

# “I Thought I Would Wright You a Few Lines”

## SOLOMON G. COMSTOCK and CIVIL WAR VETERAN PENSIONS



Congressman Solomon G. Comstock  
of the Fifth Congressional District of  
Minnesota, circa 1889–90.

### Trista Raezer-Stursa

ON DECEMBER 5, 1889, Z. Barriger wrote a plaintive letter to his US representative, Solomon G. Comstock, of the Fifth Congressional District of Minnesota. Barriger, a Civil War veteran who had spent time in the notorious Andersonville Prison as a prisoner of war, was seeking an increase in his war pension. Claiming to have suffered from scurvy during his time at Andersonville, he wrote, “I thought I would wright you a few lines and see if you would be kind anouf to help a poore cripple of the last ware, as I am confind to the house, not abel to do any thing.”<sup>1</sup>

During Comstock’s term from 1889 to 1891, he compiled files on 219 veterans and widows seeking assistance, often in desperation, with getting pensions or increases in pensions from the Pension Bureau. The hundreds of letters that Comstock received give a glimpse into the lives of aging veterans, the majority being from rural Minnesota, trying to navigate a complicated federal bureaucracy for a pension to alleviate their poverty. These men and women were either struggling with the pension process or were appealing rejection of their claims. They used many tactics and strategies to appeal to Comstock’s goodwill

and sense of justice. These letters illustrate the challenges veterans and politicians alike faced as the Pension Bureau struggled with an unprecedented number of veterans after a war that nearly crippled a young nation.

### PENSION LAWS

The United States has a long history of providing pensions to soldiers in return for their service. Even before the nation gained independence, English Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony passed a law in 1636 providing for injured soldiers. In 1776, the first national war pension law was enacted. Initially, only wounded Revolutionary War veterans received pensions, and all officers received half-pay for the rest of their life. According to historian Theda Skocpol,

In 1818, pensions were extended more generally to veterans of the U.S. War of Independence—but only to those who could prove the most dire poverty. . . . In 1832, service pensions were legislated for all veterans, benefitting some 33,425 men whose average age by then was 74.5 years. And, in 1836, the widows of rank-and-file soldiers who had served during the War of Independence also started receiving pensions.

These early pension laws were conservative in nature. They set officers as a class apart, and decades would pass before widows were taken into consideration. The Pension Bureau was established in 1833. The last Revolutionary War veteran to receive a pension died in 1869.<sup>2</sup>

When the Civil War broke out, patriotism in the North “raised more troops than the War Department could accommodate.” By the summer of 1862, however, men were hesitant to fight. They feared leaving their family destitute if they died or became too injured to work. Thus, on July 14, 1862, an “Act to grant Pensions,” commonly known as the General Law System, was passed. This law granted pensions to injured soldiers based on how bad their injury was; or to a widow, minor children, mother, or orphaned sister. In 1866 an amendment included fathers and

orphaned brothers. When the Civil War began, 10,700 veterans and widows were receiving pensions, at a cost of \$1 million a year. By the time the war ended, pension rolls had swelled to 127,000 veterans, costing the government \$15.5 million a year. Nonetheless, this reflected a small fraction of the total 1.9 million Union veterans at the end of the war. Nearly 40 percent of men in the North from the age of 15 to 44 had served in the war. Confederate veterans were ineligible for pensions, even if they had left the Confederacy and joined the US Army or Navy later on in the war.<sup>3</sup>

After the war, Civil War pension laws changed dramatically. In 1873, the Consolation Act allowed veterans to receive pensions if injuries or illness contracted during the war “subsequently resulted in a disability” at any time after war service ended. This law led to a major increase in pension applications—and increasingly complex conditions for doctors to diagnose. For example, a veteran could claim that suffering from typhoid fever during the war later led to chronic diarrhea, or that pneumonia later led to lung disease. Most common was the claim that wartime service led to rheumatism later in life.<sup>4</sup>

The 1879 Arrears Act opened up a floodgate of pension applications. Before the Arrears Act, a veteran started to receive a pension from the date his application was approved. The Arrears Act gave veterans back pay from the date they were discharged from the war. Veterans who already received a pension began getting additional payments for the period from their discharge to when they started receiving their pension. New applicants received a lump sum “arrears” for their first payment, as long as their application was received by July 1, 1880. Suddenly, new pension applications jumped from 1,600 to 10,000 a month. The majority of

veterans who contacted Comstock for help had applied for their pension after the Arrears Act became law. Of the 219 veterans and dependents Comstock corresponded with, pension application dates could be found for 163 of them. Of these, only 40 had applied for a pension before 1879.<sup>5</sup>

Halfway through Comstock’s term, the Dependent and Disability Act of 1890 opened up pensions to any veteran incapable of manual labor, no matter how they acquired the disability. It did not have to be related to war service, the only exceptions being disability “arising from vicious habits or gross carelessness.” Within three years the pension rolls increased from 489,000 veterans to 996,000. At the time, this legislation was the most “expensive and liberal” pension law “ever passed by a legisla-

tive body in the world.” Before 1879, pension payments had accounted for 11 percent of federal spending. They rose to 23 percent in the 1880s and ballooned to 40 percent after 1890, becoming “the largest single item in the federal budget.” Between the Revolutionary War and 1861, the federal government had spent \$90 million on war pensions. In 1890, the annual pension budget cost more—\$106 million—and the government had spent over \$1 billion on Civil War pensions in total.<sup>6</sup>

The liberalization of pension laws was not necessarily the result of kindhearted politicians wanting to take care of war heroes. Rather, it was a deeply politicized move that greatly benefited the Republican Party. During this period, Comstock and his fellow northerners were solidly



The Pension Building, now the National Building Museum, was constructed during 1882–87 with over 15 million red bricks, costing about \$886 million. This image was published by T. W. Ingersoll of St. Paul in 1898.

