

# Looking for Bob: Black Confederate Pensioners After the Civil War

*By James G. Hollandsworth, Jr.*

Confederate general John B. Gordon wrote in his memoirs that Robert E. Lee liked to tell an anecdote about a black servant, a cook for one of the officers on his staff, who called on him one day at his headquarters:

“General Lee,” the old man said, pulling off his hat, “I have been wanting to see you a long time. I’m a soldier.”

“Ah?” Lee replied, “To what army do you belong—to the Union army or to the Southern army?”

“Oh, General, I belong to your army,” the man said.

“Well, have you been shot?” Lee asked.

“No, sir; I ain’t been shot yet,” he answered.

“How is that?” Lee asked. “Nearly all of our men get shot.”

“Why, General,” the old black man replied, “I ain’t been shot ‘cause I stay back whar de generals stay.”<sup>1</sup>

Lee’s humorous anecdote may or may not have been true, but it does highlight several questions surrounding the service of African Americans assigned to the Confederate army during the Civil War. Were these men soldiers or servants? Did they get shot? Why did they serve, and

---

JAMES G. HOLLANDSWORTH, JR., former professor of psychology and history at the University of Southern Mississippi, is the author of *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* and a new volume, *Portrait of a Scientific Racist: Alfred Holt Stone of Mississippi*, due from LSU Press in 2008. He lives in Jackson.

<sup>1</sup> John Brown Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 383–84.

what was the nature of the relationship between black servants and their white masters in uniform? The answers to these questions may never be completely understood, but one thing is clear from a variety of sources: African Americans were an integral part of the Confederate war effort.

Black southerners contributed to the Confederate war effort in four ways. First, as slaves, they provided the labor that fueled the southern economy and maintained the production of foodstuffs and other commodities essential to the South's prosecution of the war. Second, slaves were rented to or impressed by the Confederate government to work on specific projects related to the South's military infrastructure, such as fortifications, bridges, and railroads. Third, African Americans made up a substantial part of the permanent work force in the Confederacy's war-related industries, such foundries, munitions factories, and mines. In addition, they drove wagons that transported food and war material produced by these industries to the front. They also provided services to wounded and sick soldiers in Confederate hospitals. Last, a large number of black southerners went to war with the Confederate army as noncombatants serving as personal servants, company cooks, and hostlers.

As far as the first contribution is concerned, Confederate authorities during the war knew that slave labor on the home front was crucial to their government's success. General Gordon recalled that he was against the enlistment of the South's slaves as soldiers in the closing months of the war because they were "absolutely essential," as he put it, "on the plantations to produce supplies for the armies and the people." "Without it [black labor]," Gordon wrote, "neither the armies nor the people at home could survive."<sup>2</sup>

Confederate authorities also used slaves to build and maintain the South's military infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> The extensive earthworks that protected the South's ports, cities, and transportation hubs such as Richmond,

---

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, *Reminiscences*, 384.

<sup>3</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, *Southern Negroes 1861-1865* (1938; reprint of revised edition [New York: Rinehart & Co., 1953] with prefatory note by C. Vann Woodward, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965), 110-33. Also see John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 283-84; Robert D. Reid, "The Negro in Alabama during the Civil War," *Journal of Negro History* 35 (July 1950): 265-67; and Tinsley Lee Spraggins, "Mobilization of Negro Labor for the Department of Virginia and North Carolina, 1861-1865," *North Carolina Historical Review* 24 (April 1947): 161-77.

Petersburg, Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Vicksburg, and Atlanta were constructed by slaves working under the direction of Confederate engineers.<sup>4</sup> In addition, slaves helped maintain the South's railroad network. They replaced rails, repaired bridges, and restored roadbeds.<sup>5</sup> Their contribution in that regard was especially valuable when they were mobilized to repair rail lines that had been disrupted by Union raiders. As the war progressed, southern railroad management was forced to rely more and more on black labor.<sup>6</sup>

Thousands of African Americans, both slave and free, were also at work in the Confederacy's war-related industries.<sup>7</sup> The Confederate ironworks at Richmond, Virginia, and Selma, Alabama, both of which turned out large quantities of arms and munitions throughout the war, relied heavily on slaves and free men of color. Half of the labor force at Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond was black during the peak of its productivity,<sup>8</sup> and workers at the arsenal in Selma were almost eighty percent black by the end of the war.<sup>9</sup> African Americans were also involved in the work of extracting saltpeter for gunpowder for the Confederate Bureau of Niter and Mining. In 1864, of the more than ten thousand men involved with the important work of supplying southern troops with gunpowder east of the Mississippi River, fifty-six percent were black.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> For examples of Confederate correspondence concerning the use of slaves to construct fortifications in Virginia, see J. Bankhead Magruder to R. E. Lee, April 8, 1862; in South Carolina, Wm. H. Echols to R. S. Ripley, March 14, 1863; and in North Carolina, Braxton Bragg to W. H. Taylor, January 11, 1865, all in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records*, 128 volumes (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1900), I, 11: 430-31; I, 14: 827; and I, 46/2: 1036, respectively. Also see Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, 113-33; Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (1905; reprint, Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Co., 1978), 205-06; and Charles H. Wesley, "The Employment of Negroes as Soldiers in the Confederate Army," *Journal of Negro History* 4 (July 1919): 239-43.

