

Racial discrimination in Union Army pensions detailed by new study

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Twenty years after the Civil War ended, the 179,000 African-American veterans of the Union Army saw racial inequality widen as the Pension Bureau left most of them out of a rapid expansion.

According to a new Brigham Young University study, the program shifted away from its relatively color-blind roots when it began granting disability claims based on chronic illness to soldiers who had not been wounded in the war.

During the 1880s, the Pension Bureau approved applications from uninjured white veterans at more than twice the rate of approval for uninjured black veterans.

"Black veterans were far less successful than whites for conditions that were hard to verify and required a degree of trust," said Sven Wilson, an associate professor of political science at BYU.

Wilson will report his findings in the [American Journal of Public Health](#).

Extending the history of black Civil War vets

The research draws from a large Union Army data set collected primarily by BYU students at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Typically it took a student one hour to locate and record a single soldier's military, pension, medical and census records.

The project began as a way for University of Chicago economist and Nobel laureate Robert Fogel to study human aging. Wilson's new study is one of the first to explore the experiences of black veterans.

Reconstruction: Powerless without a paper trail

During the Reconstruction period, the Pension Bureau awarded monthly disability payments only to veterans disabled by war injuries. To weed out fraudulent claims, the Bureau required applicants to produce documents like birth certificates, military papers and hospital records.

For many black veterans - three-fourths of whom were former slaves - such records simply didn't exist.

"The Union Army had a hard time staffing the hospitals of black regiments, so ailing black soldiers were not sent to the hospital as often as white soldiers," Wilson said.

"Since they didn't get sent to the hospital, they didn't have a paper trail of illness or injury. As a result they had a harder time applying for a pension."

An enrollment gap emerged, with wounded white veterans getting pensions at twice the rate of wounded black vets.

The silver lining during this period was that blacks who met the application requirements fared about as well as whites. Between 1865 and 1878, the Pension Bureau approved 83 percent of the applications submitted by wounded white veterans and 77 percent submitted by wounded black veterans.

"The fact that the Pension Bureau gave it to both blacks and whites was an accomplishment for the time," Wilson said. "The pension was a

tremendous financial boon for black families in a time when the economic opportunities of African-Americans were severely limited by Jim Crow policies."

Ballooning bureaucracy leaves black vets behind

During the 1880s, political pressure changed how the Pension Bureau operated.

Review boards became more lenient about linking veterans' various conditions to the war. Veterans awarded new claims also became eligible for back payment.

Racial inequality widened as the program expanded because black veterans' claims were believed far less readily than whites, especially if the disability was harder to verify medically. Wilson's study shows that a claim of chronic back pain, for example, was twice as likely to be approved for a white veteran.

Applicants with highly verifiable ailments such as varicose veins, on the other hand, had roughly the same chances regardless of race.

Second chance comes too late for most

Twenty-five years after the war ended, a new law dropped the requirement that the disability must trace back to the war. The new rule required just proof of service and a current disability or chronic illness.

"Even in this period of overwhelming injustice, black veterans benefited from the pension program," Wilson said. "Unfortunately most black [veterans](#) did not live to the turn of the century when the program peaked in terms of equal treatment."

Wilson holds a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago. He is the director of the Public Policy Graduate Program at BYU.

Provided by Brigham Young University

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