women, predominantly widows, mothers, and sisters of Union veterans, but also former army nurses. Its mission was to assist the GAR by aiding needy veterans, and to aid former army nurses and other loyal women who were now indigent.<sup>37</sup>

In order to fulfill the latter part of this mission, National Senior Vice-President Kate B. Sherwood put forward plans in 1884 for a general relief fund that would send army nurses a small sum of money every Christmas. Sherwood also called for the WRC to petition Congress to grant pensions to female army workers. The bill, which was eventually named the Army Nurses Pension Act (ANPA), would grant \$12 pensions to “nurses and other army workers.”<sup>38</sup>

At the conclusion of the 1884 convention, Sherwood was named secretary of the newly-formed National Pension and Relief Committee. She must have seemed like the natural choice for the position. Sherwood was, after all, one of the founding members of the Woman’s Relief Corps, and her husband, Isaac Sherwood, was a Republican

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<sup>36</sup> “Our Army Nurses: Tributes to the Blue and the Gray—the \$12 Bill in the House,” *National Tribune*, July 14, 1892.

<sup>37</sup> *Report of the National Organization: Woman’s Relief Corps* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1884), 23.

<sup>38</sup> *Proceedings of the Third National Convention, Woman’s Relief Corps: Portland, Maine, June 24, 25, and 26, 1885* (Toledo: Montgomery & Vrooman, 1885), 131.

congressman from Ohio and a former Union soldier. She was also a member of dozens of local committees, churches, and veterans groups, and a prolific writer, composing stories, poems and satires for numerous papers.<sup>39</sup> Very few people could match her scope. However, it was these very qualifications that eventually created problems for army nurses. Sherwood's lack of service meant she had a limited understanding of the kinds of women who served as army nurses, and tended to polarize her definitions of service, which in turn made its way into the Army Nurses Pension Act. Her numerous commitments also meant that she could not devote all her time and energy to lobbying for army nurses. This alternately resulted in others working in her stead or in absolutely nothing being done.

However, the consequences of Sherwood's narrow definitions of what constituted military nurses and her inability or reluctance to pursue legislation were still years off. At this point, petitioning Congress for pensions for army nurses was more show than anything else, a hazy possibility. After the Arrears Act in 1879 it seemed every widow, or dependent child, and every member of the GAR, was drawing, or had applied for, a pension. When the WRC made pensions for nurses one of its missions, it did so with no understanding of the work and responsibilities that came with such a promise. The National Convention agreed to create the General Relief Fund and endorsed Sherwood's plan to petition Congress, but did nothing to support either effort.

When the WRC met for its annual convention in 1886, however, things took a more practical turn. Rather embarrassed, the Pension Committee admitted that during the preceding year National Headquarters had been flooded with hundreds of letters from army nurses. These women were under the impression that the WRC had the funds to

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<sup>39</sup> "Mrs. Kate Sherwood, Writer and Patriotic Leader, Dead," *Washington Times*, February 15, 1914.

provide for them, or that pensions would soon be forthcoming from Congress. Neither was true. An initial bill introduced in Congress never made it past committee, and the WRC had a meager \$86 in its relief fund.<sup>40</sup> Sherwood and her committee were confident that with time the ANPA would pass, but they needed a stop-gap measure to provide for army nurses in the interim. Thus, special act pensions came into fashion.

### *Special Act Pensions*

Special act pensions were private acts of Congress which granted pensions to specific individuals. Unlike the Pension Bureau, Congress did not have official standards which applicants had to meet. Claimants simply had to prove their service to the satisfaction of the Congressional Pension Committee, which would then plead the case before the rest of Congress. These special acts proved to be a crucial stepping stone for the ANPA. In an attempt to make applicants appear as deserving as possible, most special acts portrayed these nurses as paragons of Victorian womanhood: what Senator Charles Belknap termed “ministering angels.” The congressional reports, which outlined each nurse’s case and the Pension Committee’s recommendation on the bill, stressed each nurse’s valuable and faithful service, and her inability to provide for herself due to disability or old age. “If attention to duty, correct deportment, modest demeanor, and Christian character count in the make up of a hospital nurse, then all were a part of her

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<sup>40</sup> *Proceedings of the Fourth National Convention, Woman’s Relief Corps: San Francisco, California, August 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1886* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1886), 116-120. The Convention Report states the bill was introduced by a Mr. Cobb from Connecticut, but there is no record of a congressman from Connecticut with that name serving at the time. There is also no mention of Mr. Cobb in the WRC Convention Records apart from this single mention, so there is nothing to indicate who this man was or what his connection to the WRC was.

possessions and were all laid upon the altar of her country,” read one report.<sup>41</sup> Another claimed, “If there is anyone on earth or in the loyal North that deserves consideration from the hands of the agents of the government it is Mrs. Gridley. She needs it to keep the wolf away from her door.”<sup>42</sup> A slightly more banal report stated, “The committee is satisfied as to the extent and value of her service. She is now seventy-seven years of age and physically and financially helpless.”<sup>43</sup> The object of these portrayals was almost certainly to give other members of Congress no grounds to block the pension; Senator George Gray (Dem.-DE), a staunch opponent of pensioning army nurses, fumed at one point that these pensions so appealed “to the chivalry and...to the gallantry of the men of the country” that Congress was willing to bankrupt the nation to provide for pensioners.<sup>44</sup> The tactic certainly worked, because of the 164 special acts included in the sample for this thesis, 151 successfully passed. In fact, one congressman wrote, they went through “like many other pension bills, without much observation by anybody”—except, perhaps, by a vexed Senator Gray.<sup>45</sup>

If the WRC wanted to set precedents regarding which women were pensionable and which were not, these special acts provided the opportunity to do so. However, the WRC chose to mold its image of worthy nurses upon its own constituency, one that paralleled the image of the “ministering angel” that Congress was so enthusiastic in supporting: the morally upstanding, white, middle or upper-class, Northern woman. In

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<sup>41</sup> “Report to accompany H.R. 6359: Charity P. Harrison,” in Charity P. Harrison Pension File, App. 958102, Cert. 519759.

<sup>42</sup> “Report to accompany bill H.R. 7617: Ann E. Gridley,” in Ann E. Gridley Pension File, App. 538383, Cert. 296347.

<sup>43</sup> “Report to accompany bill S. 2951: Mary Morrison Elliot,” in Mary Morrison Elliot Pension File, App. 673510, Cert. 411483.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record: 52<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, July 14-August 5, 1892*, vol. 23 part 7 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), 6796.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 6797.

fact, of the 55 special act pensions put forward by WRC nurses or by nurses recognized by the WRC, almost all conformed to this image.<sup>46</sup> There was no need to debate definitions of service.

As a result, women whose service did not conform to this image faced two options: paint their service in acceptable terms, or lose the pension. Politicians made it very clear that they were more than willing to strike down the bills of women who did not comply. When Annie Etheridge petitioned for a pension in 1887 based on her service as a vivandiere, the senator in charge of her case had to rewrite the bill shortly after it was introduced to Congress.<sup>47</sup> Where the old bill had spoken equally of Etheridge's presence on the battlefield and her work nursing the men of her regiment, the new bill focused solely on her nursing efforts. When Etheridge's pension was passed later that year, the bill listed her as a "volunteer nurse" rather than a vivandiere.<sup>48</sup> Another vivandiere, Kady Brownell, received similar treatment.<sup>49</sup> The one exception to this rule was Sarah Emma Edmonds, who did serve as a nurse, but after she enlisted and served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan for two years under the alias Frank Thompson. Edmonds was ultimately pensioned for her service as a soldier in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan, as she asked. Congress could hardly refuse her when she had the backing of the GAR, of which she was actually a member.

However, the congressional report on her pension took care to state that as a nurse she

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<sup>46</sup> This conclusion is based on congressional reports and on vignettes taken from *Our Army Nurses* and *In Honor of Our Army Nurses*.

<sup>47</sup> Vivandieres, or daughters of the regiment, were women attached to a specific regiment. They frequently nursed soldiers, in addition to doing the laundry and some cooking, but were mostly known for accompanying their regiments into battle. These women were instantly recognizable by their uniform: a set of "rationals" or a short skirt with bloomers underneath and a short jacket designed to resemble a military uniform.

<sup>48</sup> "Report to Accompany bill S. 2774: Anna Etheridge Hooks," *Reports of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the Forty-Ninth Congress: 1885-1886* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886); "Report to Accompany bill S. 2884: Anna Etheridge Hooks," *ibid.*; U.S. Congress, *Statutes of the United States of America Passed at the Second Session of the 49<sup>th</sup> Congress: 1886-1887* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 259.

<sup>49</sup> "Report to accompany bill S. 773," in Kady Brownell Pension File, App. 524000, Cert. 279843.

“rendered much more valuable aid to the cause nearest her heart than she could possibly have done as a soldier in the ranks.”<sup>50</sup> Even Edmonds’ unique service was spoken of in gendered terms, and made to appear as similar as possible to the service of other women. By failing to challenge the established gender roles and presenting every nurse in terms of domesticity, virtue, and dependency, both nurses and their supporters in Congress and the WRC ensured that these were the only women that Congress would consider eligible for pensions.

Though special acts were very successful, several politicians protested vehemently against their passage. This division does not appear to have been a sectional issue, but rather a partisan one, with the majority of detractors coming from the Democratic Party. Senator Gray, for instance, who had complained that overly chivalrous congressmen were bankrupting the country, was a Democrat from Delaware. In 1886, President Grover Cleveland, the only Democratic president elected between 1860 and 1913, refused to sign bills granting pensions to six former nurses, including the famous Mary Ann Bickerdyke, as well as numerous other veterans and widows, claiming they smacked of government charity.<sup>51</sup> Senator Francis Cockrell, another Democrat and former Confederate brigadier general from Missouri, objected specifically to pensioning army nurses on the grounds that nurses never rendered military service and therefore did not merit pensions. Accordingly, he tried to block any special acts that came before the Senate. When it became clear that he was fighting a losing battle, Cockrell arranged with

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<sup>50</sup> Sarah Emma Edmonds Pension File, App. 526889, Cert. 282136.

<sup>51</sup> US Congress, *The Statutes at Large of the United States of America, from December, 1885, to March, 1887*, vol. XXIV (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 710-731; Grover Cleveland to Senate, July 5, 1888, in *The Public Papers of Grover Cleveland, Twenty-Second President of the United States: March 4, 1885 to March 4, 1889* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 351-352. Luckily for Bickerdyke and the other nurses, Congress was still in session when Cleveland refused to sign them, and they automatically became law after ten days.

several members of the Senate Pension Committee in 1890 to fix these pensions at \$12 a month, whereas previously pensions had gone as high as \$25.<sup>52</sup> This limit remained in effect and was eventually codified in the Army Nurses Pension Act. Cleveland's and Cockrell's supporters were not numerous, but their opposition was immensely frustrating for army nurses, causing one woman to comment in 1892, "i feel as if i am shure of my pension now as wee hav got a republican president. i am so glad Cleavland is out of the white house."<sup>53</sup>

#### *Veterans and the Army Nurses Pension Act*

Despite the attitude of conservative politicians, support for pensioning army nurses was widespread, especially among Union veterans. The Grand Army of the Republic was strongly in favor of the measure. One of its commanders, Senator John Logan, was the husband of Mary Logan, a member of the WRC Pension Committee, and he used his position on the Congressional Pension Committee to push both for special acts and the ANPA. The GAR also expanded the terms of the ANPA bill in early drafts to include more nurses. However, this support came with a caveat: the WRC's campaign for the ANPA could not interfere with the GAR's own initiatives. In fact, the first time the WRC's Pension Committee took its provisional ANPA legislation to the GAR for approval in 1886, the GAR endorsed the measure but insisted that the WRC not press the matter in the current Congressional session because the GAR's Dependents' Pension Bill was pending before Congress. The GAR's request made a great deal of sense. The Dependents' Pension Bill would grant thousands of veterans and their dependents access

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<sup>52</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record: 52<sup>nd</sup> Congress*, 6798.

<sup>53</sup> Lucy Slawson to James Tanner, December 28, 1896, in Lucy Slawson Pension File, App. 1138609.

to pensions. In comparison, the ANPA stood to benefit very few women; the best estimate Sherwood could give was around several hundred women. Accordingly, the WRC's Pension Committee agreed to not put the ANPA forward that congressional session, but insisted that the committee be part of any of the GAR's future plans regarding pension legislation.<sup>54</sup> Both sides were satisfied with the compromise. The exchange, however, established very clearly that the GAR, and the male veterans that formed its constituency, were concerned primarily with their own welfare, and that of their dependents. Despite the high regard many veterans felt for army nurses, the welfare of these women was a secondary concern. Again, this was logical, since male veterans vastly outnumbered nurses, but it emphasized a lesson that was becoming increasingly apparent to WRC members: the GAR would not go out of its way to support the ANPA, and "matters pertaining to women are best understood and worked for by women themselves."<sup>55</sup>

*Limiting the ANPA: Annie Wittenmyer and Kate B. Sherwood*

The WRC began pushing the ANPA in earnest in 1888. The bill met immediate criticism from both sides of the aisle: Republicans insisted that nurses should wait until after all male veterans were provided for; Democrats opposed the measure outright. Senator James Beck, a Democrat from Kentucky who had once practiced law with the former Vice President and Confederate Secretary of War John C. Breckenridge, spoke for many of his colleagues when he complained that "any woman who was caught inside the

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<sup>54</sup> *Proceedings of the Fourth National Convention*, 117-119.