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Republican; southerners were firmly Democratic. The Republican Party strongly supported tariffs because they shielded northern manufacturers from foreign competition. The tariffs also pushed Europeans to begin cultivating cotton in their colonies, thus harming southern cotton producers. The earnings from tariffs swelled federal coffers, and the surpluses funded veterans' pensions, which was further advantageous for the Republican Party. The increasingly generous pensions drew most Civil War veterans to vote Republican. In fact, Democratic president Grover Cleveland lost his reelection in 1888 partially due to vetoing a bill that would have given all disabled Civil War veterans pensions.<sup>7</sup>

### SOLOMON G. COMSTOCK

An early pioneer and leading citizen of Moorhead, Minnesota, Solomon G. Comstock was born in Maine in 1842. He went to law school for a year in Michigan, then practiced law briefly in Omaha, Nebraska. Finding few clients, he worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad in Texas; then moved north to St. Paul, Minnesota. Unable to compete with the number of lawyers in the area, he became a railroad laborer for the Northern Pacific's Duluth line with hopes of making his way to the West Coast to practice law. He reached the tent city that became Moorhead in 1871 and ended up staying for life. He was appointed county attorney in 1872 while also opening a private practice. Comstock

proved to be an astute businessman, founding various enterprises over the years. He became wealthy after befriending railroad baron James J. Hill, becoming Hill's western legal agent in 1879 for the Great Northern Railroad. Comstock's role was to plat town sites along the proposed rail routes. He and a colleague eventually founded the Northwest Land Company.

Comstock was first elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives in 1876, serving until 1877; then from 1879 to 1882. From 1883 to 1888, he served in the state senate. In 1888, he was elected to the US House of Representatives for the fifth district, which covered most of northern Minnesota at the time. After his 1890 reelection campaign failed, he focused on his business ventures until his death in 1933. The letters Comstock received while serving in the US House of Representatives came from desperate veterans and widows who were having difficulty navigating the application process, who had not received information about their pension applications, or who had been outright rejected.

Regular citizens reaching out to elected officials for personal help dealing with the federal government was a new phenomenon in the late nineteenth century. In 1882, Representative Roswell G. Horr of Michigan claimed that about a quarter of the correspondence he received each week was from veterans. Congressmen sent about 40,000 pension inquiries to the Pension Bureau in 1880, and about 94,000 inquiries in

1888. By 1891, after the Dependent Act became law, congressmen sent 154,817 inquiries. A higher proportion of Americans were disabled than at any other time in US history, and this was reflected in an overworked Congress.<sup>8</sup>

If a veteran's pension claim was rejected, he could appeal to a congressman to put forth a private pension bill. Comstock and his colleagues had no qualms doing this often. During the Forty-Eighth Congress, from 1885 to 1887, "40 percent of the legislation in the House and 55 percent in the Senate consisted of special pension acts." During Comstock's two-year term, Congress passed 1,388 private bills to grant pensions and increases to pensions. From 1861 to 1917, 53,283 private bills were passed. Comstock's files on veterans include letters asking for these private bills. In response to one such request, on January 13, 1890, Comstock introduced a bill to pay Warren Onan arrears according to the 1879 Arrears Act. Onan's application had been mailed out before the deadline to get arrears, but his application had been delayed in the mail. On June 13, 1890, Comstock introduced another bill to put Agnes R. Rice, the widow of Parson C. Rice, on the pension rolls. The unfortunate widow had believed that her husband had divorced his first wife, but it turned out that Agnes's marriage had been an act of bigamy, making her ineligible for a pension. Fortunately, Comstock was willing to assist her, and indeed he was successful in securing a pension for her. Comstock wrote to one veteran that a bill could not be introduced until the veteran had gone through the pension application process and had been denied a pension.<sup>9</sup>

The 219 files Comstock carefully organized are an excellent representation of the struggles many rural veterans were facing almost 30 years

51ST CONGRESS,  
1ST SESSION.

## H. R. 4755.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

JANUARY 13, 1890.

Referred to the Committee on Invalid Pensions and ordered to be printed.

Mr. COMSTOCK introduced the following bill:

### A BILL

Granting arrears of pension to Warren Onan.

- 1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
- 2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*
- 3 That the Secretary of the Interior be, and he is hereby, au-
- 4 thorized and directed to pay to Warren Onan, late of Com-
- 5 pany C, One hundred and fifty-fourth New York Volunteers,
- 6 arrears of pension at the rate of seven dollars and fifty cents
- 7 per month from the eleventh day of June, eighteen hundred
- 8 and sixty-five, to the second day of July, eighteen hundred
- 9 and eighty.

"H.R. 4755, a Bill Granting Arrears of Pension to Warren Onan," was introduced in the House of Representatives by Congressman Solomon G. Comstock on January 24, 1890. The Pension Bureau had denied Onan arrears due to a late application. Comstock rectified the situation by putting forth this bill.

after fighting to save the Union. The average Comstock file contained letters from the veteran, his lawyer, his widow, or other supporters. Each file contained a form that included the veteran's name, claim number, date, company, and regiment; and the information Comstock was seeking from the Pension Bureau. The bottom of the form stated, "Senators and Members will greatly aid the Bureau of Pensions in giving them an early answer if they will fill and use this

slip in making call in pension cases." Lastly, each file usually included a typed sheet of paper filled out by one of Comstock's staff members with brief notes on the progress of the veteran's case. These sheets included the veteran's name, claim number, company, regiment, and the dates of letters from the veteran and from Comstock. Some files were thin, containing only the bureau form, while others were thick with many letters and documents.<sup>10</sup>

## NAVIGATING BUREAUCRACY

The complicated bureaucracy that veterans and widows had to navigate is detailed in the many letters received by Comstock, shedding light on the difficulty citizens had interacting with the federal government in the late nineteenth century and the inequities found in the pension application process. The largest difficulty by far that Comstock's files reveal is that many veterans had been waiting years to hear about the status of their application. While in a few instances the bureau did not receive an application, most veterans who told Comstock that they had been waiting years can be verified by the General Index to Pension Files, which includes dates of application.