<sup>5</sup> James H. Brewer, *The Confederate Negro: Virginia's Craftsmen and Military Laborers, 1861-1865* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1969), 92-94; Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Reliance on black labor increased despite the fact that slaves lacked the technical skills of the white workers they replaced (Robert C. Black, *The Railroads of the Confederacy* [1952; Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot, 1987], 130).

<sup>7</sup> Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 283-84; Spraggins, *Mobilization of Negro Labor*, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Brewer, *The Confederate Negro*, 38-39, 56-57; Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), 92.

<sup>9</sup> Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, 112. In February 1865, 310 of the 400 workmen in the arsenal at Selma were black.

<sup>10</sup> Annual report of I. M. St. John to James A. Seddon, secretary of war, October 1, 1864, in *Official Records*, IV, 3: 696.

Departments providing logistic and medical support to the Confederate army also relied heavily on black labor. As the war progressed, slaves were used to replace white teamsters in the quartermaster, commissary, and ordnance departments,<sup>11</sup> while black hospital attendants provided services ranging from patient care to digging graves.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, these men worked in supply depots and hospitals located in rear areas. If they came in contact with Confederate soldiers on the front lines, it was for short periods of time. Nevertheless, there was another contingent of black southerners that served near the front throughout the war. These were noncombatants assigned to the Confederate army, men like the cook who approached General Lee.

Traditionally, the role of black noncombatants with the Confederate army has been viewed as an interesting but insignificant aspect of the Confederate war effort. Generally, these men have been described as the personal servants of wealthy planters who used them to recreate a lifestyle in the army similar to that they had enjoyed on the plantation before going off to fight the Yankees. "Affluent Confederates took their Negro body servants to the war with them," John Hope Franklin explained in his book *From Slavery to Freedom*. "These [black] workers kept the quarters clean, washed clothes, groomed uniforms, polished swords, buckles, and spurs, ran errands, secured rations, cut hair, and groomed animals. Some even took part in the fighting." But the service of these personal servants was a luxury, something that their masters were able to enjoy only during the first part of the war. "As the fighting grew desperate, and rations shorter," Franklin noted, "most servants were sent home."<sup>13</sup>

Franklin's description was accurate, as far as it went, but it may have been incomplete. Anecdotes from Confederate memoirs and accounts of black noncombatants that appeared in newspapers and the other publications after the war suggest that the extent and significance of the

---

<sup>11</sup> For examples, see General Orders No. 20, Hindman's Corps, Dalton, Georgia, February 6, 1864; Gideon J. Pillow to planters of Lauderdale, Lawrence, and Franklin Counties [Tennessee], March 6, 1863; and Confederate correspondence from Texas in 1863, in which a quartermaster's agent, F. W. Rhine, states "I would rather have 1 negro driver than 2 conscripts to drive a team," all in *Official Records*, I, 32/2: 683; IV, 2: 421; and I, 26/2: 154, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 284.

service of African Americans with the Confederate army was greater than keeping camp and running errands.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with developing a picture of the services black non-combatants performed for the Confederate army is the lack of reliable information. Documentation for the use of slave labor on fortifications and railroads is extensive because that type of labor was a matter of official policy and subject to contractual arrangements. The services of black workers in Confederate arsenals, mines, and hospitals were also documented because they worked under the direct supervision of officers and doctors who were held accountable for their performance. Unfortunately, the same sort of documentation does not exist for black noncombatants with the Confederate army because their service was not officially recognized.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the primary source of information regarding their service is anecdotal.

Drawing meaningful conclusions from anecdotes is problematic because anecdotes usually originate from a single source and thus lack corroboration. This shortcoming can be illustrated by reference to a widely accepted conclusion regarding the length of service of black noncombatants.

It is generally assumed that most of the black noncombatants who went to war with the Confederate army were sent home “as the fighting grew desperate, and the rations shorter,” as Franklin put it. In 1994 Richard Rollins noted that

Bell Wiley’s assertion that few servants were left in the army after 1862 except those of higher officers seems reasonable, given the South’s reputation for starving and inadequately clothing the fighting men. Indeed, when servants are mentioned in other works, that seems to be the accepted generalization.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> For a collection of anecdotes concerning this topic, see J. H. Segars and Charles K. Barrow, *Black Southerners in Confederate Armies: A Collection of Historical Accounts* (Atlanta, Ga.: Southern Lion Books, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> There were some black noncombatants with the Confederate army whose duties were officially sanctioned. They were black company cooks, slave and free, who served in that capacity as a result of a bill passed in the Confederate Congress on April 21, 1862 (*Official Records*, IV, 1: 1079–80). Nevertheless, records of their service are sketchy, and many slaves who began their service as personal servants ended up cooking for the men as the war progressed. As a result, it is very difficult to differentiate between slaves who were rented by the Confederate army as cooks under the provisions of the bill and slaves who initially went to war with their masters.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rollins, “Servants and Soldiers: Tennessee’s Black Southerners in Gray,” in Richard Rollins, ed., *Black Southerners in Gray: Essays on Afro-Americans in Confederate Armies* (Redondo

