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.”

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.

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.3

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.4

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 1879.5

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 legislative 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.6

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.
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.

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.8

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.9

The 219 files Comstock carefully organized are an excellent representation of the struggles many rural veterans were facing almost 30 years.
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.10

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.”11

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. Comstock rectified the situation by putting forth this bill.

“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.
According to National Archives archivist Claire Prechtel-Kluskens, “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.13

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
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.”

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.

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.

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.”
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.18

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 other doctors and hoped to have his case reopened.19

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.20

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 “does not answer my Letters I think there is something wrong with the attorney.” Ditmore even offered to pay Comstock for his help. Comstock wrote reassuringly that he was in contact with Ditmore’s attorney.\(^{21}\)

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.\(^{22}\)

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.\(^{23}\)

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 labour as my health was entirely destroyed serving as a soldier in the army.”\(^{24}\)

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 raise Bounty for So many Old Soldiers this is only taking a little from those millonaires 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.”\(^{25}\)

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 Blaisdell, 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.26

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 where 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

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.

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. W.,

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 pay, of County, etc., as attorney in the case of W. W. Griswold, Late 1st Co., 152nd 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,

[Signature]

Washington, D.C.

(Ed. Feb. 1989—000,000.)
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.”

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 Republi-
can League and not only worked for
you, but for the Entire Republican
ticket. I do not say this in a boastful
way—but merely 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 mem-
ber I hope I am not asking too much.”

Mostly, these men were proud of their
service. They knew they were respon-
sible for saving a shattered nation and
hoped to remind Comstock of that.

Others took an angrier tone.
Charles Lampanius was beyond indig-
nant 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 service I did not count the
drops of Blood or tak a thought of con-
sequenses of Health, and it got all ther
was in me and it is not Fair, Honorable
or Just.” Samuel Grant echoes Lam-
panius, “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
“it cannot understand why a decision
has not been reached and I will at
once communicate with the Pension
Office.”

Nearly 30 years after the Civil War,
letters appealing to Comstock’s good-
will 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, pen-
sion 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 Tripplett, who was born to an
83-year-old veteran in 1930. Tripplett
received a Civil War pension of $73.13
a month for life due to mental disabil-
ities. She died in 2021, 159 years after
the first Civil War pension law went
into effect.

Solomon G. Comstock’s Civil War
veteran files give a snapshot of a com-
plicated 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 affi-
davits, diagnoses, and answers from
the Pension Bureau hindered them.

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 formal-
izing and streamlining the care of
veterans, and Comstock’s letters offer
a glimpse into the growing pains of
this endeavor.
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