Exacerbating the situation, the Pension Bureau was not only overwhelmed but also had recently become underfunded. In 1881, Congress reduced appropriations for the bureau, resulting in a reduction in staff just as applications were increasing. According to historian Theda Skocpol, "As a result of the many reapplications and new applications stimulated by the Arrears Acts, a backlog of several hundred thousand claims piled up for processing, and such massive backlogs continued to hang over the system in the 1890s."<sup>11</sup>

Comstock clearly knew this was an issue. When corresponding with him, most veterans included the claim number given to them by the Pension Bureau upon receipt of their application. Occasionally, a veteran forgot to include it or did not know it. Comstock replied to one letter, "If you could furnish me with the number of the claim, it would be a great help in looking up the case. The Pension office is so overwhelmed with work now that it is loath to take any unusual trouble in looking up such a claim."<sup>12</sup>

According to National Archives archivist Claire Prechtel-Klusens, “During the fiscal year ended June 30, 1875, the bureau received 24,292 pension claims, 51,000 reports . . . 15,600 communications from other government departments, and 81,000 pieces of additional evidence from other sources.” More than 40 veterans and widows complained to Comstock of waiting from two to nearly thirty years for a pension or pension increase. A lawyer for James Grey wrote to Comstock on August 22, 1890, and included the paperwork that Grey had received when he applied for a pension in 1882. The letter from the Pension Bureau stated that Grey’s pension number was 441,941, and that the bureau was currently working on pension claim 360,000 and working through 2,200 a month on average. That meant that Grey was expected to wait another three years before the Pension Office would get to his claim.<sup>13</sup>

Another major reason why some cases dragged out for years was the difficulty that veterans had in finding the officers, comrades, and doctors who had witnessed and treated their injuries. Veterans needed affidavits from witnesses to prove their injuries, but by the late 1880s, more than 20 years had passed since the war, and it was getting exceedingly difficult to find these witnesses. The Pension Bureau required affidavits from the veteran’s officer regarding the injury, or from two comrades who had witnessed the injury if that officer was unavailable. The veteran also needed affidavits from the physicians who had attended to his wounds. The widow of Robert Slaughter was able to send in an affidavit for one comrade, but it was not enough. Mrs. Slaughter’s son-in-law wrote that one of Mr. Slaughter’s comrades had moved to Europe and could not be found, some comrades were dead, others could not



[3--040.]

**Record Division.**

**Department of the Interior,**

**Pension Office,**

*Washington, D. C., March 24<sup>th</sup> 1882.*

Mr. *James A. Grey*  
*S. Pacific Junction*  
*Carlton Co. Minn.*

SIR :

Your claim has been received, recorded, and is numbered *441,941*. As claims are presented they are filed, the sufficiency of the declaration is inquired into, and the claimant, if an invalid, is ordered before a Medical Board for examination. Claims will then be taken up for settlement when reached in their order. You have no occasion to expect that your case will be taken up for action until it is reached in its regular turn.

The highest number of claims of same class as yours now in progress of adjudication is about *36,000* thousand. By the number of your claim you will learn approximately when you may be called upon to furnish additional evidence, as cases at the head of this class are now being settled at the rate of about *2,200* hundred per month. You can, however, employ the intervening time to excellent advantage in preparing the evidence necessary to complete your claim, of the nature of which you will be informed by reading carefully the accompanying circular; and if your evidence is found to be complete and satisfactory, the claim can be settled without delay when reached.

The clerical force furnished this Office by Congress will be worked to its fullest capacity in settling cases, and you must be patient and wait your turn. Cases will be made special, *only* when such cause therefor is shown to the Commissioner in writing as will satisfy the other worthy claimants whose claims precede it, should they know the facts, that such action would be proper.

Your claim is entitled, No. *441,941*, *James A. Grey*  
Name of soldier.  
 Co. *E* *37<sup>th</sup>* Reg't. *Pa. Inf.*, and in all communications relative thereto, be sure and state the same in full as above. You will soon receive another communication from this Office, and will, at the same time, be informed if your declaration is insufficient.

Very respectfully,

*Wm. J. Dudley*  
 Commissioner.

TOP: Special examiners at the Pension Office, 1904. The office was underfunded from the 1880s on, resulting in a backlog of cases. After applying for a pension, Civil War veterans like James A. Grey often received form letters advising about the lengthy timeline and what they could do while awaiting a response.

be found, and one letter to a comrade was returned from the dead letter office. Lastly, the two doctors who had attended to Slaughter were also dead. Unfortunately, Comstock's reply to her son was not encouraging: "[I] shall be glad to do all I can to promote Mrs. Slaughter's interests . . . but the Pension Office is [so] overwhelmed with business . . . that it is almost impossible to get any case expedited."<sup>14</sup>

Even Comstock's brother, Edgar, could not get the testimony he needed. Edgar wrote, "You know Dr. Rich treated me when I came home, and he has been dead 15 years or more. Dr. Thompson treated me awhile when I was in Prescott he is dead our Regimental surgeon who treated me in Campbell Hospital is dead, Dr. Stone a citizen Dr. of Washington . . . I have read in the papers he was dead he was Lincolns physician and was with him at time of his death." Comstock had to "send three urgent requests to the Pension Office" before he got information on his brother's pension claim.<sup>15</sup>

Widow Mary Jager's brother wrote, "before he [Mary's husband] died he made application for a pension but he died before he had given the names of witnesses that knew him before he enlisted and he never mentioned any to my sister." For many of these veterans, a private bill was the only way to get a pension under the 1879 law.<sup>16</sup>

Besides affidavits from witnesses, veterans needed to be evaluated by a physician (or a board of three physicians in larger cities) chosen by the commissioner of pensions. A veteran was not expected to travel more than 40 miles by rail to see a physician. Essentially, these physicians were "the gatekeepers of the pension system."