<sup>55</sup> *Proceedings of the Third National Convention*, 134.

lines of the Army...and cooked for six months...is to get a pension.”<sup>56</sup> Sherwood immediately fired back. In a letter addressed to the members of the US Senate Pension Committee dated a few days after Beck’s remarks, she wrote: “As it would be improper to assert that an honorable Senator of the United States would mortally wound and insult any woman, much less self-sacrificing women, inspired by the largest philanthropy, it must be assumed that the remarks of Senator Beck arose from an ignorance of the scope of the Diet Kitchens of the war.”<sup>57</sup>

While it is not clear whether Beck’s complaint specifically targeted Diet Kitchens—the *National Tribune* actually reported his objection as against women who were “set to work” rather than women who cooked—it is significant that Sherwood immediately took it to mean such.<sup>58</sup> During the war, many nurses cooked food for their charges. To lend their work an air of respectability and medical authority, many women began calling their hospital kitchens “Special Diet Kitchens,” a term popularized by Annie Wittenmyer and the US Christian Commission, which were responsible for organizing many of these kitchens. However, many women continued to cook and nurse without the label of Diet Kitchen nurse. The fact that Sherwood specified Diet Kitchen nurses, excluding those women who did the same work under a different name, is the first symptom of a larger problem she revealed as the fight for the ANPA continued. Sherwood had a very limited definition of who exactly was entitled to be called an “army nurse.” Never having been a nurse herself, she saw the division of labor in very narrow

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<sup>56</sup> Kate B. Sherwood and E. Florence Barker to US Senate Pension Committee, March 29, 1888; Folder HR50A-H12.8: Various Subjects, Dec. 21, 1887-Feb. 25, 1888; Box No. 146, Petitions, Memorials and Resolutions of State Legislatures, & Related Documents Which Were Referred to Committees, 50<sup>th</sup> Congress; Records of the United States House of Representatives, RG 233; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “Congress: An Abstract of the More Important Proceedings in Both Houses,” *National Tribune*, March 29, 1888.

terms. In the same letter to the Committee, Sherwood separated the women with the army into two distinct classes: camp followers, or prostitutes, and middle-class philanthropists, like those in the Sanitary Commission. “At no time,” she wrote, “was the standard [of who could serve as a nurse] lowered, and however the army may have been disgraced at any time, or place by women camp followers [prostitutes], the women of the Sanitary Service commanded under all circumstances, the respect and confidence of officers in charge of the sick and wounded.”<sup>59</sup> Sherwood’s rigid definition of service meant that time and time again she would accept revisions to the ANPA that cut out swathes of women who would otherwise be included. Her position as secretary and later as chairwoman of the WRC Pension Committee eventually crippled the struggle to see as many nurses pensioned as possible.

Senator Beck’s attack on the definition of a nurse’s service was not the only attack he made on the bill. The WRC had as yet presented no firm estimate of how many women the ANPA would potentially cover—and, consequently, how much the bill would cost the government. The WRC had in fact tried to secure a record of enrolled nurses from the War Department, but the cost of obtaining this count had been prohibitive and the Committee decided against it.<sup>60</sup> Sherwood had also tried to put together a list of nurses based on the WRC’s Honor Roll of Nurses, but the count was very inexact. The best number Sherwood could give the Congressional Pension Committee was 247—the number of nurses currently on the WRC Honor Roll. Now these lapses came back to haunt the WRC. Receptive to Beck’s argument, Congress voted to table the ANPA until

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<sup>59</sup> Sherwood and Barker to Pension Committee, March 29, 1888; HR50A-H12.8: Various Subjects, Box 146, Petitions, Memorials, and Resolutions, 50<sup>th</sup> Congress; RG 233; NAB.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the War Department could provide it with specific numbers of how many women had actually served.<sup>61</sup>

“[I] am not surprised that it stranded for a time on the rock it did,” Lydia Scott wrote to Clara Barton, both of whom were members of the WRC Pension Committee. “We should have had that information and presented it with the bill or given it to Committee.”<sup>62</sup> The Committee, however, refused to take the setback to heart. The chairwoman, E. Florence Barker, assembled her committee in Washington. Sherwood was unable to make the journey, but Clara Barton and Mary Logan both responded. Barker and Barton arranged a special conference with the Senate Pension Committee and with a subcommittee of the House Committee on Pensions to discuss possible steps forward.<sup>63</sup>

The Committee meetings, however, produced nothing. When the WRC’s Sixth National Convention convened in September of 1888, the bill was still tabled. At the convention, Sherwood recommended three new courses of action: first, that the Committee prepare a form that members could use to reach their personal Congressmen and urge their support for the bill; second, that the WRC establish a National Relief Corps Home where indigent army nurses, widows, and soldiers could spend their remaining days, supported by the dues of WRC members and their own pensions; and third, that the Committee authenticate the list of army nurses already in their possession. Nowhere did Sherwood request money to pay the War Department for a list of female

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<sup>61</sup> “Congress: An Abstract” *National Tribune*, March 29, 1888.

<sup>62</sup> Lydia A. Scott to Clara Barton, March 28, 1888, Reel 64, Clara Barton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>63</sup> *Journal of the Sixth Annual Convention of the Woman’s Relief Corps: Columbus, Ohio, September 12, 13 and 14, 1888* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1888), 117.

army workers, nor do the financial reports indicate that any such payment was made.<sup>64</sup> Her suggestion that the WRC establish a National Relief Corps Home suggests that she was seriously considering alternative ways of supporting destitute nurses—plans that also included care for widows and soldiers. It was the first sign of Sherwood’s changing priorities, as Sherwood’s and the WRC’s focus shifted to the dependent widows, mothers, and sisters that made up the majority of the WRC’s constituency.

In the coming years, Sherwood’s support for the bill further eroded. In 1890, the Senate report on the Army Nurses Pension Act contained a letter sent to Sherwood by Annie Wittenmyer. Wittenmyer herself was a former army nurse, one of the most prominent members of the US Christian Commission, and was now a key figure in the temperance movement. During the 1889 elections at the WRC National Convention, she was elected National President, and she began pushing for the ANPA with a will. In her letter to Sherwood, Wittenmyer took Sherwood to task over her wording of the bill, which currently covered only nurses who were enrolled by Dorothea Dix. This meant that women like Wittenmyer and her former colleagues were ineligible for a pension, and Wittenmyer bristled at the oversight. “I should be very sorry, indeed, if this worthy class should be ruled out under the provisions of this bill,” Wittenmyer wrote Sherwood.<sup>65</sup>

By now, Sherwood was showing signs of strain, and shortly after the 1890 National Convention she declined the new National President’s request to continue to serve as chairwoman of the Pension Committee. However, when the committee secretary resigned, citing overwork and ill health, Sherwood reluctantly changed her mind.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>65</sup> Annie Wittenmyer to Kate Sherwood, November 2, 1889, in U.S. Congress, “Report to accompany bill H.R. 6469: Female Nurses in the War of the Rebellion,” *Reports of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the Fifty-First Congress: 1889-1890* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1890).

Someone who knew the overall plan had to stay on.<sup>66</sup> But from this point on, Sherwood's campaign changed significantly. She stopped going to Washington to lobby for the bill, instead sending others—committee members Clara Barton and Mary A. Logan, and the new secretary, Harriette Reed—to haunt the halls of Congress while she remained in Ohio, coordinating and directing. It may have been, in part, that she was tired, and had other groups and committees that required her attention. Her husband also voiced his displeasure that she was leaving home; by Sherwood's own admission he hardly let her attend the National Conventions.<sup>67</sup> Suffice to say that in 1890 Sherwood withdrew from the ANPA campaign.

Her *de facto* replacement was Annie Wittenmyer. More than any other national president before her, Wittenmyer pressured Congress to pass the ANPA. By December, 1889, the ANPA had made it through the Senate, and was now waiting to come before the House. However, with the end of the Congressional term rapidly approaching, the bill's chances of appearing for debate were diminishing by the day. Recognizing the danger, and determined to prevent a repeat of the 1888 session, Wittenmyer issued a Circular Letter asking for WRC Corps and Departments to sign petitions supporting the bill, and to return them in two weeks' time. "Senator H.W. Blair will introduce the bill into the United States Senate," Wittenmyer informed the Corps. "When it comes up for consideration there must be a Relief Corps petition so long that it will girdle the Capitol

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<sup>66</sup> *Journal of the Eighth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps: Boston, Mass., August 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, 1890* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1890): 145.

<sup>67</sup> *Journal of the Tenth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps: Washington D.C., September 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, 1892* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1892), 338.

and show our legislators that the country demands some measure of relief in behalf of the distresses and neglected woman patriots of the war.”<sup>68</sup>

The response was overwhelming. In two weeks, the WRC collected over 160,000 signatures.<sup>69</sup> When Clara Barton sent some late petitions to Senator Cogswell a few months later, she joked, “from the size of that ‘cartwheel’ roll one would judge that it needed no further accessories.”<sup>70</sup> The WRC Pension Committee also sent letter after letter to members of Congress, detailing the points of the bill and asking for their consideration. These elicited dozens of declarations of support, many from former Union veterans and members of the Republican Party.<sup>71</sup> Congressmen such as Samuel S. Yoder (Rep.-OH), William Cogswell (Rep.-MA) and Charles Belknap (Rep.-MI) lobbied on the nurses’ behalf, and urged the Chamber to consider the bill.<sup>72</sup> Even state governments voiced their opinions; in March, 1890, the General Assembly of Iowa passed a Joint Resolution asking Congress to pass the ANPA.<sup>73</sup> Apparently the WRC’s plea to its members to use any and all political connections to bring pressure to bear on Congress had not gone unheard. However, as before, other matters in Congress took precedence. This time the tariff was a nagging question, and many Congressmen used the issue to avoid responding to the WRC, stating they could not possibly address the issue this

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<sup>68</sup> Annie Wittenmyer Circular Letter, December 17, 1889; MC 218, Vol. 1: Order Book; Woman’s Relief Corps, Department of Massachusetts Papers, 1887-1955; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>69</sup> *Journal of the Eighth Annual Convention*, 27; Pension for army nurses of the civil war; Sen. 50A-K6, Box No. 111; Records of the U.S. Senate, 50<sup>th</sup> Congress, RG 46; NAB.

<sup>70</sup> Clara Barton to William Cogswell, May 9, 1890; H.R. 51A-H10.1, Box. No. 107, Committee on Invalid Pensions; RG 233; NAB.

<sup>71</sup> Clara Barton Papers, Series 3, Box 1, Folder 5: Women’s Relief Corps, Correspondence on Pension Bill, 1889-1890 and undated; University of Maryland Digital Collections; <http://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/12624>.

<sup>72</sup> For examples, see Robert Graves, “Pensions for Heroines: A Bill Born of Gratitude Toward Brave, Wartime Women,” *Marion Star*, August 7, 1890.

<sup>73</sup> “Joint Resolution No. 3,” Box No. 107, Committee on Invalid Pensions, HR51A-H10.1; RG 233; NAB.

session.<sup>74</sup> Then the War Department, which until now had been dragging its feet on producing a list of the total number of women who served, finally produced one. According to the War Department, over 22,000 women served as nurses, matrons, laundresses, or cooks. The WRC immediately revised its estimate of eligible nurses—only half of the 22,000 would be considered under the bill, it argued, and the Bureau would most likely only grant pensions to 900 of that number, although they never said why they believed this to be.<sup>75</sup> This number, however, was still dramatically different from the total put forward by the War Department. The House took one look at the growing number of dollar signs and refused to let the bill come up for discussion.<sup>76</sup>

That did not mean Wittenmyer and other stalwarts had given up. After the end of her term as National President in the summer of 1890, Wittenmyer was elected as the head of the WRC's Invalid Home in Fulton, Ohio. The Home was established specifically to care for aging indigent nurses and soldiers' dependents. Wittenmyer spent a significant amount of time in Washington, lobbying for individual pensions for her inmates, portions of which were handed over to the Home as rent. This focus on securing individual pensions was not new. Given the current status of the ANPA, this was the most reliable means of securing any kind of federal financial support for indigent nurses. When Wittenmyer arrived in Washington in the fall of 1891 to begin the next round of lobbying for private acts, she offered her services to Sherwood: if Sherwood needed someone on the ground in Washington, Wittenmyer was already working on pensions and would gladly do what she could. As Wittenmyer herself said, "I got into it. I get into

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<sup>74</sup> Amos L. Allen to Sarah E. Fuller, September 19, 1890, in Clara Barton Papers, UMD; Joseph Gurney Cannon to Sarah E. Fuller, September 19, 1890, *ibid.*; S.S. Yoder to Sarah E. Fuller, September 25, 1890, *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Graves, "Pensions for Heroines," *Marion Star*, August 7, 1890.

<sup>76</sup> *Journal of the Eighth Annual Convention: 1890*, 146.

everything. I get out of some things if I can.”<sup>77</sup> Wittenmyer spent five weeks in Washington, living in a third-story backroom in order to economize. At Wittenmyer’s request, secretary Harriette L. Reed made the journey from her home in Dorchester, Massachusetts, to Washington shortly after Wittenmyer’s arrival, and began coordinating with the Army Nurses Association’s representative in Washington, Ellen Tolman, and its president, former army nurse Harriet P. Dame.<sup>78</sup>

The Army Nurses Association (ANA), also known as the Ex-Army Nurses Association or the National Association of Army Nurses, was founded in 1881. Since the organization was composed entirely of former army nurses—only women who had served for a minimum of three months were eligible for admission—the ANA was very invested in the passage of the Army Nurses Pension Act.<sup>79</sup> When the WRC introduced its first draft of the bill to Congress in 1888, the ANA put its own forward as well, calling for \$25 pensions as opposed to the WRC’s \$12.<sup>80</sup> Despite having overlapping membership, the two groups continued to work at odds with one another. The ANA stalwartly refused to support the WRC’s bill, arguing it would rather have no legislation at all than settle for \$12 pensions. The WRC refused to cross the GAR, which in turn refused to consider granting pensions to nurses greater than those veterans currently received. As the GAR wielded considerable political power and influence, and was using these to support the ANPA, the WRC deemed it prudent not to antagonize them.<sup>81</sup>

Thanks to their disparate efforts there were three separate bills before the House

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<sup>77</sup> *Journal of the Tenth Annual Convention: 1892*, 337.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>79</sup> Kate M. Scott, *In Honor of the National Association of Civil War Army Nurses* (Atlantic City: Yeakel Printing Co., 1910), 3.

