

Pacific Northwest Indian War Pensions

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As the country pressed westward, forever moving to the frontier, they encroached on the lands that Native Americans had occupied for centuries. The settlers were land hungry and considered themselves to be superior to the Native Americans already occupying the land. This was the Wild West, where law was tenuous. Conflict was inevitable.

Men of the Oregon Territory, fighting in the Indian Wars, might be volunteers, members of local militias, or members of the U.S. Army. They included whoever they could gather to protect people just coming in on the Southern route of the Oregon Trail, as well as established settlers. Louis Southworth, an early Oregon Territory settler, who arrived as a slave with his master James Southworth in 1853, claimed to have fought in the Rogue River War in 1856. Here in his own words:

Guns were necessary in traveling through the Indian country. So I bought me a very fine rifle for \$50. I prized it very highly. But at Roseburg I met a company of volunteers under Colonel John Kelsay, on their way to the Rogue River war. Because rifles were very scarce in those times, the soldiers threatened to take the gun away from me. Thereupon Colonel [Kelsay] said I could keep the gun if I would go along with it. Feeling as if I could not part with my gun, which was the only means of defense I had, I joined the company. During the war I was wounded, but was carried off the field, and my life was saved by Major Bruce, who was brave to the core.

This incident recalls the fact that many years afterward I met Colonel John Kelsay and Congressman Thomas H. Tongue at the Corvallis courthouse. Colonel Kelsay introduced me to Congressman Tongue saying, "Here is an aged man who fought bravely through the Rogue River war, but has never received any compensation."

Whereupon the congressman replied he would get help for me, even [if] it had to come out of his own pocket. But within a short time he died. This is as near as I ever came to getting any compensation for my services in the Rogue River Indian war.

Articles written about Louis in the last years of his life talked about how financially destitute he was. He had no family to take him in. Louis's informal induction into the Rogue River war raises questions about whether records were created to prove his presence in the war.

The Records

Sometimes there were no records; muster rolls were misplaced or lost. There could be records in state archives or kept on a national level. The Grand Commissioner of the Indian War Veterans of the North Pacific Coast, T A Wood, was also a lawyer who handled Indian War pension applications. Today we might think of this as conflict of interest, and indeed he was convicted in federal court of defrauding the government and was fined \$1000 on 14 June 1904. He was re-elected as Grand Commissioner shortly after that, even though he was not popular with veterans because he overcharged them for his services.²

He also withheld records from the government. This early 1900s style running title of a newspaper article leaves almost no need to read the article: "He Must Give Up — T. A. Wood has Indian War Muster Rolls — Department Wants Them — State of Oregon Likely to Be Asked to Take Legal Steps — Veterans Cannot be Paid — Only Proof of Their Service is Contained in the Documents the Portland Attorney Holds onto Tenaciously." The U.S. Pension Bureau was puzzled by his actions and fought to get their records back. Wood and the Pension Bureau were in a standoff over who needed to make a copy so they could both have them.³

An annual Pioneers' Day meeting occurred on Wednesday, 17 June 1903 in the Portland Exposition Building, replete with hundreds of attendees, a parade, a banquet, and general celebration. Taking advantage of the occasion, the Veterans of Indian Wars met the day before at the Grand Army Hall. Pensions were high on their list of discussion topics, a bill having been passed the previous year. A veteran mentioned that, "The Commissioner of Pensions of course has to guard against error. It has said that in the past 30 or 40 years many frauds have been perpetrated in the Pension Office, and this has compelled the Commissioners of Pensions to make very rigid and exacting rules."⁴ But perhaps those rules were a little too rigid, when they asked a widow to prove that she had not married prior to her marriage to

the Indian War veteran. They had been married for 70 years and at the time of her claim, anyone who would have known her before her marriage to the soldier, would have had to be at least 100 years old. She did not get the pension, with no one around who fit that profile.