An affidavit of Dr. O. C. Trace, who examined Civil War veteran William Boyle for his pension claim. Dr. Trace diagnosed Boyle with a double inguinal hernia.

In order to be considered disabled, a veteran's injury was measured by his "capacity 'for procuring a subsistence by manual labor'—not by whether he could perform the particular kind of employment he had before military service."

They determined if there was a disability and rated the severity, then filled out certificates that were sent to the Pension Bureau. In order to be considered disabled, a veteran's injury was

measured by his "capacity 'for procuring a subsistence by manual labor'—not by whether he could perform the particular kind of employment he had before military service."<sup>17</sup>

**PHYSICIAN'S AFFIDAVIT.**

TAKE NOTICE.—This affidavit should, if possible, be in the handwriting of the affiant; the marginal instructions should be carefully observed before writing out the statement. All the facts in possession of affiant as to the origin and continuance of the disability should be fully set forth, and the dates of treatment should be specifically given. If the affidavit is prepared from memoranda in possession of the physician, that fact should be stated.

State of Minnesota } SS.  
 County of Morrison }

In the Pension Claim No. ....  
 of William Boyle late of  
Company "D" 3rd U.S. Infantry  
Company and regiment of service, if in the army; or vessel and rank, if the navy.

Personally came before me a Phys. of the Probate Court in and for the aforesaid  
(Official Character of Magistrate.)

County and State O.C. Trace a citizen of Minnesota  
 in the County of Morrison and State of Minnesota

well known to me to be reputable and entitled to credit, and who being duly sworn, declares in relation to the aforesaid case as follows:

That he is a practising physician, and that he has been acquainted with said Soldier for about 10 years, and that all the facts I know about the above  
(Here embody all the facts known to the affiant in accordance with the marginal instructions. No erasures or interlineations will be permitted unless the magistrate certifies in his jurat that they were made before executing the paper.)

Named ex soldier are as follows, viz

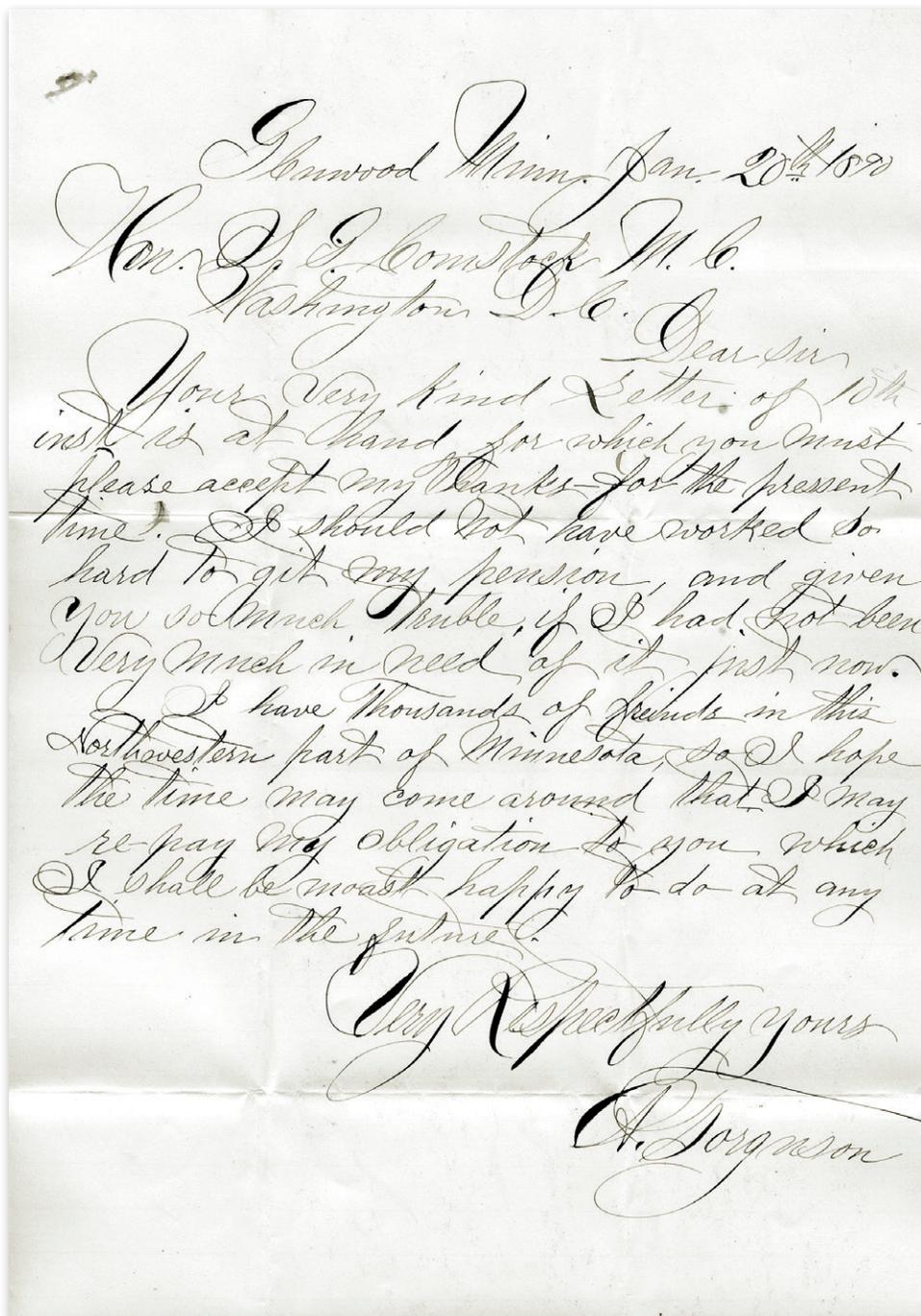
I have made a careful examination of Mr Boyle and find him to be afflicted with double inguinal hernia.