<sup>80</sup> “Report No. 3897 to Accompany bill S. 373: Women Enrolled As Army Nurses,” *The Reports of Committees of the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Fiftieth Congress, 1888-’89* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889).

<sup>81</sup> *Journal of the Eighth Annual Convention: 1890*, 146.

Committee on Pensions in 1891: the Cogswell Bill, endorsed by the Army Nurses Association, the Grout Bill, and the Belknap Bill. Each asked for different monthly pensions for different groups of nurses. Long, drawn-out conferences between Tolman, Dame, and Reed finally resulted in a fourth bill, the Butler Bill, which asked for \$12 pensions for every woman who had served six months or more and had been mustered in by an authority recognized by the War Department.<sup>82</sup>

Based on the ANPA's track record in the Senate—the bill had easily passed that body in 1890—Reed, Wittenmyer, and the ANA focused their lobbying efforts on the House. Reed left Washington after six weeks, citing the prohibitive cost of living in the city, but Wittenmyer stayed on, juggling the individual claims of the Home's residents and the ANPA. In June, 1892, the Army Nurses Pension Act finally passed the House and went before the Senate. It should have been a moment of relief, but suddenly the Senate expressed qualms about the terms of the bill, and it appeared for a moment that the bill would not pass. Wittenmyer telegraphed Sherwood, who immediately dispatched Reed back to Washington, and the two women, along with Barton and Logan, who were both already in the city, went to work. Just days before the summer recess, the Senate agreed to a compromise bill, and the ANPA finally passed on July 27, 1892.<sup>83</sup> The bill reads as follows:

Be it enacted, etc., That all women employed by the Surgeon General of the Army as nurses, under contract or otherwise, during the late war of the rebellion, or who were employed as nurses during such period by authority which is recognized by the War Department, and who rendered actual service as nurses in attendance upon the sick or wounded in any regimental, post, camp, or general hospital of the armies of the United States for a period of six months or more, and who were honorably relieved from such service, and who are now or may hereafter be unable to earn a support, shall, upon making due proof of the fact according to

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<sup>82</sup> *Journal of the Tenth Annual Convention: 1892*, 184.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 184-185

such rules and regulations as the Secretary of the Interior may provide, be placed upon the list of pensioners of the United States and be entitled to receive a pension of twelve dollars per month, and such pension shall commence from the date of filing of the application in the Pension Office after the passage of this act: Provided, That no person shall receive more than one pension for the same period.

There is no record of what the members of the WRC's National Pension Committee saw, did, or felt, during those last few weeks as they fought for the ANPA. Newspaper announcements were subdued, relegating the news of the bill's passage to announcements of other legislation passed in Washington that day. The only sign of celebration was the relieved headline in the GAR's and WRC's newspaper, the *National Tribune*, "The Bill Which Finally Passed," and a brief announcement in General Orders No. 9 from WRC President Sue Pike Sanders. Sanders said, simply, "Let us rejoice together that these women have at last received National recognition for their self-sacrificing services."<sup>84</sup> Sanders may have spoken prematurely. Congress certainly had recognized women's Civil War service, but that was no guarantee that the Pension Bureau would as well. The larger consequence of the special acts and the efforts to pass a pension bill acceptable to Congress was to narrow eligibility to women who fit specific gendered models of behavior tied closely to social, economic, and racial status, to limit the aid nurses could receive, and to define acceptable female military service in increasingly narrow terms.

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<sup>84</sup> General Orders No. 9, August 20, 1892; MC 218, Vol. 1; WRC Papers, 1887-1955; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

*Chapter 2: The Trials and Tribulations of the Pension Process*

A few notes on the pension process as a whole are necessary before examining the files themselves. According to the ANPA, nurses had to prove two facts in order to receive a pension: that they had served for at least six months in a regimental, post, camp, or general hospital, and that they had been employed by someone authorized by the War Department to hire nurses. Originally, proof of service could be obtained only from the records of the War Department, specifically muster rolls or pay rolls. However, when it became clear that many women were not listed in the records, the Bureau allowed claimants to prove their service through original documents such as military passes, surgeons' recommendations, and enlistment and discharge papers, or through affidavits provided by any "competent witness," including officers, enlisted men, and civilians.<sup>85</sup>

The question of "competent authority"—whether or not a nurse's employer had possessed the authority to hire her—was more convoluted. If the official records showed that a nurse had served the requisite six months, then the Bureau took this as proof she had been employed by someone authorized by the War Department. If, however, there was no official record, an applicant had to obtain the testimony of a commanding officer or medical officer that someone in authority had in fact hired her. This frequently proved difficult, since most nurses had not kept in contact with their former superiors. Luckily, the Bureau kept a record of veterans' last known addresses and frequently provided nurses with the names and addresses of hospital staff. Much of the time, these men were dead or could not remember working with or seeing a specific nurse. As one surgeon

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<sup>85</sup> John W. Bixler and Edward P. Hall, eds., "Army Nurses—Act of August 5, 1892," *Decisions of the Department of the Interior in Appealed Pension and Bounty-Land Claims*, vol. VII (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 8-11.

pointed out, “At the interval of thirty years I cannot remember the names of nurses who served.”<sup>86</sup> At this point a nurse often abandoned her application, or the Bureau rejected her claim based on a lack of evidence. If a nurse was lucky enough to find someone who remembered her service and sent in their affidavit, an inquiry was sent to the Surgeon General, George M. Sternberg, regarding whether or not a nurse’s employer had the authority to hire her in the first place. This allowed Sternberg, and the officials who controlled the flow of information to him, to make their own, seemingly arbitrary decisions about which applicants received a pension and which did not.

There were also several other particulars that nurses had to prove which were not mentioned in the ANPA. If a woman could prove she was older than 65, she was automatically deemed too old to provide for herself and eligible for a pension. If, however, she was younger than 65, she had to prove that she was destitute and had no means of supporting herself. This was perhaps the easiest part of the process, and could be met through the affidavits of neighbors or a physician.<sup>87</sup>

All documents and affidavits had to be signed and properly notarized, as did the Bureau’s requisite forms, but usually without the help of an attorney or pension agent. Apparently in reaction to the blatant abuses of some pension agents, known as “pension sharks,” Congress stipulated that any agent or attorney involved in a nurse’s case could not receive any payment in excess of ten dollars, and even that sum could only be paid with the permission of the Pension Commissioner.<sup>88</sup> Any agent who worked these

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<sup>86</sup> John J. Bartholf to the Commissioner of Pensions, in Mary E. Conner Pension File, App. 1138195, Cert. 998643.

<sup>87</sup> These questions were addressed through a blank sent out to each applicant, which indicated what information the Bureau required from each applicant, including the applicant’s age, any name changes as a result of marriage, and whether her husband or sons had served in the army and were currently receiving pensions. For an example of a blank, see Emily Edenborough Pension File, App. 1116143.

<sup>88</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*: 52<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 6798.

claims, then, essentially did so *pro bono*. As a result, most women had little or no legal advice during the entire process.

Of the 2,448 women who applied for pensions under the ANPA, 185 were examined for this study.<sup>89</sup> Of these, 120 eventually received pensions—nearly two thirds of all applicants. Virtually all were white, literate, suffering from the effects of old age, and practically penniless. Yet the numbers belie the reality of the pension process. Despite the steady success rate, the application process was riddled with human error and conflicting notions of what officials considered acceptable military service for a woman, endangering a number of applications. Nurses also had their own varied opinions about their service, as well—opinions that did not always fit the ideal of the “ministering angel” that the WRC or Congress had championed.

The following section examines all the applicants in the sample as a whole. Subsequent sections focus on specific groups of nurses, distinguished by race, branch of service, and various other factors, and their experiences with the Pension Bureau. This approach allows us to address some larger questions. Who were these women? What were the problems they faced in prosecuting their claims? In what terms did they couch their service, and is it possible to see any changes in their views and the views of the Pension Bureau and Congress regarding women’s military service? And what do these pension claims reveal about the nature of women’s service during the Civil War?

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<sup>89</sup> The sample pensions were chosen at random; the only restriction was that the applicant had to have filed her claim between August 5 and December 31, 1892. This was in part due to time constraints of this study, but also because it seemed logical that there would be a surge in applications immediately after the passage of the ANPA. This allows us to see the greatest variation within a small space of time, and to gives all applicants a common base for comparison.

*The Real “Ministering Angels”: Nurses as a Collective*

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Woman’s Relief Corps focused its efforts on aiding the women who made up its constituency: literate, white, middle- and upper-class women. This focus is obvious in the rhetoric surrounding the ANPA. Throughout the four-year fight to pass the ANPA, congressmen and WRC activists alike trumpeted the image of the “ministering angel”: the middle- or upper-class woman, married and with children, who used not only her army pay but also her private funds to purchase food and medicine for her charges. These women were now, “through the vicissitudes of life, old and necessitous,” but were hesitant to publicize their service.<sup>90</sup> ANPA supporters insisted that these nurses deserved whatever charity the government could afford them, especially since, according to a revised estimate of eligible women based on the Carded Service Record, only 900 women were supposed to be eligible, and that number would rapidly diminish as these women passed away.<sup>91</sup> The drain on the treasury then would be minimal. In an interview given in 1890, Senator Charles Belknap (Rep.-MI), one of the more ardent supporters of the ANPA in Congress, downplayed the service of other groups of nurses: “mere girls,” who were driven to serve by romantic notions and a sense of adventure, women from “lower walks of life, lacking in experience and refinement,” and soldiers’ wives.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Kate Sherwood and E. Florence Barker, the Secretary and Chairwoman of the WRC Pension Committee respectively, spoke of women of “mature age” who “enlisted in purest cause of humanity...without any hope of reward,

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<sup>90</sup> Graves, “Pensions for Heroines,” *Marion Star*, August 7, 1890.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

any desire for personal preferment,” and dismissed young women and those serving for pay.<sup>93</sup> The ANPA was not meant for them, only for a worthy few.

While Congress and the WRC certainly had a target group in mind when they fashioned the ANPA, an analysis of the pension files reveals that not all applicants fit the profile of the “ministering angel.” Rather, these nurses came from all walks of life, not just the “virtuous” middle and upper class, and served in a myriad of capacities. Most of the applicants were white, literate, were or had been married, and were suffering from the effects of old age rather than a wartime injury.<sup>94</sup> They were also destitute, and no longer able to support themselves. However, many nurses who would have been classified as “mere girls,” lower-class women, and soldiers’ wives applied for pensions, as did several blacks, and dozens of women who were not affiliated with the Woman’s Relief Corps. These women were also eligible for pensions, at least on paper. Their experiences with the Pension Bureau are an excellent gauge of gender roles and racial ideologies around the turn of the century.

### *Black Nurses*

*“I am old now and stand greatly in need of my pay As I am asking only for what I labored for when it became a law for hospital nurse to get their pay then I put in for mine.”*

*--Mary Ann Jones, Huntsville, Alabama  
February 14, 1894*

An applicant’s race is difficult to determine from pension records. The Bureau never specifically inquired about it, and the women themselves volunteered very little

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<sup>93</sup> Sherwood and Barker to Pension Committee, March 29, 1888; HR50A-H12.8: Various Subjects, Box 146, Petitions, Memorials, and Resolutions, 50<sup>th</sup> Congress; RG 233; NAB.

<sup>94</sup> Of the 185, 5 could be identified as black; 25 were not literate, compared to 150 who were; 11 were obviously injured during their service, 174 were not.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Status of Application</u>	<u>Branch of Service</u>	<u>Hospitals Served</u>	<u>Free or Former Slave</u>
<b>Maria Binford</b>	Accepted	Contract	Huntsville Hospital, Alabama, and Stevenson G.H.	Former Slave
<b>Mary A. Jones</b>	Rejected (3)	Contract	Huntsville Hospital, Alabama	Former Slave
<b>Rose Russell</b>	Accepted	Contract	McPherson G.H., Vicksburg, Mississippi	Former Slave
<b>Clara Watson</b>	Rejected (3)	Contract	Murfreesboro G.H., Tennessee	Former Slave
<b>Annie Chloe Wilson</b>	Rejected (3)	Contract	Keokuk G.H., Iowa	Free

Table 1. Information taken from the pension records of black nurses. The number in parenthesis denotes the total number of times an applicant filed her claim. “G.H.” stands for “General Hospital.”

information. Five of the 185 pension claims can, however, be identified as belonging to women of color: those of Maria Binford, Mary A. Jones, Rose Russell, Clara Watson, and Annie Chloe Wilson (see Table 1).<sup>95</sup> According to the Carded Service Record, roughly ten percent of the War Department’s total female workforce was colored women.<sup>96</sup> These five women represent roughly three percent of the 185 sample pensions. The disparity in representation and the sample size means that any conclusions drawn based on these records are speculative, yet there are intriguing hints at patterns and larger issues.

Of the five, Binford, Jones, Russell, and Watson were slaves just recently released or escaped from bondage when they began their service. All five women served in the Western theatre as contract nurses—that is, women who were employed by a specific surgeon rather than by an umbrella organization like the US Sanitary Commission or the War Department—and all five were illiterate, signing all their official documents by

<sup>95</sup>Maria Binford Pension File, App. 1417702, Cert. 869519; Mary Ann Jones Pension File, App. 1138266; Rose Russell Pension File, App. 1139608, Cert. 868306; Clara Watson Pension File, App. 1141792; Annie Chloe Wilson Pension File, App. 1142734.

