

CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS: LESSON 4: HANDOUT 3**U.S. COLORED TROOPS: SERVICE AND PENSION RECORDS**

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Following the Civil War, soldiers on both sides suffered. Many had been farmers and laborers before fighting and could no longer work these positions if they had been severely injured during the war. They would need money from the government in order to survive. A pension system was put in place that would pay **veterans** a small amount of money each month. Union veterans were under the federal system that began in 1862. Both White and Black veterans were eligible for benefits. Any soldier who became disabled was able to claim a pension, but the amount of money depended on his rank and injury. Dependents (that is, a soldier's wife and children) were able to receive benefits if that soldier had been killed or died during the war. In the beginning, widows had to prove that they were married to a soldier at the time of his death and that he had died serving. They could not receive benefits if they remarried. In 1890, an act was passed that made it possible for a widow to receive benefits if her husband had been disabled at the time of his death, which did not have to be during service. Nurses who served also began receiving pensions in 1892.¹

Even though the pension system was “color blind,” Black veterans faced challenges in getting their pensions. At first, they were less likely to fight in combat because they were assigned to work the hard jobs around the army camp. They also had fewer opportunities for medical attention at hospitals. Documentation from a hospital was required to be granted money for disability. One major challenge veterans faced was the time and money required to complete an application. Many had to have help in writing letters and completing the application because they could not read. The veteran listed his service, disability and current status and had to provide witnesses that could support his statements. White authorities were usually the ones to review applications, and they could be biased, making it very difficult for veterans and their widows to receive a pension.²

Following is the pension record for February Francis:³

FRANCIS, FEBRUARY

Co. K, 21st Regiment of United States Colored Infantry

Enlisted: September 14, 1864 at Fernandina, Florida.

Enslaved before the war; the property of William Christopher at Talbot Island, Duval County, Florida.

Discharged: April 23, 1865 at Charleston, South Carolina.

Pension Record Number 672,736

¹ Kathleen L. Gorman, “Civil War Pensions.” Source: Essential Civil War Curriculum, Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech. <https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/civil-war-pensions.html>

² Ibid.

³ Source: Florida History Online - Black Floridians and the Civil War: The 21st, 33rd, and 34th United States Colored Infantry Regiments. <https://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/CIR/21.htm#D>

GENERAL SUMMARY

February Francis was born a slave at Mayport, in Duval County, Florida, the property of William Christopher. Francis was both a sailor and a soldier during the Civil War. He enlisted first in the United States Navy and, after being honorably discharged, enlisted in the United States Colored Infantry.

February Francis was originally from North Florida where he spent his childhood in slavery and was known as February Christopher. At some point during the war he changed his name from that assigned him by his former slave owners to February Francis, although Navy records apparently list him as Christopher February. After the war, Francis returned to Duval County and lived at Jacksonville, Florida. Late in life, on November 8, 1917, former sailor and soldier February Francis was married to M. Alena Diggs at St. Nicholas, Florida. Francis had become a deacon in a church at St. Nicholas by then and had changed his name again, to February Shaw.

EXCERPTS FROM THE PENSION RECORD

Received at the Office of the Pension Bureau on 05/22/1912: "I am the identical February Francis who enlisted in Company 'K' 21st Regiment U.S.C. Troops at Jacksonville Florida on the 14th day of September 1864 to serve 3 years and was discharged April 23 1866 at Charleston S.C. by means of muster out of organization having served 1 year, 7 mos and 18 day I am now 73 years of Age, having been born at Mayport February 1, 1839.

"I am 5 feet 8 in high, black, black eyes, black hair grey now. I have lived in Duval County Florida during the whole time since the war. I am now a Pensioner of the U.S. government under certificate No. 672763 I have the honor to ask the Hon. Commissioner of Pensions that I may be re-rated at \$20.00 per month under law of May 1912."

11/02/1916: "Attention is invited to affidavit of claimant filed July 27, 1916, wherein he states that the name of his owner was William Christopher, which statement, in the opinion of the examiner, is sufficient, taken in connection with the unusual name of February, and in consideration of the similarity in present description and allegations of the claimant, February Francis, to establish his identity with the sailor Christopher February"

F.D. Byington, Acting Commissioner, wrote to the Quartermaster General, War Department, on 11/04/1916: "In the above-cited claim for pension it appears that Christopher February, a colored man, was discharged from the U.S.S. 'Wabash,' then part of the blockading fleet off Charleston, S.C., on November 29, 1863, and he states that he was thereafter placed on the transport 'General Hunter'; was on said vessel on April 16, 1864, when she was torpedoed on the way to Jacksonville, Fla.; was taken off by the 'Harris Reed'? (Harriet A. Weed) and brought to Jacksonville, where he enlisted in the army.

"It is shown by a report from the War Department that he enlisted in Co. K, 21st U.S. Col. Inf., on September 7, 1864, under the name February Francis, and a report is desired showing whether said Christopher February or February Francis was serving as an employee of the

Quartermaster's Department aboard the 'General Hunter,' and, if not, showing to what regiments the troops aboard said vessel were assigned."

February Francis to Commissioner, Stamped Received by the Pension Office, 07/19/1917:

"[I] was discharged from U.S.S. 'Wabash' and went right aboard the 'General Hunter' and served on her until she was torpedoed April 16, 1864 off Mandarin...joined the 'Wyoming' Cap. Jones. Left the 'Wyoming' and enlisted in the 21 U.S.C. Inf. Sept. 7, 1864 and served with until he was discharged."

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Copy of Wedding Invitation, Stamped Received by the Pension Office, 05/01/1920: "Mr. Frank E. Smith of Jacksonville, Fla. announces the marriage of his mother Mrs. M. Alena Diggs to Deacon February Shaw at St. Nicholas, Fla., Wednesday evening March the Fourth, at eight o'clock nineteen hundred and fourteen"

Will of February (Francis) Shaw, November 8, 1917: Makes his wife Mary Alena Shaw the sole administratrix of his estate. Leaves 1 1/4 acre and another 3 7/8 acre plots of land to his wife with the exception of one acre which he leaves to his adopted son Robert Lee Adams. He also leaves his wife all personal belongings.

Letter from M. Alena Shaw to the Commissioner of Pensions, Stamped Received by Pension Office, 05/01/1920:

"Dear Sir

I am not making application for a widow pension, I am only asking for my husbands Pension to pay his funeral expenses, and will be satisfied if paid my attorney undertaker Pratt I Borrowed money to make the first payment and owe a balance of \$65.00 so you can see that there nothing in it for me."

Undertaker Statement

Casket: \$60.00

Embalming: \$10.00

4 [?]: \$20.00

Car: \$10.00

Robe: \$10.00

Grave: \$2.50

[Total]: \$112.5