Did not know claimant before he entered service; but recently made his acquaintance.

**NOTES.**  
 The Physician's Affidavit should show the following facts:  
 1st. Whether or not he knew the soldier prior to enlistment; the length of time he has known him; how intimately, and what opportunities he has had of observing his physical condition, whether as his family physician or as a neighbor; and how near he has lived to him. If he knew that the soldier was a sound man at enlistment, he should so state, adding, if true, that had he been unsound, he would have known it.  
 2d. If he treated claimant while in the service, either as his regimental surgeon or while claimant was home on furlough, that

Between 1862 and 1888, 64 percent of pensions were granted to veterans for conditions that had not been incurred on the battlefield. Thus, most of the time doctors were not looking at conditions that could easily be connected to service in war, such as bullet wounds, but rather conditions such as rheumatism, chronic diarrhea, malaria, dysentery, and nervous conditions. This “forced doctors to draw on their understanding of the impact of military service on soldiers’ bodies.” But the onus was on veterans to prove to a doctor that an illness incurred during the war led many decades later to the inability to perform manual labor, and many veterans were completely dissatisfied with the doctors they met with.<sup>18</sup>

Comstock’s files reflect numerous examples of veterans’ frustrations with their examinations for pension. Henry Clyde felt his examination was “unjust” after no pensionable disability was found. He contacted Comstock in hopes of getting a second examination. James Hosack was nervous about his upcoming examination. He informed Comstock, “I wish to say to you, that I am told by comrades who have presented themselves before the Medical board at Hampton, that they have reason to believe they have not been fairly reported as their cases deserve— Because of Confederate sympathies on said board.” Comstock advised him to follow through with the examination. Andrew Torkelson’s dramatic letter is full of accusation and indignation: “I had also the misfortune to be sent to Dr. Vivian of Alexandria for examination who is a Copperhead Democrat and personal enemy to myself and of course done what he could to defeat my honest claim.” Sydney De Long’s application was rejected after his examining surgeon found “no permissible disability,” but De Long then gathered testimony from some



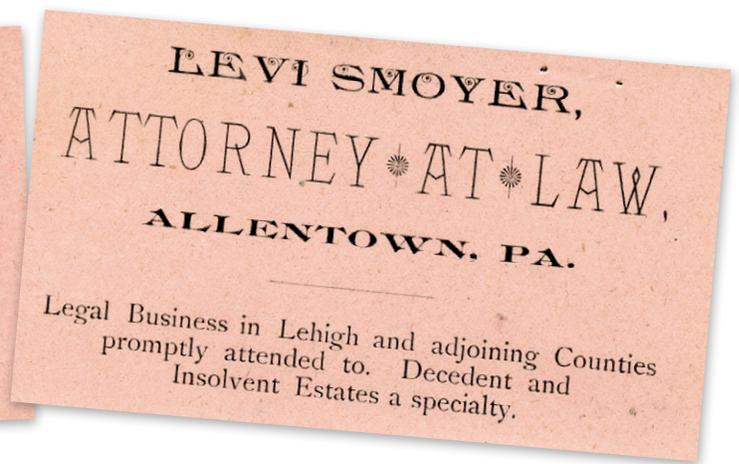
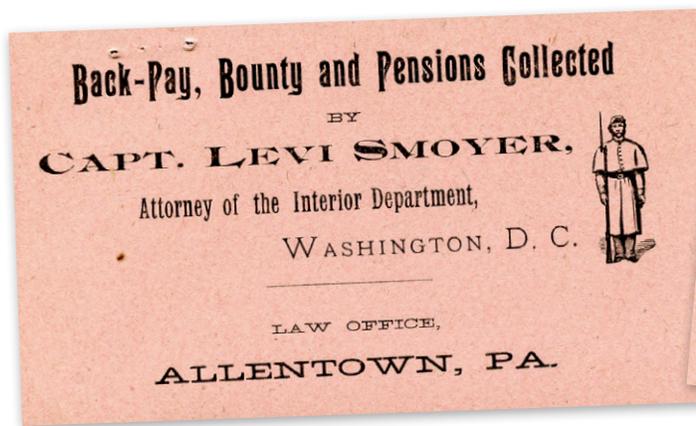
A letter from Civil War veteran Andrew Torkelson to Congressman Solomon G. Comstock, January 20, 1890. Torkelson was seeking Comstock’s assistance in getting his Civil War pension.

other doctors and hoped to have his case reopened.<sup>19</sup>

Facing so many frustrations and hurdles, veterans turned to lawyers for assistance. The majority of Comstock’s files contain letters from lawyers. One even includes a business card noting the lawyer’s specialty in “Back-Pay, Bounty and Pensions Collected.” With the enormous number of veterans putting in pension claims

as the laws became more liberal, lawyers soon found that fortunes could be made. Lawyers were allowed to charge \$10 to assist a veteran. In 1898, 60,000 lawyers were allowed to practice law in Pension Bureau cases.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, this led to many lawyers hunting for any veteran they could find, no matter how tenuous their case was. While many lawyers were truly helpful and worked closely



with Comstock to ensure their clients received their benefits, some failed their clients. Conrad Ditmore lamented to Comstock that his lawyer “dose not answer my Letters I think there is something Rong with the attorney.” Ditmore even offered to pay Comstock for his help. Comstock wrote reassuringly that he was in contact with Ditmore’s attorney.<sup>21</sup>