<sup>96</sup>Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 21.

mark. Their personal data fit neatly with the image of colored workers that Schultz constructs in her analysis of the Civil War hospital workforce.<sup>97</sup>

Their pensions demonstrate two interesting points. First, while the applications of three out of the five women were rejected by the Bureau, the decision appears to have been free from overt racial discrimination, though the institutional structure of the pension process certainly worked against them. Second, these women were uniformly aggressive in asserting their right to a pension, something rarely found in the applications of white women.

For black male veterans and their dependents, the pension process was rocky. Illiteracy meant many blacks had to find third parties to prosecute their claim—and often these people were unscrupulous and charged outrageous fees for their services, essentially taking the entire pension, if the pension ever came at all. Illiteracy also meant that blacks had few of the written records that the Bureau required for widows' or minors' pensions, such as marriage certificates or a child's date of birth. The Bureau refused to take into consideration the fact that up until 1868, these individuals were not accorded the rights of citizenship, and most were not free to marry or obtain an education prior to emancipation. It was only through years of persistence that any pensions for black veterans and their dependents passed the Bureau, and these were often smaller than those granted to whites. Clearly the Bureau was not free of racist biases.<sup>98</sup>

While there is certainly racist material in several of the five pension files, there is nothing to suggest that racism on the part of the Bureau had any bearing on the Bureau's final decision regarding these nurses. Mary Jones, Clara Watson, and Annie Wilson were

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 25-27, 55.

<sup>98</sup> Blanck and Logue, "Benefit of the Doubt": 377-399.

all rejected because the War Department records failed to show six months of service, and the women were unable to furnish testimony the Bureau deemed acceptable to replace the missing Department records. It is very possible that these women were never placed on the wartime records because of their race. However, many applicants faced the same problem, regardless of race, and the two successful applicants, Rose Russell and Maria Binford, were actually listed in the records. Record keeping was simply not a forte of the Civil War Medical Department. It is difficult, then, to determine how much the lack of documentation of these women is due to simple oversight or racist actions. The one clear case where lack of documentation can be attributed to racial causes was not the result of any action on the part of the War Department or the Bureau, but rather to an applicant's former status as a slave. Maria Binford could not provide the Bureau with her exact age, which the Bureau needed to determine her capacity to support herself. "My mistress told me when I left home during the war that I was 40 years of age," she wrote, but since she herself had no records she could not be more specific.<sup>99</sup> Eventually the Bureau had to launch a special examination in order to determine her age so that it could rule on her application. The lack of documentation here is clearly traceable to Binford's experience as a slave: masters and mistresses often did keep track of their slaves' dates of birth, but slaves had no way of producing those documents. The special examination found in Binford's favor, ruling that she was in fact over 65 years of age, and entitled to a pension. Significantly, there is no mention in the special examiner's report of Binford's race. Indeed, race did not figure prominently in any of the Bureau memos or letters, either in Binford's case, or in the cases of the remaining four women. Most references to

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<sup>99</sup> Deposition of Maria Binford, March 23, 1894, in Maria Binford Pension File, App. 1417702, Cert. 869519.

the applicant's race come from the affidavits or letters of the applicants themselves. These references mean that the Bureau was certainly not blind to the race of these applicants, but its silence indicates that this was not something the Bureau emphasized when ruling on these applications.

Only one applicant, Annie Chloe Wilson, suspected racism on the part of the Bureau. "It seems very strange to me that they try to debar me out simply because I am colored," she fumed in a letter to Commissioner Murphy in 1897. "I did the same work that the rest of the nurses did in the hospital." However, Wilson's pension claim was flawed from the start. In her first affidavit, Wilson testified that she had served as a cook at Estes House Hospital rather than as a nurse. As discussed below, unless they had served in a Special Diet Kitchen, cooks were not covered by the ANPA. Wilson further stated that she served from October, 1862 to March, 1863, but the conflicting affidavits of her co-workers placed her at Estes House at different times altogether, preventing her from reliably proving six months service. Wilson was also one of those unfortunate applicants whose supervisors were either dead or unable to remember details of events thirty years earlier. The one surgeon who thought he remembered her later rescinded his testimony after he realized he had confused Wilson with another nurse of the same name. Bad luck, an incomplete understanding of Bureau requirements, and inconsistencies in her own testimony were Wilson's strongest obstacles, not racism.<sup>100</sup>

Colored applicants were also exceptionally stubborn and vocal throughout the entire pension process, in stark contrast to their white counterparts. Jones, Watson, and Wilson all re-submitted their applications at least twice over more than a ten-year period,

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<sup>100</sup> Annie Wilson to Commissioner Murfey, August 21, 1897 in Annie Chloe Wilson Pension File, App. 1142734.

sending in more affidavits to support their claim, and pressing Bureau officials, demanding to know why their claim was not going forward; Wilson and Jones even filed appeals, calling for an official investigation into their claims. And there are the stunningly forthright letters—Wilson was not the only one who took umbrage at the Bureau’s apparent ineptitude. Mary A. Jones wrote to Commissioner Lochren, “I consider it my duty as an honest woman + as a nurse in the Post Smallpox Hospital to contend for my rights. Tisn’t my fault that my name doesn’t appear [on the hospital rolls]. I answered every question asked me...I certainly would not have gone through all this had I not worked for it and known that I deserve my pension.”<sup>101</sup> Clara Watson wrote in a similar vein, though with much less ire, “I am a poor old woman and need my pension. I served over two years a nurse in the Hospital and now am old and need my pension. I am entitled to it and have furnish [sic] evidence so it is now over four years since I made application.”<sup>102</sup>

There were white applicants who spoke as forthrightly as Wilson and Watson. Lucy Slawson, who had been trying to push her claim through for nearly fourteen years, railed, “I want my pension as honest as any soldier ever did. It is justice I demand of you.”<sup>103</sup> Other nurses used the same tact as Watson and insisted, very courteously, that they were entitled to a pension.<sup>104</sup> Overwhelmingly, however, white nurses wrote letters similar to this one, written by Elizabeth Nichols to Commissioner Lochren in 1893: “I won’t tell a lie in getting a Pension if I am disappointed I will take all things for the best

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<sup>101</sup> Mary A. Jones Pension File, App. 1138266.

<sup>102</sup> Clara Watson to Commissioner Evans, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1897, in Clara Watson Pension File, App. 1141792.

<sup>103</sup> Lucy Slawson to Commissioner of Pensions, March 7, 1906, in Lucy Slawson Pension File, App. 1138609.

<sup>104</sup> Ex. Mary Field Pension File, App. 1130335; Martha Aull Pension File, App. 1131566.

as I am not able to work much hardly able to do my hause Work [sic.] with poor health a pension would help me very much I would not ask a Pension if I did [not] need it.”<sup>105</sup>

More poignant is the letter written in 1903 by Mary J. Boston, another white nurse, after a decade of trying for a pension: “At this late date in life we feel the need of help. So our assistance from the U.S. Gov wont be long, if they heed our appeal for aid. My living self support was taken from me in 1890...so you can judge why I make one more appeal...I try to do all I can yet when it comes to a dollar I can suffer only God himself knows the rest of my many privations.”<sup>106</sup> Nichols and Boston are subservient where Jones is righteous, resigned where Jones is indignant. They emphasize their ill health and inability to do housework, depicting themselves in dependent terms. Jones, on the other hand, almost accuses the Bureau and the War Department of incompetence, and demands her rights as a former civil employee. While Watson is certainly much more polite about the whole matter, she is just as firm as Jones in asserting that she needs her pension and she is entitled to it. These files suggest that black women were not held to, or did not adhere to, the same gendered ideologies as middle- and upper-class white women, and that they likely viewed themselves as wage earners and their nursing service as employment for which they were entitled to compensation.

The outspoken nature of these letters could be attributed to general frustration with the pension process, but white women who spent comparable time waiting for the Bureau to process their applications rarely registered this level of discontent. In fact, it is found almost exclusively in blacks’ applications. Leslie Schwalm notes that work was

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<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Nichols Pension File, App. 1131954.

<sup>106</sup> Mary J. Boston to Commissioner Ware, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1903, in Mary J. Boston Pension File, App. 1140277.

central to black women's experience of freedom.<sup>107</sup> After years of slavery, these women were determined to control their own labor: they would choose when they worked, and what tasks they worked on, and they would be paid. In fact, compensation was so important to these women that it was frequently a point of contention between them and their former masters—now their employers—and many women left their employers or complained to the Freedman's Bureau due to disagreements over compensation.<sup>108</sup> While the analysis of black women's labor has so far been limited to black women's relationships with white plantation owners and the Freedman's Bureau, the content of Jones' and Watson's letters suggest that this analysis could be extended to include the federal government or, at least, the Pension Bureau. At the least, these letters strongly suggest that former black nurses, like the black women fighting with white farmers and the Freedmen's Bureau, were conscious of their rights as citizens and as independent laborers and wage earners, and had no inhibitions about fighting for those rights.

### *Regimental Nurses*

*"...I had to travel with the Regiment Rain ore [sic.] Shine. Jest see onley six dollars a month. Jest see how long I have waited for my pay ever since -1863—no pay as yet."*

*--Charlotte Wheeler  
August 8, 1897<sup>109</sup>*

Of all the women who applied for pensions, regimental nurses had the most difficult time proving their qualifications under the ANPA. These women were attached to specific regiments, usually because their husband was serving in that same regiment,

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<sup>107</sup> Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 187.

<sup>108</sup> Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and The Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy In the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 70.

<sup>109</sup> Charlotte Wheeler to Assistant Secretary of the Interior, August 8, 1897, in Charlotte Wheeler Pension File, App. 1138728.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Status of Application</b>	<b>Unit Served With</b>
<b>Isabel Aldritch</b>	Abandoned	8 <sup>th</sup> Vermont
<b>Celia A. Bailey</b>	Rejected	154 <sup>th</sup> New York
<b>Candace Baldwin</b>	Rejected	111 <sup>th</sup> Illinois
<b>Margaret Ball</b>	Rejected	5 <sup>th</sup> Missouri Militia
<b>Addie Ballou</b>	Accepted by Special Act	32 <sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin
<b>Marie J. Blaisdell</b>	Accepted by Special Act	5 <sup>th</sup> Minnesota
<b>Elizabeth Bray</b>	Rejected	5 <sup>th</sup> Kansas Cavalry
<b>Nancy C. Brown</b>	Abandoned	4 <sup>th</sup> Iowa Cavalry
<b>Helen Bull</b>	Abandoned	33 <sup>rd</sup> Illinois
<b>Mary Coppage</b>	Accepted	129 <sup>th</sup> Illinois; Nashville and Gallatin G.H.
<b>Elizabeth Evans</b>	Abandoned	9 <sup>th</sup> Kansas
<b>Lucy J. Fuller</b>	Abandoned	1 <sup>st</sup> California
<b>Elizabeth Handy</b>	Abandoned	21 <sup>st</sup> New York Battery
<b>Mary E. Harris</b>	Rejected	50 <sup>th</sup> New York Engineers
<b>Matilda Hart</b>	Accepted by Special Act	8 <sup>th</sup> Missouri
<b>Emily C. Huntley</b>	Abandoned	152 <sup>nd</sup> New York
<b>Sarah E. Ingham</b>	Accepted by Special Act	83 <sup>rd</sup> Illinois
<b>Estelle Johnson</b>	Rejected	4 <sup>th</sup> Vermont
<b>Elizabeth Nichols</b>	Rejected	111 <sup>th</sup> New York
<b>Annie E. West</b>	Accepted	1 <sup>st</sup> New York; Soldiers Home G.H., NY
<b>Charlotte Wheeler</b>	Rejected	148 <sup>th</sup> New York

Table 2. Information taken from the pension records regarding the status of regimental nurses' claims, and the regiments they served with; unless otherwise mentioned, regiments refer to infantry units. "G.H." stands for "General Hospital."<sup>110</sup>

and made arrangements with the commanding officer or the regimental surgeon to tend to the sick and wounded—sometimes for pay, sometimes without compensation. In this sample, twenty-one women identified themselves as regimental nurses (see Table 2). Of these, seven applications were abandoned before the Bureau passed final judgment, and twelve were rejected. Only two applications were accepted by the Bureau, but their acceptance was based on additional services performed at established army hospitals

<sup>110</sup> Isabel Aldritch Pension File, App. 1133530; Celia A. Bailey Pension File, App. 1141840; Candace Baldwin Pension File, App. 1138405; Margaret Ball Pension File, App. 1138267; Helen Bull Pension File, App. 1131633; Marie J. Blaisdell Pension File, App. 1139786, Cert. 978811; Elizabeth Bray Pension File, App. 1139268; Mary J. Buncher Pension File, App. 1133561, Cert. 856431; Mary Coppage Pension File, App. 1128908, Cert. 863570; Elizabeth Evans Pension File, App. 1134018; Lucy Jane Fuller Pension File, App. 1138227; Elizabeth Handy Pension File, App. 1128485; Mary E. Harris Pension File, App. 1140375; Matilda Hart Pension File, App. 1152885, Cert. 1000423; Sarah Ingham Pension File, App. 1130421, Cert. 963567; Estelle Johnson Pension File, App. 1131323; Elizabeth Nichols Pension File, App. 1131954; Annie West Pension File, App. 1138727, Cert. 860034; Charlotte Wheeler Pension File, App. 1138728.

rather than their regimental services. Four of the women whose claims were rejected later managed to secure a special act from Congress overturning the Bureau's decision and granting them a pension, bringing the total up to six successful applications, or barely one-third of all applications. Clearly regimental nurses faced an uphill battle in seeking pensions, and the odds of receiving a favorable ruling were slim. However, the abysmal success rate was not entirely due to the normal problems women faced in proving their service. The inattention of the Bureau and its own inconsistency and, sometimes, outright negligence, strongly suggest that the reason for this high rate of failure is more than a mere question of length of service or "competent authority."