Indian War Pension Laws⁵

Pacific Northwest Indian wars that were first covered by the 1902 law are the Cayuse, Yakima, Puget Sound, Rogue River, and Coeur d’Alene wars. Wars covered by the 1917 law are the Modoc, Nez Perce, Bannock, and Sheepeater Indian wars. The Nez Perce war was originally covered in the 1881 law. For more information about these wars, consult the Wikipedia page about American Indian Wars and the links on that page to information about the individual wars⁶

- Regiment, company, and commanding officers
- Date and place of death of the veteran
- Date of death of the widow
- Cross-references to files in other series
- Physical description
- Places the veteran lived after leaving the service

The Indian War Pension files are located at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Virgil White’s book *Index to Indian Wars Pension Files 1892 – 1926* indexes the files at the National Archives.⁷ The Oregon Indian War pensions from this book also appear as an online index at the Genealogical Forum of Oregon (<http://www.gfo.org/pension/index.htm>). This online index does not appear to contain all of the Oregon records in Virgil White’s book, but it’s a good and easy

Indian War Pension Laws

Date Enacted	Name of Law	Statute	Content
1881 - March 3	Nez Perce Indian War	21 Stat. L., 641	Paid \$1 / day, including time in hospital. Wounded, disabled, or killed, pension laws in effect as of 1881 apply.
1892 - July 27	Certain Indian Wars from 1832 to 1842	27 Stat. L., 281	\$8 / month
1902 - June 27	Certain Indian Wars from 1817 to 1858	32 Stat. L., 399	\$8 / month
1908 - April 19	Increase, Widows and Minors; Regardless of Income	35 Stat. L., 64	\$8 / month, widows \$12 / month and \$2 / month for each child under 16 years.
1913 - February 19	Rates Increased	37 Stat. L., 679	\$20 / month
1917 - March 4	Pensions of Survivors of Certain Indian Wars from January 1, 1859 to January 1891	39 Stat. L., 1199	Pensions for those enlisted men and officers who have reached the age of 62, and who served for thirty days in the campaign in southern Oregon and Idaho and northern parts of California... Specific Indian wars mentioned. See chart of Pacific Northwest Indian Wars.

The Records

National Archives & Virgil White

The Indian war pension files supply an amazing array of genealogically valuable information. Typically you will find the following information:

- Name of veteran or soldier and any aliases used
- Name of widow and surname if remarried
- Name of 2nd or 3rd or former husbands
- Children’s names
- Parents or siblings may be referred to
- Application number
- Certificate number, if approved for veterans or dependents
- State or country from which claim was filed
- Date claim was filed
- Name of war and dates served

place to start without having to leave home. This is the information that an entry in Virgil White’s book supplies:

Peek, Abraham M.,
Survivor’s Certificate #5049,
applied for in Oregon on 9 October 1902,
served in the Cayuse War.