John Huntsinger had similar issues. He wrote, “I have made application for increase. It has been pending so long that I conclude that my attorney John W. Morris ‘is not dead, but sleepeth.’” Hiram Huntress had strong words for his lawyer: “I employed P. J. Lockwood as my agent years ago—but he misled me [and] has been a damage instead of a help.” While these men may have misunderstood their lawyers or how lawyers were supposed to help them, these men’s concerns and frustrations illuminate yet another hurdle that veterans had to navigate to get their pensions.<sup>22</sup>

### APPEALING TO COMSTOCK’S GOODWILL

Those veterans not seeking assistance with navigating a labyrinthine bureaucracy were most often trying to convince Comstock that they were deserving of and had the right to a pension. Historian James Martens indicates that in being so vocal about their worthiness, veterans

were insisting that “pensions had been part of the promise made by . . . the federal government when they volunteered. . . . Despite living in an era when old-age pension were virtually unknown . . . and when the federal government rarely intruded into the lives of individual citizens, [they] insisted that their disabilities and service had earned them nearly unprecedented consideration.” The many letters to Comstock reflect men and women establishing their rights to government assistance, sometimes with reluctance and humbleness, sometimes passionately and firmly.<sup>23</sup>

Unsurprisingly, many veterans and widows sought to prove their poverty to Comstock. Most pension claimants in the United States came from poor, rural, Republican areas. Comstock’s district was a primarily rural farming area and deeply Republican. Not only did the poorest veterans have the hardest time getting pensions, but also sometimes they got pensions that were only \$1 a month. Yet veterans of higher social status received better treatment from the Pension Bureau. Letters to Comstock about poverty are intense with urgency. Andrew Torkelson lays out his dire situation: “My beloved wife died about two months ago she always worked hard helping to support the family, and now I am left alone with six children to provide for, and one of them sick at the present time. I am unable to do any manual

*Business card for attorney Levi Smoyer, who specialized in assisting Civil War veterans in getting their pensions.*

labour as my health was intierly destroyed serving as a soldier in the army.”<sup>24</sup>

Another letter writer, Henry Pennock, laments, “Allow me to tell you Mr. Comstock this is harde for an old Soldier to get down and acknowledge himself a Beggar but I tell you Sickness and poverty will do more to crush out manly pride than anything else I know of . . . my Home is at stake on this Issue of this Pension Claim.” Comstock replied, “I shall be glad to do whatever I properly can to promote your interests.” Magna Samson, outraged, declares, “Some say that it is to costly to rase Bounty for So many Old Soldiers this is only taking a little from those millioners minoply Railroad Kings and the rich men in the Country giving it to where it is more needed . . . and it was a rich mans quarl and a poor mans fight.”<sup>25</sup>

These veterans are close to losing everything, with only the hope of a pension or pension increase to save them. They had few other options beyond going to the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, established in 1865, or a state asylum. This option was untenable to most. Maria Blaidsell, guardian to her insane husband, wrote, “as you are well aware of the over crowd state of our Asylum—in this state . . . I find

that there are sixty Patients laying on the floor now, waiting for the new Asylum at Fergus to open." She was desperate to get her husband out of the asylum, but could only do so once his pension was reinstated. Company pensions did not exist prior to the 1880s, and state and federal old age pensions did not exist until the 1930s. A Civil War pension was the only hope for most poor veterans outside of charity. Comstock, moved by Maria's plight, visited the commissioner of pensions in person in hopes of moving the case forward.<sup>26</sup>

Describing illnesses and injuries was another strategy used by veterans to appeal to Comstock's empathy. The injuries that these men wrote about were usually not those acquired on the battlefield, such as gunshot or bayonet wounds, but were nebulous in nature. By the time Comstock entered the legislature, veterans with obvious and easily provable injuries had long ago received their pensions. By 1889, men who were still trying to get their pension often had illnesses and injuries that were hard to connect to their war service. Injuries mentioned in the letters included: diarrhea, rheumatism, hernias, piles, malaria, paralysis, scurvy, typhoid, neuralgia, sunstroke, dysentery, asthma, and various injuries to limbs and organs.

Some men were shockingly frank in their descriptions. George Ridley suffered from "Bleeding Piles, the outcome or remnant of Chronic Diarrhea contracted while on Picket Duty." Pension laws stated that the injury had to prevent a man from performing manual labor, and many of the men who wrote to Comstock noted that they could not work. For example, John Huntsinger wrote, "In

Sept. 1863 while on a raid into West Virginia my horse fell on me severely injuring my right leg and causing a dangerous Hernia. Since which time I have been unable to perform manual labor." These men were desperate to connect their war service to their current physical condition.<sup>27</sup>

Men who applied for pensions for nervous disorders and infectious diseases were more likely to be rejected. Some veterans, such as Theodore Ostrander, knew they could not prove

the connection. "Really I don't know that any of the diseases I am afflicted with were contracted in the Army, at the same time it was there no doubt that the foundation was laid." Others, such as Whedon Griswold, gave incredible detail on how they believed an obscure event from their war service led to their current ailments. Griswold regaled Comstock with the tale of arduous marches for dozens of miles with no horse and getting wet in the rain and while crossing

Form 28.

All Official Letters to this Office must be addressed to the "Second Auditor of the Treasury," and in replying to Letters from this Office the initials on the upper left hand corner should be referred to. The name, company, and regiment of the soldier must be given.

W. 7 &

## Treasury Department,

SECOND AUDITOR'S OFFICE,

Washington, D. C., May 7, 1889.