In some ways, regimental nurses did not differ greatly from their sisters in other branches of the nursing service. They rarely appeared on the pay rolls, and even less frequently on the muster rolls. For some, this absence was a point of pride. "I volunteered to take care of the sick soldiers not looking for any pay," Elizabeth Nichols wrote in her application, "but I had to sign the payrolls and signed it only one [sic] While I Was out in the field it was through some mistake."<sup>111</sup> For others it was a major point of contention. Estelle Johnson and her sister Lydia Wood both signed the payroll of the 4<sup>th</sup> Vermont and drew rations, but apparently Johnson never received the majority of her pay, because in her letter to President McKinley in 1899 asking for his support she not only asked for a pension but for back pay.<sup>112</sup> Of course, this dearth of records became a major stumbling block for practically all regimental nurses. With no official records to back their claims, applicants sent in affidavits from men whom they had nursed, or men who had served in the same regiment as they, testifying to their service. Almost

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<sup>111</sup> Elizabeth Nichols to Commissioner Raum, Jan. 23, 1893, in Elizabeth Nichols Pension File, App. 1131954.

<sup>112</sup> Estelle Johnson to William McKinley, January 18, 1899, in Estelle Johnson Pension File, App. 1131323.

invariably these affidavits were deemed invalid by the Bureau because they failed to demonstrate that a nurse had been employed by someone with the authority to hire them. That could only be proven with an affidavit from the regimental surgeon or someone on his staff, such as an assistant surgeon or steward. With most of these men dead or senile, proving competent authority was very difficult.

Some nurses did manage to locate an assistant surgeon or steward willing to testify on their behalf. For any other class of nurses, this testimony would have been sufficient to prove competent authority. However, when Surgeon General George M. Sternberg reviewed these cases, he invariably rejected them by invoking a wartime measure, General Order 31. Issued by the War Department on June 9, 1861, General Order 31 directed that “women nurses will not reside in the camps, nor accompany regiments on the march.” Thirty years later, Sternberg used this order to argue that because women were not allowed to live in the camps, regimental nurses had essentially served illegally and therefore were not employed by competent authority.

Seen from this perspective, the almost universal rejection of regimental nurses’ claims appears to be perfectly legal. However, the ANPA specifically stated that nurses who served in any regimental hospital were entitled to a pension, and it is the Bureau’s treatment of these conflicting laws that strongly suggests that something more than legal technicalities was behind the rejection of these applications. These two conflicting stances should have generated some sort of formal inquiry. The Bureau was not unused to working out the finer points of the ANPA. As discussed in the next section, women who served in the Special Diet Kitchens also faced strong opposition from the Bureau when they applied for pensions, despite the fact that the ANPA specifically noted their

eligibility. It required an official ruling from the Secretary of the Interior for the Bureau to consider Diet Kitchen nurses eligible for pensions.<sup>113</sup> The Secretary's actions prove that the Bureau was to some degree willing to work out conflicts surrounding the terms of the ANPA. Yet the Bureau never discussed the legal position of regimental nurses, and instead clung to General Order 31 as a mantra.

This behavior is especially strange because Annie Wittenmyer was deeply involved in trying to counter the Surgeon General's ruling, and brought it to the attention of Congress and the Woman's Relief Corps. When one of the claims for which Wittenmyer served as attorney was rejected because of General Order 31, Wittenmyer fired back:

The law of 1892 very clearly allows army nurses who served in Post or Regimental hospitals pensions, other conditions having been met. I cannot see that the General Orders 31 War Department... could bear unfavorably on their services in the hospitals. As I understood this matter, the US Congress has by law placed this class of nurses on the pensionable list, no proof of service. I know that to have been the purpose of those who framed the law.<sup>114</sup>

The Bureau never responded, and Wittenmyer, supported by the WRC, took the matter to Congress. Though the bill she tried to push through ultimately failed, the matter should have generated at least some discussion or clarification of the legal position of regimental nurses.<sup>115</sup> Yet there is no sign of any such discussion in the records, and the repercussions of this inaction are evident in the high rate of failure for this class of applicants. Ultimately, of the twelve applicants in this sample who were rejected, nine were rejected on the basis of General Order 31.

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<sup>113</sup> Bixler and Hall, *Decisions in Appealed Pension Claims*, 8-10.

<sup>114</sup> Annie Wittenmyer to Commissioner Lochren, November 19, 1895, in Mary E. Harris Pension File, App. 1140375.

<sup>115</sup> *Journal of the Fourteenth National Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps: St. Paul, Minnesota, September 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 1896* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1896), 150.

Even when General Order 31 was inapplicable, the Bureau found other ways to deny claims, most notably in the cases of Matilda Hart and Addie Ballou. Hart and Ballou were both fortunate enough to locate the surgeons who had employed them and obtain their testimony, proving both six months service and service under competent authority. As part of standard procedure, the Bureau sent an inquiry to Surgeon General Sternberg asking if the surgeon had had the authority to employ these women. Sternberg responded: "Army Regulations of 1861 and 1863 required that 'cooks and nurses will be taken from the privates.' [Army Regulations] provided for the employment of female nurses in general or permanent hospitals only. I am therefore of the opinion that the employment of claimant as nurse was not by competent authority." Based on Sternberg's ruling, Hart's and Ballou's applications were rejected. With General Order 31 in question since both women had clearly been employed by the regimental surgeon, Sternberg had found another technicality upon which to base his rejection.

The reason behind George Sternberg's decisions may be partly reasoned from his later career. In 1901, Sternberg organized the US Army Nurse Corps, which still exists today. This organization replaced the ad-hoc system of hiring contract and civilian nurses used during both the Civil War and the Spanish-American War with a body of professional, enlisted nurses. Perhaps Sternberg objected to nurses who he felt served on an individual, informal basis rather than as a member of a formal governmental organization. Without more information on his background, it is hard to say for sure what his motivation was, but between the treatment of regimental nurses and the experiences of the Diet Kitchen nurses, a strong case can be made that Sternberg had his

own idea of what constituted acceptable military service for women, and interpreted the law to suit his opinions, perhaps paving the way for his own nursing corps.

*Diet Kitchen Nurses and the US Christian Commission*

*“We were young then and never thought of a pension, or how valuable such papers might be.”*

*--Elizabeth B. Faatz  
December 30, 1893<sup>116</sup>*

While they certainly had their own share of difficulties, nurses who worked for the US Christian Commission (USCC) fared much better than regimental nurses. Of the seven women identified as USCC workers, six received pensions (see Table 3). While the sample size is small, these files do reveal a great deal of confusion and inconsistency regarding the exact status these women held under the ANPA, further suggesting that the bureaucrats responsible for handling pension applications had their own notions of acceptable service and applied them.

USCC workers here fall into two categories: those who worked directly for the USCC, and those who worked for Annie Wittenmyer, who organized many of the Special Diet Kitchens found in numerous hospitals during the last years of the war. For women who served in the USCC, but not under Wittenmyer, the chief difficulty lay in supplementing the War Department’s incomplete records with affidavits. If they could accomplish this, their applications were successful. Diet Kitchen nurses, however, were not so fortunate. During their wartime service, these women were tasked with preparing special dishes for injured soldiers. As such, they fell into that gray area between nurse and cook—the former being pensionable under the ANPA, but not the latter. Another

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<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth B. Faatz Pension File, App. 1143711, Cert. 881850.

Name	Status of Application	Hospitals Served
Sarah Bloor	Accepted	Gayoso Hospital Diet Kitchen
Harriet V. Clough	Rejected	Bridgeport, Alabama and Nashville field hospitals
Helen B. Cole	Accepted	Campbell G.H. Diet Kitchen
Sallie Cowgill	Accepted (2)	Chattanooga Field Hospital Diet Kitchen
Elizabeth B. Faatz	Accepted	Jackson, Webster, and Vicksburg G.H. Diet Kitchens
Carrie W. Pollard	Accepted	Chattanooga Field Hospital Diet Kitchen, several 'floating hospitals'
Lydia A. Wilson	Accepted	West Building, Baltimore G.H.

Table 3. Information taken from the pension claims of USCC regarding the status of their claim and the hospitals where they served. The list of hospitals is not exhaustive; many of these women relocated several times within the space of a few months, based on demand. Numbers in parenthesis denote the total number of times an applicant filed her claim. "G.H." stands for "General Hospital."<sup>117</sup>

issue was the question of who exactly had hired these women: the surgeons or Wittenmyer? If these women were hired by the surgeon in charge, then they easily fell within the requirements of the ANPA. Wittenmyer, however, was another matter, since she was not directly employed by the War Department. As previously mentioned, this quickly became an issue as Diet Kitchen nurses began to apply for pensions. In response to the problems generated by the initial applications, the Assistant Secretary of the Interior ruled in June, 1893, that since "the dietary nurse sustains a relation to a patient which is much akin to that of a medical advisor...their pensionable status under the act [is] unquestionable."<sup>118</sup> He ruled that in such cases applicants had to prove they were employed by the surgeon in charge, and had prepared the meals in consultation with the surgeons and the patients. The question of whether Wittenmyer was authorized to hire

<sup>117</sup> Sarah Bloor Pension File, App. 1140274, Cert. 867464; Helen Brainard Cole Pension File, App. 1131667, Cert. 938521; Sallie Cowgill Pension File, App. 1139290, Cert. 874297; Elizabeth B. Faatz Pension File, App. 1143711, Cert. 881850; Carrie Pollard Pension File, App. 1141411, Cert. 871309; Lydia A. Wilson Pension File, App. 1139316, Cert. 874531.

<sup>118</sup> Bixler and Hall, *Decisions in the Appealed Pension Claims*, 10-11.

these women in her own right was left unsettled. This was bound to create a problem in future applications, since frequently the surgeons who requested the Diet Kitchen workers were dead or had forgotten the women, leaving Wittenmyer as the only person in authority who could testify to their service.

The ensuing paper war between the Record and Pensions Division and the Surgeon General over Wittenmyer's exact status, visible in the files of Wittenmyer's employees, is testimony to the many questions then being posed about nurses' Civil War service. Standard procedure in a case where there was no record of service on file called for the Bureau to send a request to the War Department asking for a decision on whether or not the employer cited in the claim had the authority to hire nurses. The request could go directly to Colonel Fred Ainsworth, the head of the Record and Pensions Division in the War Department, or he could pass it on to the Surgeon General, George Sternberg. Ainsworth, it seems, was convinced that there was no record in the Surgeon General's department that Wittenmyer had been given the authority to employ nurses. Accordingly, he denied competent authority in two of the sample cases, and, according to the precedents he cited in his reports, also denied competent authority in at least five other applications outside the sample.<sup>119</sup> At the same time, however, Sternberg put forward his own decision. Apparently he had access to information Ainsworth did not have, because he cited wartime documents that specifically gave Wittenmyer the power to "employ such ladies as she might deem proper upon the request of U.S. surgeons," which meant she was considered competent authority.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sallie Cowgill Pension File, App. 1139290, Cert. 874297; Carrie Pollard Pension File, App. 1141411, Cert. 871309.

<sup>120</sup> Sarah Bloor Pension File, App. 1140274, Cert. 867464.

The issue finally came to a head over the case of Carrie Pollard. Ainsworth denied competent authority on the usual grounds, but somehow the matter was forwarded to Sternberg, who came down on Ainsworth with a resounding crash. The report he returned to the Pension Bureau reiterated his decision that Wittenmyer was authorized to hire nurses on behalf of army surgeons, and insisted that the records which Ainsworth claimed did not exist were in fact very real. Furthermore, Ainsworth had utterly misinterpreted the report Sternberg had previously sent him on the extent of Wittenmyer's authority. What Ainsworth had taken as an overarching decision that Wittenmyer did not have the authority to hire nurses was instead an observation that Sternberg had found no records pertaining to a particular application. In other words, Ainsworth was "incorrect," and the decision was reversed.<sup>121</sup> Not a single Diet Kitchen nurse in this sample was denied a pension following this decision.

This whole debacle could be interpreted as an honest mistake on Ainsworth's part, but Ainsworth was something of an administrative genius. When he arrived in Washington in 1886, Ainsworth set about radically altering record-keeping in the War Department by creating a system of index-record cards which allowed officials to obtain information in a fraction of the time it had previously taken them, and simultaneously avoid wear and tear on the original documents. Historians know him mostly for his work in compiling the massive, 128-volume work, *The War of the Rebellion: Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. His access to and control of records meant that projects lived or died at his whim. He was, as one historian put it, "a behind-the-scenes operator whose influence has rarely been surpassed in the history of

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<sup>121</sup> Carrie Pollard Pension File, App. 1141411, Cert. 871309.

Washington bureaucracy.”<sup>122</sup> A man this careful, this political, and this good at his job does not simply misinterpret a Surgeon General’s report, or misplace a pertinent record.

Also potentially significant is his connection to Senator Francis Cockrell, a Democrat from Missouri. Cockrell made no secret of his opposition to the ANPA, or to pensioning nurses in general. Nurses, Cockrell argued, were never actually in the military service and therefore should not be pensionable at all. To that end, as noted in Chapter 1, he helped institute a rule in Congress from 1888 onward that nurses’ pensions granted by special act should not exceed \$12, whereas previously nurses could receive up to \$25. When he saw that the ANPA was going forward whether he wished it or not, Cockrell took great care to restrict eligibility to “those who might be found by the record or by competent evidence and to the satisfaction of the War Department to have been in the service.”<sup>123</sup> Taken out of context this may seem like the logical move of a man concerned with fraud, or pensioning non-military personnel. However, since many of the nurses who had been pensioned up to this point were exactly the kind of women whose service did not appear in the official records, it was a damning move on Cockrell’s part.