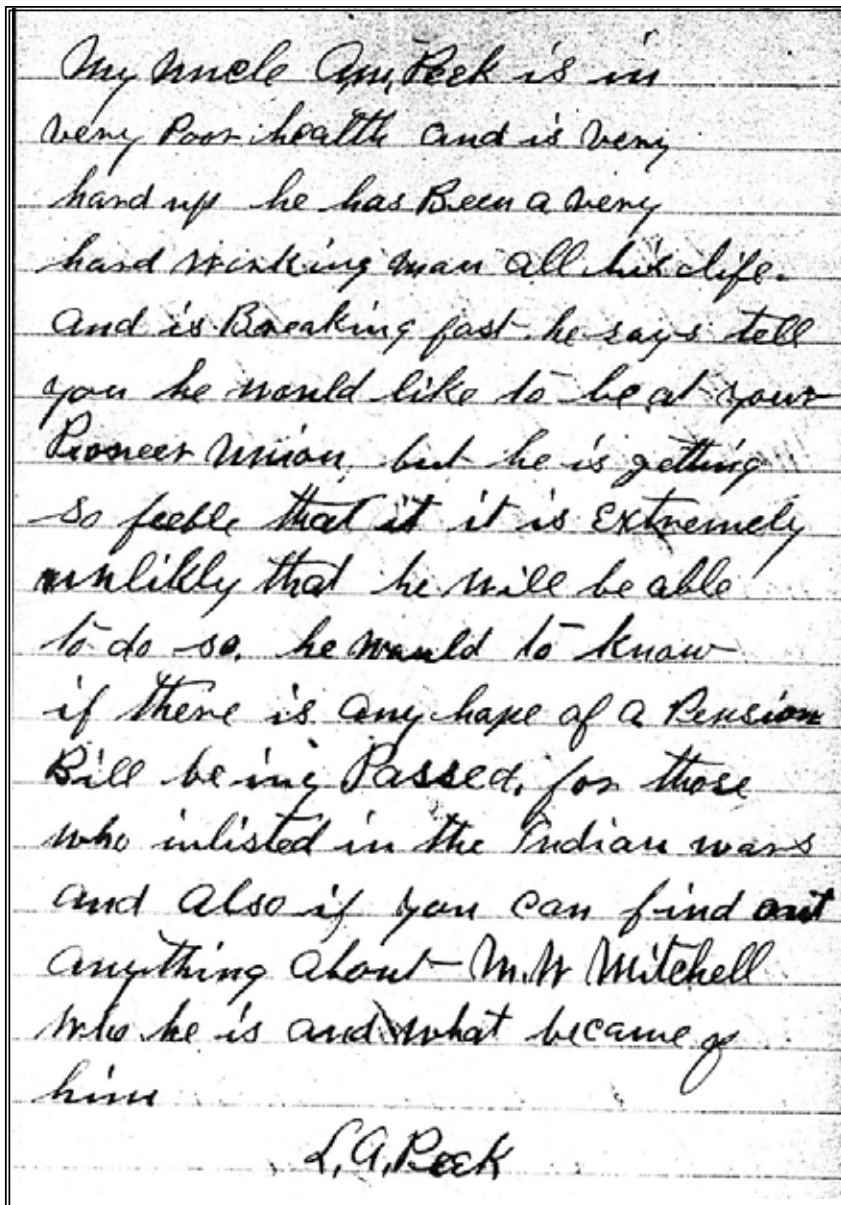
Once you locate an Indian war pension, you can order copies of the pension file online.

They can be ordered directly from the National Archives at the following address –
<https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline/>

Oregon Historical Society

The Oregon Historical Society (OHS) has Oregon Indian pension files. These records are indexed in the Biographical Index at OHS. This index provides an application number and the files are available on microfilm, in order of application number. These files are from the records of T A Wood, the lawyer who many people consulted to complete their pension application. Because the first contact with T A Wood quite often was by letter, with an appeal from the veteran, which sometimes gives insight into the life of the veteran. The letter below is an example from Abraham Peek's OHS Indian war pension file.

From other items in this file, we know that Abraham was actually in and out of the Oregon State Hospital. He had been kicked in the head by a horse and had some brain damage from that that made him emotionally volatile.



My Uncle Am. Peek is in very poor health and is very hard up he has been a very hard working man all his life. and is breaking fast he says tell you he would like to be at your Pioneer Union, but he is getting so feeble that it is extremely unlikely that he will be able to do so. he would to know if there is any hope of a Pension Bill being Passed, for those who enlisted in the Indian wars and also if you can find out anything about Mr Mitchell who he is and what became of him.

L. A. Peek

Seeing what Abraham Peek had to say about himself and other people had to say about him in his pension file fills in pieces of his story. There is much more of this narrative in the OHS pension files than the ones from National Archives.

Special Acts

When a veteran or a widow had some difficulty getting an adequate pension or any pension at all, a legislator could introduce a special act to try to get that individual reconsidered for a pension. *GenealogyBank.com* is a paid website most widely known for its newspaper collection, but it also contains historical documents, including the *U.S. Serial Set*. This resource is a compilation of various government publications, including Congressional reports, the *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States*, and the *Journal of the Senate of the United States*, which include the special acts. Select "Historical Documents" and enter names and a range of years or whatever else needed to sufficiently narrow the search. If you find a special act you can also search by the number of the act to see if there are any follow-up reports (i.e. "H.R. No. 271")

Back to Louis Southworth

We started, in the first paragraphs of this article, with a newspaper article about Louis Southworth that said that a Representative Thomas A Tongue was going to help him get a pension. Louis said that Tongue died shortly after that. A search of the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* (<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000309>) shows that Tongue died in 1903. The pension law that applied to the Rogue River Indian Wars was passed in 1902, so this fits Louis's story.