Sir:

Action upon the claim filed by you in this Office for arrears of Jay County, &c., as attorney in the case of W. W. Griswold, late Col., Co. — 152 Ind. Vols., is deferred until the necessary official information called for from the War Department shall have been obtained, upon the receipt of which, the claim will in its order be taken up for examination, and should additional evidence be required, you will be advised. No unnecessary delay will occur in the final disposition of this claim. Frequent inquiries in relation to individual claims, by the examination necessary for a reply, only delay final action. The inability of the clerical force at this time to keep up with the current work makes this communication necessary.

N. B.—This notice must be accepted as the true condition of the claim until you are called on to furnish additional evidence, or notified that it has been finally disposed of.

Respectfully,

M. A. Day  
Auditor.

J. W. Strayer,  
Washington,  
D. C.

(Ed. 7-5-'88—20,000.)

(over)

The attorney for Civil War veteran W. W. Griswold received this form letter from the Treasury Department, giving information about the progress of Griswold's claim.

streams. Thus, "so much marching and halting, that when I got warm, I then got cold, and as we did not get into camp until late at night, suffice it to say, that in consequence I [got] Rheumatism."<sup>28</sup>

Many veterans took a political tact with Comstock, seeking to prove their patriotism and loyalty to the Republican Party. Mentions of voting for Comstock and Republicans are numerous. Thomas Leeson, who campaigned for Comstock in 1888, notes, "I worked under the Republican League and not only worked for you, but for the Entire Republican ticket. I do not say this in a boastful way—but mearly offer it in excuse for my boldness in asking your aid in my case." Benjamin Zarracher, with a more humble approach, writes, "I need your aid and knowing that you are informed of my loyalty to the party of which you an honored member I hope I am not asking too much." Mostly, these men were proud of their service. They knew they were responsible for saving a shattered nation and hoped to remind Comstock of that.<sup>29</sup>

Others took an angrier tone. Charles Lampanius was beyond indignant when he wrote to Comstock: "It is now I need [a pension] and not when I am in my grave. . . . When the Country needed my servise I did not count the drops of Blood or tak a thought of consequences of Health, and it got all ther was in me and it is not Fair, Honorable or Just." Samuel Grant echoes Lampanius, "Had we who took our lives in our hand in 1861 been as dilatory in responding to our country's call where would our govt. be now? . . . Summary, No credit, nothing to eat in my house, home taken from me, hard for poor comrades to assist any further, half sick, entirely discouraged." Comstock let Grant know that he had last heard news about his claim in March, and "I cannot understand why a decision has not been reached and I will at

once communicate with the Pension Office."<sup>30</sup>

Nearly 30 years after the Civil War, letters appealing to Comstock's goodwill served as strong reminders that the government would not exist as it was if not for men across the nation who had come to its aid. Comstock's replies to these veterans were quick and cordial. While it is not known how much influence he had to move pension claims forward, he did what he could in his capacity by making inquiries of the Pension Office.

### AFTER COMSTOCK

After Comstock's term in office, pension law continued to become more liberal, expanding pension benefits to more and more veterans. In 1904, old age became a disability covered by the 1890 act, meaning that all veterans were due a pension at age 62 regardless of their health. By 1910, 90 percent of Civil War veterans who were still alive were receiving pensions. The last Civil War veteran to receive a pension happened to be a Minnesotan, Albert Woolson. He died in 1956 at the age of 106. The last person to receive a Civil War pension was Irene Triplett, who was born to an 83-year-old veteran in 1930. Triplett received a Civil War pension of \$73.13 a month for life due to mental disabilities. She died in 2021, 159 years after the first Civil War pension law went into effect.<sup>31</sup>

Solomon G. Comstock's Civil War veteran files give a snapshot of a complicated issue that affected veterans across the country. Aging veterans, often poor, struggled with navigating a new and complex federal system for their well-earned pension. Changing pension laws opened up pensions to previously ineligible veterans, but difficulties in getting witness affidavits, diagnoses, and answers from the Pension Bureau hindered them.

(3-550.)  
CONGRESSIONAL.  
No. 381465  
NAME OF CLAIMANT,  
Mrs Bertha Stahler  
Widow NAME OF SOLDIER,  
Michael Stahler  
Co. E, Reg't 3 Minn Infy

*Information wanted as follows:*  
Respectfully returned,  
inviting attention to Mr.  
Berano's letter, and re-  
questing information.  
S. G. Comstock  
Mc., 5<sup>th</sup> Dist. Minn  
1416 K St., N.W.  
April 26/90  
No letter formal with this  
Ugate

Senators and Members will greatly aid the Bureau of Pensions in giving them an early answer if they will fill and use this slip in making calls in pension cases.  
GREEN B. RAUM,  
Commissioner.  
(1842)-100 (R.) 6-301

A slip that Solomon G. Comstock sent to the commissioner of pensions requesting information on the status of Bertha Stahler's Civil War pension.

In desperation, many turned to their US representatives for assistance, using various tactics in their letters to prove their case. These men opened up in extraordinarily vulnerable ways, describing dire circumstances decades after they had hung up their uniform and returned to civilian life. Comstock stepped in when he could, putting forth bills in special cases and making inquiries to the Pension Bureau in all cases. The Civil War pushed the United States into formalizing and streamlining the care of veterans, and Comstock's letters offer a glimpse into the growing pains of this endeavor. □

## Notes

1. Z. Barriger to Solomon G. Comstock, Dec. 5, 1889, Solomon G. Comstock Papers, 1872-1939, S246, Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, Minnesota State University Moorhead (hereafter, Comstock Papers). Quotations from veterans' letters include all original misspellings and grammar mistakes.

2. Franklin M. Aaronson, "Pensions and Compensation to Veterans and Their Dependents," *Social Security Bulletin* 5, no. 11 (Fall 1942): 1; Theda Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System: The Expansion of Benefits for Civil War Veterans," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 91-92; Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA History in Brief* (Washington, DC: US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2006), 4; Edward F. Waite, "Veteran's Pensions: The Law and Its Administration from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 86, no. 512 (Jan. 1893): 238.