Cockrell was also responsible for Ainsworth’s promotion to the Record and Pensions Division.<sup>124</sup> The effects of this decision can be seen in the evidence Cockrell put forward in 1890 and again in 1892 against the ANPA: a “classified schedule of female hospital employés as shown by the records on file in the Record and Pension Division, War Department.” In other words, it was a list of all the women who had

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<sup>122</sup> John J. Pullen, *A Shower of Stars: the Medal of Honor and the 27<sup>th</sup> Maine* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1966), 115.

<sup>123</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record: 52<sup>nd</sup> Congress*, 6798.

<sup>124</sup> Siert F. Riepma, “A Soldier-Archivist and His Records: Major General Fred C. Ainsworth,” *The American Archivist* 4, no. 3 (July, 1941): 182.

served in any capacity during the war who were listed in the War Department records.<sup>125</sup> This schedule, known as the Carded Service Record, listed over 22,000 women. Not all of these women were eligible for pensions under the ANPA—in fact, only 6,000 of these women were listed as nurses—but the number was significantly greater than the estimates the WRC had previously argued would be eligible, and, consequently, so was the drain on the national treasury. Adding to the confusion was the fact that many of the remaining 16,000 women were listed as “undetermined,” meaning there was no record of who had hired them or what duties they had performed. Cockrell immediately took advantage of the situation and scared many of his fellow senators into believing that because of the thousands of “undetermined” women, the ANPA as it currently stood would allow all 22,000 women to draw pensions. The Senate balked at the growing expense of pensioning all those women, and decided to put the matter on hold until a better record could be obtained. Overnight, the Carded Service Record became the greatest obstacle to the passage of the ANPA, and the WRC and its supporters in Congress devoted an immense amount of time and effort to correcting it.<sup>126</sup>

These records, as Cockrell said, came from the Record and Pension Division: Ainsworth’s office. Ainsworth, then, contributed indirectly to the failure of the ANPA in 1890, and four years later was directly responsible for the failure of one pension (Cowgill), the near-failure of another (Pollard), and the likely failure of at least five more, unidentified pensions.<sup>127</sup> Add to this his continued association with Senator Cockrell,

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<sup>125</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record: 52<sup>nd</sup> Congress*, 6797.

<sup>126</sup> *Journal of the Ninth Annual Convention of the Woman’s Relief Corps: Detroit, Mich., August 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 1891* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1891), 41.

<sup>127</sup> These unidentified claims are referenced in reports Ainsworth cited in his reasons for denying Cowgill and Pollard pensions. Because he gave only report numbers and not pension application numbers, it is impossible to identify precisely which claims he referred to.

and it seems very likely that, whether for personal or political reasons, Ainsworth was strongly opposed to nurses receiving military pensions.

*Dorothea Dix's Nursing Corps and the US Sanitary Commission*

*"I know you will think what a nuisance old women are so you need not bother to answer me, only do get someone to look after her case."*

*--Emma Black*

*September 5, 1907<sup>128</sup>*

From the beginning, women who served in Dorothea Dix's nursing corps were earmarked for success in obtaining pensions. Every rendition of the ANPA mentioned these nurses specifically, and, because Dix's department was directly supervised by the War Department, there was ample documentation of nurses' services, and no question as to competent authority. Consequently, the troubles that plagued other nurses were not a factor in these applications. Of the twenty-four corps nurses who received pensions, most were approved within six or seven months, much faster than the year and a half or more that nurses who were not employed by a governmental organization typically had to wait (see Figure 4 for a list of all Corps nurses). Only four corps nurses were rejected, and all for reasons that had nothing to do with gender or conflicts over the definition of nurses' service. One, Annie Stiles, was already drawing a pension as the widow of an 1812 veteran. As the Bureau informed her in its rejection letter, it was illegal for one person to draw two pensions simultaneously and they could not accept her nurses' application. Julia Sutliff was denied on a technicality: she had neglected to have a notary sign all her forms, which was only discovered in 1907 as the Bureau was preparing to

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<sup>128</sup>Emma Black to Commissioner Warren, September 5, 1907, in Julia D. Sutliff Pension File, App. 1138710.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Status of Application</b>	<b>Hospitals Served</b>
<b>Lauretta Balch</b>	Accepted	Fort Schuyler
<b>Diana Belden</b>	Accepted	Columbian College Hospital
<b>Sophronia Bucklin</b>	Accepted	Camp Letterman, Camp Stoneman, Seminary Hospital and Judiciary Square Hospital
<b>Nellie E. Butler</b>	Accepted	White House Landing, Cowling Green, Raleigh and Newborn Hospitals
<b>Bell Vance Clark</b>	Accepted	G.H. 3, Nashville
<b>Martha B. Douglass</b>	Accepted	Fortress Monroe, Chesapeake Hospital, Macon House, and Balfour G.H.
<b>Jennette DuBois</b>	Accepted	Columbian College Hospital, Judiciary Square Hospital
<b>Clara D. Estabrook</b>	Accepted	Market Street Hospital, Judiciary Square Hospital, and Davis Island
<b>Jane Fanning</b>	Accepted	Fortress Monroe
<b>Margaret G. Fitzroy</b>	Accepted	Frederick G.H., Columbian College Hospital, and Kalorama Hospital
<b>Susan Free</b>	Accepted	Covington G.H., Lexington G.H., and Woodward Hospital
<b>Fanny Titus-Hazen</b>	Accepted	Columbian College Hospital,
<b>Emeline Himes</b>	Accepted	Judiciary Square Hospital, Union Hotel, Point Lookout, and St. Elizabeth's
<b>Jane Howard</b>	Accepted	Harewood Hospital, Slough G.H., and Columbian College Hospital
<b>Mary A. Huff</b>	Accepted (2)	Carver Hospital
<b>Sarah J.A. Hussey</b>	Accepted	Hampton G.H., Continental Hospital, and Blackwell Island
<b>Fannie A. Jackson</b>	Accepted	Big Shanty, Centerville, Lookout Mountain
<b>Lucy L. Kaiser</b>	Accepted	Jefferson Barracks, various hospital boats
<b>Harriet M.D. Scott</b>	Rejected	Camp Griffen, Fortress Monroe, Union Hotel Hospital, Armory Square Hospital, "Rockland"
<b>Annie E. Stiles</b>	Rejected	National Hotel, Baltimore
<b>Julia D. Sutliff</b>	Rejected	Georgetown, Fortress Monroe, "Ohio"
<b>Eliza Townsend</b>	Accepted	Baton Rouge Hospital
<b>Josephine H. White</b>	Accepted	Lovell Hospital
<b>Rachel Woodford</b>	Accepted	Union Hotel, New Haven Hospital, Davis Island

Table 4. Information on corps nurses in this sample, including the status of their application, and the hospitals they served in. The list of hospitals is not exhaustive, since many nurses were transferred based on surgeons' demands. "G.H." stands for General Hospital. Any hospital in quotation marks indicates the hospital was a hospital transport ship. Numbers in parenthesis denote the total number of times an applicant filed her claim.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Lauretta Balch, App. 1131579, Cert. 851560; Diana Belden Pension File, App. 1138409, Cert. 854366; Sophronia Bucklin Pension File, App. 1138431, Cert. 856103; Nellie E. Butler Pension File, App. 1138434, Cert. 864505; Bell Vance Clark Pension File, App. 1138447, Cert. 853529; Martha B. Douglass Pension File, App. 1128421, Cert. 856446; Jennette DuBois Pension File, App. 1128424, Cert. 825342; Clara D. Estabrook Pension File, App. 1138492, Cert. 855599; Jane A. Fanning Pension File, App. 1128435, Cert. 853846; Susan Free Pension File, App. 1138570, Cert. 896644; Fanny Titus-Hazen Pension File, App. 1130928, Cert. 847656; Emeline Himes Pension File, App. 1141302, Cert. 854923; Jane Howard

<b>Name</b>	<b>Status of Application</b>	<b>Hospitals Served</b>
<b>Sarah Barton</b>	Accepted	Jefferson Barracks
<b>Ellen Baxter</b>	Accepted	Camp Denison G.H.
<b>Caroline Boston</b>	Accepted (2)	Benton Barracks
<b>Helen N. Burnell</b>	Accepted	Adams G.H.
<b>Caroline C. Edward</b>	Accepted	5 <sup>th</sup> Street Hospital and Hickory Street Hospital
<b>Lydia B. Ely</b>	Accepted	Nashville, Louisville, and Crittenden G.H.
<b>Adelia Ferris</b>	Accepted	Columbian College, Mt. Pleasant, and McKimms Hospitals
<b>Mary E.S. Guest</b>	Accepted	Union Hospital
<b>Rachel E. Gwin</b>	Abandoned	Cairo General Hospital
<b>Rena L. Miner</b>	Accepted	Jeffersonville G.H., and Jefferson Barracks
<b>Catherine Near</b>	Accepted	Benton Barracks, Vicksburg and Freedmen's G.H.

Table 5. Information on US Sanitary Commission nurses identified in the sample, including the status of their application and the hospitals where they served. "G.H" stands for General Hospital. Numbers in parenthesis denote the total number of times an applicant filed her claim.<sup>130</sup>

approve her application. Mary A. Huff was a non-resident living in Canada when she applied for her pension. At the time the Bureau was not authorized to grant pensions to non-residents and rejected her claim, but when a law passed in 1893 granting pensions to this specific class, Huff was able to successfully reapply. The last nurse, Harriet M.D. Scott, had the unfortunate distinction of being the only Corps nurse to be absent from the records, and could not locate anyone able to testify on her behalf.<sup>131</sup>

Sanitary Commission nurses had similar rates of success (see Figure 5). The United States Sanitary Commission (USSC) was a private organization founded under the

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Pension File, App. 1131824, Cert. 833797; Sarah J. A. Hussey Pension File, App. 1138546, Cert. 854439; Fannie Jackson Pension File, App. 1130424, Cert. 867942; Lucy L. Kaiser Pension File, App. 1138563, Cert. 855161; Eliza Townsend Pension File, App. 1132088, Cert. 854356; Josephine White Pension File, App. 1138733, Cert. 855262; Rachel Woodford Pension File, App. 1138743, Cert. 857247.

<sup>130</sup> Sarah Barton Pension File, App. 1123054, App. 875442 ; Ellen Baxter Pension File, App. 1130227, Cert. 857318 ; Caroline Boston Pension File, App. 1130247, Cert. 980312 ; Helen M. Burnell Pension File, App. 1141214, Cert. 857562 ; Caroline C. Edward Pension File, App. 1130830, Cert. 852576; Lydia B. Ely Pension File, App. 1138494, Cert. 858140; Adelia Ferris Pension File, App. 113850, Cert. 858128; Mary E.S. Guest Pension File, App. 1138516, Cert. 855373; Rachel E. Gwin Pension File, App. 1140102; Rena L. Miner Pension File, App. 1130970, Cert. 831176 ; Catherine Near Pension File, App. 1130537, Cert. 855198.

<sup>131</sup> Annie Stiles Pension File, App. 1138701; Julia D. Sutliff Pension File, App. 1138710; Harriet M.D. Scott Pension File, App. 1138678; Mary A. Huff Pension File, App. 1133604, Cert. 895217.

auspices of the War Department, and many USSC nurses were commissioned by both their regional USSC leader and by Dix. Just like Dix's nurses, their records were very complete, which allowed for an almost 100% success rate. The one rejection amongst the eleven USSC nurses, Caroline Boston's, was due to a clerical error, which was discovered after Boston reapplied in 1898—she was subsequently granted a pension.<sup>132</sup> Clearly these women had a much easier time obtaining pensions than their sisters in other branches of the service.

While their success rate is almost certainly due in part to superior record keeping, there are other factors. Both Corps and USSC nurses were closely tied to the War Department, which clearly indicated they were hired by someone with competent authority. The Corps and the USSC also actively recruited women who fit the image of “ministering angels” that Senator Belknap later envisioned—the women considered most deserving of government aid. These nurses had to fulfill strict requirements if they wished to be hired. Dix issued Circular No. 8 in July, 1862 detailing her standards:

No candidate for service...will be received below the age of thirty-five years (35) nor above fifty...Matronly persons of experience, good conduct, or superior education and serious disposition, will always have preference; habits of neatness, order, sobriety, and industry are prerequisites. All applicants must present certificates of qualification and good character from at least two persons of trust, testifying to morality, integrity, seriousness, and capacity for the care of the sick.<sup>133</sup>

The USSC maintained similar standards, though they were more lax about the age requirement than Dix. As a result of these requirements, most Corps and USSC nurses were characterized, both during and after the Civil War, as matronly, middle-class

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<sup>132</sup> Caroline Boston Pension File, App. 1130247, Cert. 980312.

<sup>133</sup> Dorothea Dix, *Circular No. 8 Regarding Requirements for Female Nursing Applicants, July 14, 1862*, NARA.

volunteers of good moral standing. The need to go through an application process and produce recommendations provided written proof of these qualities. Their reputation for morality and integrity, their clear military service, and the abundance of documentation meant that there were no grounds for bureaucrats like George Sternberg or Fred Ainsworth to question their eligibility under the ANPA.