Searching Virgil White's book produces a record of pension application submitted for Lewis Southworth in 1902:

Southworth, Lewis, Survivor's Application # 6917, applied for in Oregon on 20 Sep 1902, served in Ross' Oregon Mounted Volunteers

A search of the newspapers on *GenealogyBank.com* produced the following article:

Pension for Negro ex-Slave Sought.
CORVALLIS, Or., Dec. 23.—(Special.)
—Representative Hawley, of the First

District of Oregon, has introduced a bill in Congress to pension Lou Southworth, an old Negro ex-slave, who fought in the Rogue River and other Indian wars in the pioneer days of this state. He was purchasing his freedom from his master when the Civil War gave him his freedom and he never received a receipt for the money paid. The bill introduced by Mr. Hawley would pay him a pension of \$20 a month.⁸

A search of the U.S. Serial Set on *GenealogyBank.com* confirms this news article. Hawley introduced special acts for Louis in the U.S. House and Senator Lane introduced them in the Senate. In all there were nine special acts entitled, "A bill granting a pension to Louis Southworth." The first special acts were introduced in 1915, by Mr. Hawley in the U. S. House of Representatives and by Mr. Lane in the Senate.⁹ There is no evidence of a report coming out of the committees that the special acts were referred to.

Oregon Historical Society

There is no file for Louis Southworth at the Oregon Historical Society, but an inspection of file for Thomas Southworth produced two misfiled pages for Louis. Thomas was the son of Louis's master. There was not the personal story about Louis that accompanies some files, however.

The Pension Bureau has the final word

The files from the National Archives showed both papers concerning both the 1902 application and the 1915 special act introduced by Hawley. "REJECTED" was stamped on both attempts. Mr. Lane stopped submitting special acts for Louis after Louis's death. On the other hand, Hawley, showing real tenacity, continued to submit special acts for eight years after his death. An affidavit in Louis's pension file from Major Bruce attested to Louis's presence in the Rogue River wars in 1855 and his wounding at the Battle of Hungry Hill. But this was not enough evidence, according to the Pension Bureau, to ease Louis's financial situation with an Indian war pension. Fraternal organizations in Corvallis took up a collection to help support Louis in the last two years of his life, ending with his death on 23 Jun 1917 in Corvallis.

(Endnotes)

1. "Oldest Negro Now Lives Here," *Weekly Gazette Times* (Corvallis, Oregon), 16 July 1915, p. 3, col. 1 -2; microfilm AN.U5 C6, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon; *GenealogyBank.com* (<http://www.genealogybank.com> : 15

April 2013).

2. "T. A. Wood is Dead," *Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), 28 September 1904, p. 16, col. 1; *GenealogyBank.com* (<http://www.genealogybank.com>: 15 April 2013).

3. "He Must Give Up: T. A. Wood Has Indian War Muster Rolls," *Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), 24 September 1903, p. 2, col 1; *GenealogyBank.com* (<http://www.genealogybank.com> : 15 April 2013).

4. "Fought on Frontier - Veterans of Indian Wars Meet In Portland..." *Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), 17 June 1903, p. 14, Col. 3 -4.

5. U.S. Bureau of Pension, Dept. of the Interior, *Laws of the United States Governing the Granting of Army and Navy Pensions...Corrected to March 4, 1919* (Washington, DC : Government Printing Office, 1919.); *Google Books* (<http://books.google.com> : 15 April 2013).

6. "American Indian Wars," *Wikipedia.com* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Indian_Wars: access 15 April 2013). Information from this web page and pages it links to for individual Indian war pages.

7. Virgil White, *Index to Indian Wars Pension Files 1892 – 1926, Volume II: L – Z* (Waynesboro, Tennessee: The National Historical Publishing Company, 1987).

8. "Pension for Negro ex-Slave Sought," *Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), 24 December 1915, page 3, column 2; *GenealogyBank.com* (<http://www.genealogybank.com> : 13 April 2013).

9. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, Sixty-Four Congress, First Session*, City of Washington, 1915, Serial Set Volume 6896, p. 109; *GenealogyBank.com* (<http://www.genealogybank.com> : accessed 15 April 2013.)

Journal of the Senate of the United States of America. Sixty-fourth Congress, First Session, Washington, 1915, Serial Set Vol. No.6895, p. 92, 743; *GenealogyBank.com* (<http://www.genealogybank.com> : accessed 15 April 2013).