3. Megan J. McClintock, "Civil War Pensions and the Reconstruction of Union Families," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (Sept. 1996): 460, 463; Murray N. Rothbard, "Beginning the Welfare State: Civil War Veterans' Pensions," *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 69-70; Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA History in Brief*, 4; Claire Prechtel-Kluskens, "'A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude': Civil War Pension Applications Processing, 1861-1885," *Prologue* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2010).

4. Peter David Blanck and Michael Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights: Civil War Pensions and the Politics of Disability in America," *Alabama Law Review* 52, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 8, 25.

5. Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System," 102, 104.

6. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 19; Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA History in Brief*, 5; Peter Blanck, "Civil War Pensions and Disability," *Ohio State Law Journal* 62, no. 109 (2001): 125; Rothbard, "Beginning the Welfare State," 78; James Martens, "Those Who Have Borne the Battle: Civil War Veterans, Pension Advocacy, and Politics," *Marquette Law Review* 93, no. 1407 (2010): 1409; McClintock, "Civil War Pensions and the Reconstruction of Union Families," 464.

7. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 10; Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System," 100-102; McClintock, "Civil War Pensions and the Reconstruction of Union Families," 464.

8. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 12; Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System," 107, 108; Social Security Administration, "Historical Background and Development of Social Security," [www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html](http://www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html).

9. Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System," 108; William H. Glasson, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1918), 280. H.R. 4755, A Bill Granting Arrears of Pension to Warren Onan,

Jan. 13, 1890; H.R. 10938, A Bill Granting a Pension to Agnes R. Rice, June 13, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to W. W. Griswold, May 30, 1890—all Comstock Papers.

10. Comstock's papers also included two files from veterans who wanted to have charges of desertion removed from their record, one veteran who wanted his discharge papers replaced, and two veterans who served in the Indian Wars. Their information was not evaluated for this article.

11. Prechtel-Kluskens, "A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude"; Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System," 107.

12. Solomon G. Comstock to Thomas Van Etten, Sept. 5, 1890, Comstock Papers.

13. Prechtel-Kluskens, "A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude"; Department of the Interior, Pension Office, form 3-040, Mar. 24, 1882, Comstock Papers.

14. Russell L. Johnson, "'Great Injustice': Social Status and the Distribution of Military Pensions after the Civil War," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 2 (Apr. 2011): 154. W. C. Nash to Solomon G. Comstock, Mar. 13, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to W. C. Nash, Mar. 18, 1890—both Comstock Papers.

15. Edgar Comstock to Solomon G. Comstock, June 14, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to Edgar Comstock, May 20, 1890—both Comstock Papers.

16. J. J. Gross to Solomon G. Comstock, Dec. 28, 1889, Comstock Papers.

17. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 14; Prechtel-Kluskens, "A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude."

18. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 8, 18.

19. Undated note in Henry Clyde's file; James Hosack to Solomon G. Comstock, Apr. 25, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to James Hosack, Apr. 29, 1890; Andrew Torkelson to Solomon G. Comstock, Jan. 6, 1890; Thomas Van Etten to Solomon G. Comstock, Jan. 25, 1890—all Comstock Papers.

20. Business card for Captain Levi Smoyer, Comstock Papers; Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System," 103.

21. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 31. Conrad Ditmore to Solomon G. Comstock, July 2, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to Conrad Ditmore, July 12, 1890—both Comstock Papers.

22. John Huntsinger to Solomon G. Comstock, Apr. 30, 1890; Hiram B. Huntress to Solomon G. Comstock, Dec. 20, 1889—both Comstock Papers.

23. Martens, "Those Who Have Borne the Battle," 1410, 1412.

24. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 15; Johnson, "Great Injustice," 142; Andrew Torkelson to Solomon G. Comstock, Jan. 6, 1890, Comstock Papers.

25. Henry Pennock to Solomon G. Comstock,

July 14, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to Henry Pennock, July 18, 1890; Magna Samson to Solomon G. Comstock, Mar. 11, 1890—all Comstock Papers.

26. Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA History in Brief*, 5; Social Security Administration, "Historical Background and Development of Social Security." Maria Blaisdell to Solomon G. Comstock, Mar. 16, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to Frank Blaisdell, Apr. 3, 1890—both Comstock Papers.

27. George Ridley to Solomon G. Comstock, Sept. 8, 1890; John Huntsinger to Solomon G. Comstock, Apr. 16, 1890—both Comstock Papers.

28. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 5. Theodore Ostrander to Solomon G. Comstock, n.d.; Whedon Griswold to Solomon G. Comstock, May 27, 1890—both Comstock Papers.

29. Thomas Leeson to Solomon G. Comstock, Jan. 23, 1890; Benjamin Zarracher to Solomon G. Comstock, Apr. 5, 1890—both Comstock Papers.

30. Charles Lampanius to Solomon G. Comstock, Apr. 15, 1890; Samuel Grant, June 20, 1890; Solomon G. Comstock to Samuel Grant, June 24, 1890—all Comstock Papers.

31. Blanck and Millender, "Before Disability Civil Rights," 9; Social Security Administration, "Historical Background and Development of Social Security"; Mary Laine, "Woolson, Albert Henry (1850-1956)," *MNopedia*; Michael M. Phillips, "Last Person to Receive Civil War-Era Pension Dies; Irene Triplett Collected \$73.13 from Department of Veterans Affairs, Benefit for Her Father's Military Service in Civil War," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2020.

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Image on p. 103 courtesy Comstock House Correspondence and Family Ephemera, Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, Moorhead, MN; p. 104 and 107 (top) courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. All others courtesy Solomon G. Comstock Papers, Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, Moorhead, MN.



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