*Contract and Volunteer Nurses*

*“You say in your letter that my name is on your book, preserved as a record among other names of those nursed by you in New Orleans hospitals, and you ask me if I can recall the circumstances—I could as soon have forgotten my mother who brought me into the world.”*

*--George Loud to Phebe Farmer  
October 1, 1892<sup>134</sup>*

When historians describe Civil War nursing, they tend to distinguish between contract and volunteer nurses. Contract nurses are defined as lower-class women who were employed by specific individuals, usually the surgeon in charge of a hospital, rather than a larger organization like the War Department or Sanitary Commission, and drew pay for their service. Volunteer nurses were the middle-class equivalent thereof, but they drew no pay, and were exceedingly proud of the fact. Trying to apply these definitions to the kinds of services put forward in the pension applications is much more complicated. There are certainly women who fit historians’ definitions, but there are also many women who claimed they volunteered for the service, but then drew pay, and others who were contracted by individual surgeons, but never received pay. This distinction is further complicated by the women themselves. Many often claimed service as a contract or volunteer nurse, when their service fit the opposite definition. Others simply did not

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<sup>134</sup> George Loud to Phebe Farmer, October 1, 1892, in Phebe Farmer Pension File, App. 1138498.

know what to call their service. When a Bureau form asked Eliza Richmond if she had served by contract or otherwise, she wrote (writing in the third person), “she thinks contract nurse.”<sup>135</sup> Many others simply left that question blank. For these reasons, contract and volunteer nurses have been grouped together for purposes of analysis.

Because branch of service is so difficult to determine for these women, they could be seen as the best representatives of the entire sample. All Bureau officials had to go on, presumably, was what the official records indicated, and what information the woman herself supplied. This is the only group whose two-thirds acceptance rate mirrors that of the overall sample. Of 120 applications, 25 were abandoned. Of the remaining 94, 64 were accepted, and 31 were rejected.<sup>136</sup> These rejections were typically based on a lack of evidence. The official records, as usual, provided very little documentation, because contract nurses were often paid off-book, and volunteer nurses not at all. “As for Pay Gen Grant done the Paying that I got,” one nurse wrote the Bureau. “I was A Voleteer did not ask how mutch I was to Receive and got my money as I called for it of Gen Grant. And when I quit Gen Grant Paid me what was back.”<sup>137</sup> Other nurses, like the nurses Susan Jenkins worked with, did not sign the pay rolls, “but as such as [sic.] did received their pay through those Officers, as they drew the money, and we did not meet with the Pay Master at all officially.”<sup>138</sup> Volunteer nurses, by their very definition, never received pay or signed the muster rolls, thereby leaving no paper trail. As a result, most

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<sup>135</sup> Eliza Richmond Pension File, App. 1138666, Cert. 857684.

<sup>136</sup> Seven of the rejections were later approved, five by special act, two by re-application to the Bureau.

<sup>137</sup> Nancy Willis to Commissioner of Pensions, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1893, in Nancy Willis Pension File, App. 1140244. This letter is also a perfect example of the difficulty of classifying a nurse as volunteer or contract. Willis presents herself as a volunteer, but she was paid for her service.

<sup>138</sup> Susan A. Jenkins Pension File, App. 1141980.

nurses had to obtain testimony from co-workers and supervisors to corroborate their claims.

The Bureau was, as usual, very particular about the kinds of evidence and testimony it required, and it very rarely gave women the benefit of the doubt. A note written by an unknown Bureau official in Adelaide Poorman's file mused, "It is strange that the record would show all her service from the time she entered the hospital to Feb. 28 & none thereafter [Poorman claimed she had served until May]. The witness, depending on her memory only, may easily be mistaken as to duration of service."<sup>139</sup> Even testimony from influential politicians and generals did little to help a claim if it did not conform to Bureau standards. Sarah Ames was close friends with General Edward Townsend, a former Adjutant General, and with former Surgeon General William Hammond, both of whom testified on her behalf. Their affidavits clearly described Ames's efforts in numerous hospitals in the eastern theatre of the war, but they could not provide specific dates for her service, and without those dates the Bureau refused to grant Ames a pension.<sup>140</sup>

Like most everything the Bureau did, these rejections seem to be—and, in fact, are—perfectly legal. However, closer examination of these rejections reveals a rather surprising oversight. Phebe Farmer filed for a pension based on the four years she spent nursing soldiers in her home in New Orleans. When the Bureau rejected her claim, she was livid: "[The] War Department fail to show that I served in a hospital in any capacity... I am denied a beggarly pension *because I nursed and cared for the soldiers at*

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<sup>139</sup> Adelaide Poorman Pension File, App. 1138657.

<sup>140</sup> Sarah F. Ames Pension File, App. 1126306.

*my own expense instead of having my expenses paid by the government* as in the case of nurses sent out by the Christian Commission [emphasis added].”<sup>141</sup>

In one powerful letter, Farmer neatly summarized the paradox of the ANPA. The ANPA as originally intended by the Woman’s Relief Corps was supposed to benefit the “ministering angels,” which included not only the Corps or Sanitary Commission nurses, but also the virtuous volunteer nurses who, like Farmer, had refused, or never received, payment for their services—essentially, the women who left no paper trail. Yet because of Bureau standards, which required documented proof of service, these were exactly the women that the ANPA did not cover.

Farmer was surprisingly cognizant of this fact. “I have never entertained much hope that the nurse bill would cover my case,” she wrote, “but Mrs. Wittenmyer and Mr. Loud who understand my position, thought otherwise...My only hope for relief was in a special act...but when the nurse bill was agitated [my special act] was turned over to the mercy of that bill and I lost hope.”<sup>142</sup> Again, Farmer was correct: special acts proved to be the only recourse in cases like hers. Elizabeth Brower tended soldiers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps of the Army of Potomac for over two years, but because she was unpaid and served in informal, temporary field hospitals there was no record of her service.<sup>143</sup> Likewise, Electa Willard worked alongside her husband, a government relief worker, distributing goods and nursing at St. Mary’s Hospital and Harpers General Hospital in Michigan, but the transient nature of her work meant there were no written records.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Phebe W. Farmer to Commissioner Lochren, April 17, 1893, in Phebe W. Farmer Pension File, App. 1138498.

<sup>142</sup> Phebe W. Farmer to Commissioner Raum, Jan. 29, 1893, in Phebe W. Farmer Pension File, App. 1138498. Mr. Loud was a former patient of Farmer’s as well as the current editor of the popular *Home and Country* magazine, a New York-based publication of the Grand Army of the Republic.

<sup>143</sup> Elizabeth Brower Pension File, App. 1138179, Cert. 892868.

<sup>144</sup> Electa Willard Pension File, App. 1133884, Cert. 1078866.

Both managed to secure special acts after the Bureau rejected their application. Many women, however, did not have the social connections or financial resources to push for a special act, and never received their pension.<sup>145</sup> This is perhaps the only time that the Bureau was not at fault for the difficulties in implementing the Army Nurses Pension Act. The blame here clearly rests with the group which wrote the ANPA: the Woman's Relief Corps. However, Farmer's caustic remark regarding Christian Commission nurses, and through them, Wittenmyer, who encouraged her to trust the Bureau with her application, was misdirected. Wittenmyer certainly did nothing to help Farmer's claim—Farmer's mention of her in her letter is the only appearance she makes in Farmer's pension file. However, Wittenmyer had no way of knowing the difficulties volunteer nurses faced in proving their service. Of the seven cases in this class with which Wittenmyer was involved, only two rejections were due to a lack of evidence.<sup>146</sup> The remaining two rejections were because the applicant herself claimed she had served less than six months, and were thus already earmarked for failure.<sup>147</sup>

Why Wittenmyer and Kate Sherwood did not envision these difficulties while writing the ANPA is unknown. Perhaps they were relying on special acts to help this particular class of applicants, or perhaps they, like many applicants, conflated volunteer nurses with women who volunteered to serve in Dix's nursing corps or the Sanitary or Christian Commission. Whatever the reason, it was a major oversight on their part, and more evidence that perceptions of women's wartime service, even among those most familiar with their service, were limited to a few select stereotypes.

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<sup>145</sup> Ex. Emily Edenborough Pension File, App. 1136143.

<sup>146</sup> Nancy Willis Pension File, App. 1140244.

<sup>147</sup> Sarah C. Dyer Pension File, App. 1140943 ; Sarah A. Jenkins Pension File, App. 1141980.

Surgeon General George Sternberg also used volunteer and contract nurses to strengthen the definitions of acceptable service he had put forward regarding regimental nurses. Elizabeth Brower was rejected because her ongoing service tending to 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps soldiers in corps field hospitals did not comply with army regulations, which stated that female nurses could only serve in general or permanent hospitals. Her service was thus not by competent authority. Similarly, Maria Eldred's service tending the wounded at the Cavalry Brigade Hospital in Falls Church, Virginia, was deemed contrary to army regulations, and was not by competent authority. Sternberg used the same argument in two other cases involving regimental nurses. Like the regimental nurses, Brower and Eldred had proof they had been contracted by an army surgeon, so there was no question of competent authority, and they had sufficient proof from affidavits and War Department records to establish a service of more than six months.<sup>148</sup> The cases met all the requirements set forward in the ANPA, yet Sternberg still chose to reject them. It seems that in addition to not approving of women who served outside of military institutions, Sternberg also did not approve of women who served on the battlefields and lived with the army, as Brower and the two regimental nurses had done. Like his motives for rejecting the regimental nurses, Sternberg's motives for rejecting these applications are unknown, but are most likely related to his eventual professionalization of army nurses and the creation of the US Army Nurse Corps.

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<sup>148</sup> Elizabeth Brower Pension File, App. 1138179, Cert. 892862; Maria Eldred Pension File, App. 1128431, Cert. 1104939.

*Other Factors*

While an applicant's branch of service was by far the most important factor in pension claims, there were other factors that could potentially influence the success of applications: literacy, the presence of an attorney, marital status, and whether or not the applicant had sustained any disabilities during her service. Of these, only literacy appears to have been a significant factor.

The number of non-literate applicants (applicants who sign by mark) is rather small, only twenty five of the entire sample, or just under fourteen percent. However, non-literate women were significantly more likely to abandon their claim or be rejected by the Bureau than literate women (see Figure 1). This is most likely attributable to the absence of written records, such as letters or diaries, and the difficulty of acquiring a written affidavit from witnesses. Organizations like Dix's nursing corps, the USSC, and the USCC, which kept official records, were also more likely to hire literate women, as illustrated by the requirements in Dix's *Circular No. 8*; among the illiterate nurses in the sample, only one served in Dix's corps, and one in the USSC.<sup>149</sup> The vast majority of illiterate women in the sample were contract nurses, who did not have to fulfill the same standards.

Interestingly, having an attorney does not appear to have helped or hindered any of the applicants. According to the ANPA, attorneys could accept no pay greater than ten dollars for their work on nurses' applications, and only then with the approval of the Pension Commissioner. Many nurses took this to mean that they were not allowed attorneys and were consequently very nervous and uneasy regarding the success of their

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<sup>149</sup> Annie Stiles Pension File, App. 1138701; Caroline Boston Pension File, App. 1130247, Cert. 980312.

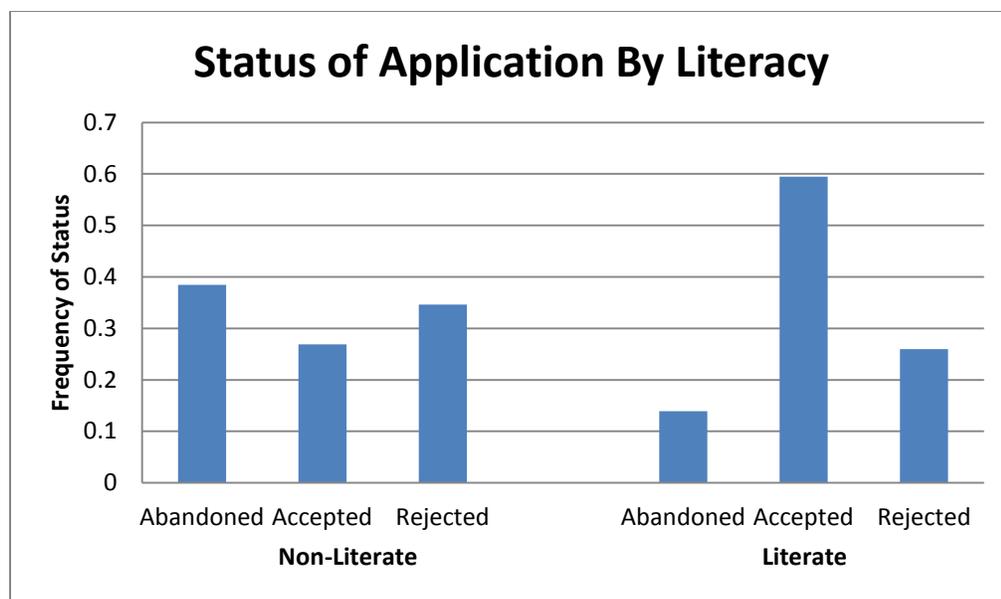


Figure 1. Graph of the success rate of applications based on literacy. Literacy was based on whether or not an applicant signed by mark.

claim.<sup>150</sup> However, some attorneys took on these cases *pro bono*, and could be very aggressive about pursuing their client's claim.<sup>151</sup> By far the most popular pension agents were Annie Wittenmyer, James Tanner, and Ellen Tolman, who served as pension agents for the Woman's Relief Corps and the Army Nurses' Association. These three knew the pension process very well. Both Wittenmyer and Tolman were intimately involved in the ANPA in addition to numerous special acts passed in the preceding years; Tanner served as Pension Commissioner for several months in 1889 before becoming a private pension agent in Washington. Even their intimate knowledge of the process does not appear to have helped their clients: their success rate is not significantly different from that of other attorneys.

<sup>150</sup> Ex. Martha Aull Pension File, App. 1131566 ; Leonora Wright Pension File, App. 1132510, Cert. 860167.

<sup>151</sup> Mary E. Buckey Pension File, App. 1129426; Lucy J. Fuller Pension File, App. 1138227.

Wartime illnesses or injuries also do not appear to have affected an applicant's success significantly. Many women claimed that their current ill health, usually rheumatism, neuralgia, or "general disability," was due to their service. Mercedes Graf has argued that some of these cases are probably Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or compassion fatigue, "a form of secondary trauma exhibited by those who have been exposed to an 'overdose' of victim suffering."<sup>152</sup> Given the sparse information in the pension applications, however, and the imprecise nature of Victorian medical terminology, it is hard to pinpoint which illnesses are combat-related, and which ones are simply the effects of old age. Only twelve women were obviously suffering from wartime illnesses or injuries. Nellie Butler, for instance, was shot in the knee at Cold Harbor while tending to men on the battlefield, and several women were suffering from the long term effects of small pox or malaria they contracted while serving.<sup>153</sup> Here the success rate is two-thirds: eight accepted, and four rejected.<sup>154</sup> Since this is the same as the success-failure rate for all pension applications, it appears physical debility did not affect a nurse's chances of success.

A final possible factor was an applicant's marital status. This was a crucial factor in widows' pension claims, as only widows who remained unmarried could continue drawing pensions. If a widow remarried, she forfeited her pension. Some nurses who

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<sup>152</sup> Graf, "For Pity's Sake," 35.

<sup>153</sup> Nellie Butler Pension File, App. 1138434, Cert. 864505; Sallie Cowgill Pension File, App. 1139290, Cert. 874256; Easter East Pension File, App. 1140330; Almeda Flint Pension File, App. 1138505, Cert. 854413; Annie West Pension File, App. 1138727, Cert. 860034.

<sup>154</sup> Mary E.B. Blackman Pension File, App. 1138430, Cert. 862768; Mary J. Boston Pension File, App. 1140277; Elizabeth Brower Pension File, App. 1138179, Cert. 892868; Nellie E. Butler Pension File, App. 1138434, Cert. 864505; Emily Cate Pension File, App. 1138443, Cert. 855109; Sallie Cowgill Pension File, App. 1139290, Cert. 874256; Easter East Pension File, App. 1140330; Almeda Flint Pension File, App. 1138505, Cert. 854413; Elizabeth Fritcher Pension File, App. 1124937, Cert. 830931; Carrie W. Pollard Pension File, App. 1141411, Cert. 871309; Annie E. West Pension File, App. 1138727, Cert. 860034.

wanted to maintain their financial independence expressed concerns that they would lose their access to pensions if they married. “i dont no what to do unless i get married,” one desperate applicant wrote. “i hav a good offer but if i git married will it debar me from getting my pension...i would rather live shingle than to get married but i have to work so hard out dorse.”<sup>155</sup> However, there is nothing in the ANPA or the pensions themselves to suggest that marital status played the same defining role it did in widows’ pensions. In fact, the Bureau only inquired about an applicant’s marital status in the context of any name changes she had undergone since her service, since this determined what name Bureau clerks searched for in the records. An examination of the pension applications reveals that widowed and married women alike were granted pensions, with success rates close to the standard two-thirds acceptance rate.<sup>156</sup> The two divorced women in the sample were also granted pensions, as was one of the two women who were separated from their husbands (the other claim was abandoned).<sup>157</sup> If Congress or the Bureau were trying to dictate morality, as they were in the case of widows, these would have been the cases to reject. Yet, based on success rates of these classes of applicants, neither Congress nor the Bureau had any interest in regulating the married lives of former nurses. Their focus, as demonstrated in previous sections, was clearly on the exact nature of a woman’s wartime service, and whether it fell within their definitions of acceptable female military service.

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<sup>155</sup> Lucy Slawson to James Tanner, February 3, 1893, in Lucy Slawson Pension File, App. 1138609.

<sup>156</sup> The success rates in this sample were 72% for married women and 67% for widows.

<sup>157</sup> Mary E. Adams Pension File, App. 1138392, Cert. 855666; Leonora Wright Pension File, App. 1132150, Cert. 860167; Mary J. Doherty Pension File, App. 1141584; Achsah Flick Pension File, App. 1130341, Cert. 894838.

*Summation*

These 185 pension applications offer very valuable insight into the policies of the Pension Bureau and the War Department, and the social and political opinions of the bureaucrats who processed the applications. From all indications the Bureau was largely blind to color, disability, or presence of an attorney, or marital status, but it is abundantly clear that a nurse's branch of service was pivotal, and not only because it affected documentation. Different branches stumbled into the gray area of what constituted acceptable military service. Surgeon General George Sternberg and Col. Fred Ainsworth frequently exercised their own personal opinions regarding nurses' service in approving or rejecting pension applications. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the pension records themselves to definitively suggest what prompted Ainsworth's or Sternberg's actions. In Ainsworth's case, it could have been the politically expedient thing to do to keep himself in Senator Cockrell's good graces, or he himself may have had reservations about nurses receiving pensions. Sternberg likely had qualms about the legitimacy of granting applications to nurses contracted by organizations other than the War Department, or perhaps he took a more conservative approach to interpreting pension legislation. Further research is necessary to determine what their motivations were.

What is clear, however, is that the issues raised about the nature of women's military service were riddled with gendered expectations. The image of the "ministering angel" conjured by Senator Belknap while stumping for the ANPA and the "dependent old woman" so often seen in the special acts and WRC rhetoric, was omnipresent throughout the application process. Women who fit this image—women who had served in Dix's Corps, or the United States Sanitary Commission—had very few difficulties

obtaining a pension. The many women whose service did not conform to this image, including regimental nurses, many contract nurses, and, for a brief time, women who worked in Diet Kitchens organized by the United States Christian Commission, faced serious opposition from within the Bureau in their attempts to acquire pensions. Clearly, the political and mainstream view of women's military service had not broadened since the Civil War. In fact, if anything, it had regressed. During the war, if the public and the War Department had not openly embraced the valuable service these women were contributing to the war effort, they certainly did not condemn it. Yet thirty years later, that acceptance was absent.

*Conclusion*

*“And who were they all? They were many, my men:  
 Their record was kept by no tabular pen:  
 They exist in traditions from father to son.  
 Who recalls, in dim memory, now here and there one.  
 A few names were writ, and by chance live-today;  
 But’s a perishing record fast fading away.”*  
 --“The Women Who Went To The War,” Clara Barton<sup>158</sup>

The Army Nurses Pension Act represented the peak in recognition of army nurses by both the government and their supporters. That is not to say that nurses went utterly unrecognized in the following years. The GAR continued to honor these women at their annual encampments, and at least two works were published detailing the contributions and experiences of Civil War nurses in their own words: *Our Army Nurses*, compiled by the WRC’s Mary Gardner Holland, and *In Honor of Our Army Nurses* by the ANA’s Kate Scott. Many nurses also published memoirs of their service, some perhaps hoping the royalties would bring in much-needed revenue, others as final testimonials of their service.<sup>159</sup>

Yet with the exception of the GAR’s actions, all of this was done by army nurses themselves. The WRC and Congress did nothing more to help these women. This was in part because of the Panic of 1893. Benevolent organizations, particularly the WRC, tightened their belts and examined their budgets. Funds spent on army nurses were immediately targeted. Consequently, Annie Wittenmyer spent the three National Conventions following the passage of the ANPA furiously trying to save what funding she did have, alternately emphasizing how little it cost the WRC to continue supporting

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<sup>158</sup> Mary Gardner Holland, *Our Army Nurses*, ed. Daniel John Hoisington (Roseville, Minnesota: Edinborough Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>159</sup> For examples, see Amanda Akins Stearns’ *Lady Nurse of Ward E* (1909), *The Autobiography of Catherine S. Lawrence* (1893), or *Reminiscences of an Army Nurse* by Adelaide Smith (1911).

army nurses, or reminding the convention that if it did not fund Wittenmyer's work in Washington securing pensions, then the WRC would be forced to use its own funds to support these women.<sup>160</sup> She succeeded, to a point. While the WRC continued to support both the Army Nurses fund and Wittenmyer's work in Washington, the funding never reached pre-Panic levels.

Other forms of neglect cannot be explained on financial grounds, but rather on ideological ones. The WRC and Congress had bent societal norms regarding women's military service and financial independence as much as they were willing to. In 1895, for instance, Wittenmyer introduced a bill to the House that specifically granted pensions to regimental nurses, whose applications, as previously mentioned, were almost universally rejected. The bill failed to pass—in fact, it never made it to the House floor because, as Wittenmyer pointed out to the 1897 National Convention, there was no concerted effort on the part of the WRC “to get it out of the clutches of the Committee on Rules.”<sup>161</sup> Wittenmyer herself was quickly losing the energy to continue the fight. A fall in 1897 while lobbying in the House left her bed-ridden for several months. Wittenmyer tried to continue her campaign from her bed, but met with limited success.<sup>162</sup> When she died in 1900, concern for army nurses died with her. No one in the WRC took her place as the organization's pension agent, and barely a year after her death the WRC was already entertaining motions to close down the WRC Home in Madison, Ohio. Built in 1890, the Home provided housing and medical care for widows and other dependents of Union

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<sup>160</sup> *Journal of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps: Pittsburgh, PA, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, 1894* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1894), 166; *Journal of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps: Louisville, KY, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup>, 1895* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1895), 130.

<sup>161</sup> *Journal of the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps: Buffalo, New York, August 26<sup>th</sup>, and 27<sup>th</sup>, 1897* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1897) 155. The Committee on Rules decides when a bill comes up for debate.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

veterans, but was primarily intended for indigent army nurses. When the motion first appeared in 1901, its supporters pointed out that none of the forty-odd residents were army nurses—in fact, only 17 of the 144 women who had lived at the Home since 1890 were army nurses—and, some argued, the Home was becoming a significant drain on the organization’s finances.<sup>163</sup> While closing the Home was certainly the practical thing to suggest, since it was clearly failing in a key aspect of its mission, this motion also demonstrates a broader lack of concern about the fate of army nurses on the part of the WRC. No one asked, for instance, why there were no nurses amongst the Home’s residents, and no one proposed an alternative way to care for nurses, since clearly the previous system was not working. This is also symptomatic of a larger issue, one that manifested first in Kate Sherwood’s actions during the fight for the ANPA. The WRC’s mission was to aid veterans. Since nurses performed military service, they would logically fall under this category. Yet nurses’ welfare had to be mentioned specifically in order to become a part of the WRC’s mission statement. Increasingly, the WRC focused on the wives, widows, mothers and daughters that made up the vast majority of its constituency, and on the veterans it had initially been created to support, and shifted its focus away from nurses. Nurses’ struggles did not become a secondary issue. They became a non-issue.

Matters were much the same with Congress. In 1907 the Army Nurses Association attempted to increase nurses’ pensions to \$20 a month. Despite favorable

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<sup>163</sup> *Journal of the Nineteenth National Convention of the Woman’s Relief Corps: Cleveland, Ohio, September 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, 1901* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1901), 292; “National Woman’s Relief Corps: List of Residents, 1890-1944, at the National Woman’s Relief Corps Home at Madison, O.,” VFM 197, Ohio Historical Society.

reports from the Senate's Committee on Pensions, the bill failed to pass.<sup>164</sup> Senator McComber, a Republican from North Dakota, wrote the dissenting "Views of the Minority." "This bill as reported," he wrote, "is a striking illustration of the tendency toward partiality and favoritism, more difficult to be resisted because the beneficiaries are women." Couching his argument in terms of equal treatment of veterans and army nurses, McComber proceeded to condemn the financial independence this bill, and the ANPA, offered army nurses as unnecessary: "Under the present law a nurse may be a married woman and have a husband to support her. The soldier is probably married and has a family to support... Under the present law the nurse may be a married and have a husband to support her and still draw her pension of \$12 per month. Under the present law if the widow has remarried she loses her pension."<sup>165</sup> McComber's claim not only ignores the fact that most nurses were heavily dependent on the pensions they received and had no male bread-winner left to support them, it also clearly demonstrates that the gender roles espoused by so many people prior to the passage of the Army Nurses Pension Act had not disappeared. Not only had they not disappeared, the fact that the bill never passed—nor did successors in 1909, 1910, 1912, or 1918—indicates that these gender norms were the dominant view in Congress. Nurses were not considered veterans: they were instead female civilians who performed service equal to that of

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<sup>164</sup> "Report To accompany S. 695: Pensions of Army Nurses," *The Report of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the Second Session of the Fifty-Ninth Congress, 1906-1907* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907);

"Report to accompany S. 6251: Army Nurses in the Civil War," *The Report of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the Second Session of the Sixty-First Congress, 1909-1910* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910); "Report to accompany H.R. 21721: Pensions for Volunteer Army Nurses," *The Report of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the Second Session of the Sixty-Second Congress, 1911-1912* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1912).

<sup>165</sup> "Report to accompany S. 185: Pensions of Army Nurses," *The Report of Committees for the Senate of the United States of the Second Session of the Sixtieth Congress, 1908-1909* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909).

women who remained at home, and were not to be granted any measure of financial independence.

At first glance, the Army Nurses Pension Act represents a landmark change in how the American public and its government regarded Civil War nurses. Its passage implied that nurses were just as much veterans as the men they had tended, and granted them a degree of financial independence that women of the time period did not typically experience. Acceptable military service for women was no longer limited to those who served under Dorothea Dix, or in the United States Sanitary or Christian Commissions, but could now include black women, women who had served with their husbands on the front lines, or women who had worked for pay. Yet an analysis of the WRC's crusade to pass the ANPA, as well as the pension applications of nearly 400 former nurses, indicates exactly the opposite. In their efforts to secure veteran status for former nurses, the WRC and Congress proscribed women's military service until only a select few women were considerable acceptable and thus pensionable. The Pension Bureau and various bureaucrats in the War Department further constrained these roles until entire classes of women were debarred from receiving pensions. The passage of the Army Nurses Pension Act was not the watershed moment for women's military service, or gendered ideologies that it promised to be. Rather, the history of the bill and the pensions that followed it suggest that though a select few women did challenge the gendered ideologies of the federal government, these ideologies remained largely unchanged from the end of the Civil War to the turn of the century.

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