Historian Ervin L. Jordan arrived at the same conclusion in 1995. "Few [body servants] remained with the Confederate army after 1863," he noted, "due to supply shortages and the increased need for black industrial and agricultural labor."<sup>17</sup>

Both Rollins and Jordan relied on Bell Irvin Wiley's groundbreaking work, *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865*, as their source. "During the first part of the war, many private soldiers were attended by servants," Wiley wrote in 1938. However, "as the service became harder and rations became shorter in 1862 and 1863, many of the Negroes were sent home."<sup>18</sup> To illustrate his point, Wiley referred to the Third Alabama Infantry, a regiment that had lost most of its servants by the end of the second year of the war.

The source for Wiley's conclusion was another historian with excellent credentials, Walter L. Fleming. Fleming referred to the attrition of servants with the Third Alabama in a section entitled "Military Uses of the Negro" in his 1905 book *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*. "Two years later there were no negro servants," Fleming had written. "[T]hey had been sent home when their masters were killed, or because they were needed at home, or they had been sold and 'eaten up' by the youngsters who now had to do their own work."<sup>19</sup>

Fleming's source was John S. Wise, a young Confederate staff officer who had published his memoirs in 1899.<sup>20</sup> Wise recalled that in 1862 he had run into three officers from the Third Alabama while he was in Richmond. Because Wise had visited the Third Alabama when it had first arrived in Virginia, he rode out to their camp that evening to renew acquaintances. "There were no more tents, or cooks, or attendant servants, or bright uniforms, or bands, or dress parades," Wise wrote in his memoir to convey the hardships of campaigning. Thus, a chance encounter in Richmond by a staff officer who made one observation became the basis for the generalization that most of the African Americans serving with the Confederate army were sent home after 1862.

The widely accepted generalization about the length of service for black noncombatants is misleading on two counts. For one, it is inac-

---

Beach, CA: Rank and File Publications, 1994), 85.

<sup>17</sup> Ervin L. Jordan, *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 186.

<sup>18</sup> Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*, 207.

<sup>20</sup> John S. Wise, *The End of an Era* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1899), 161, 212-13.

curate, as we shall see. For another, it undervalues the service of black noncombatants because it implies that, although they were with the army when things were easy, they had been sent home when things got tough. By implication, white men had stayed to finish the job by themselves.

The potential for belittling the service of African Americans with the Confederate army is inherent to the use of anecdotes as a primary source of information. Invariably, anecdotes about the service of black noncombatants came from white men who owned them as slaves and had a vested interest in reinforcing the notion that African Americans in the South before the Civil War accepted, even liked, their status as slaves. In addition, many of these anecdotes portrayed black noncombatants in a comic or even ludicrous light.<sup>21</sup> Further, because most of these black noncombatants were illiterate and generally could not document their service with the Confederate army, they did not get a fair shake. The story of J. E. B. Stuart's body servant, Bob, is a case in point.

In 1867 John Esten Cooke, a member of Stuart's staff, published a memoir entitled *Wearing of the Gray*. As would be true in virtually every biographical sketch of Jeb Stuart, Cooke's memoir noted the General's love of music. More specifically, Cooke recalled that Stuart's servant, Bob, was Stuart's primary music maker, a role that was highlighted by Cooke's account of an incident during the first year of the war, when Stuart's cavalry was in winter quarters at Camp Qui Vive near Centerville, Virginia. The scene was set in a small farmhouse. In addition to Stuart's staff and couriers, two women, caught trying to slip past Confederate pickets and presumed to be spies, were present. "Behold the scene now, reader, as I looked at it, on that evening of December in 1861," Cooke wrote.

We are in a bleak room, with no furniture but a desk, a chair, and a camp couch. At the desk sits Stuart, writing away with immense rapidity, and stopping now and then to hum a song. On the couch, near the fire, are the ladies—the younger smiling, the elder frowning. Around stand the staff, and at the door are the laughing faces of couriers, who look and listen. In front of them stand the sable musicians, and the great performer of the breakdown—ebon-hued, dilapidated in costume, awaiting

---

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Dabney Herndon Maury, *Recollections of a Virginian in the Mexican, Indian, and Civil Wars* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1894), 160–65.

orders, and approaching the performance with serious and unmistakable satisfaction.

Stuart calls from his desk, without turning his head, and the process of charming away the evil spirit commences. The guitar is played by the General's body-servant Bob, a young mulatto of dandified appearance—the air, indeed, of a lady killer—and an obvious confidence in his own abilities to delight, if not instruct and improve, his audience. Bob laboriously tunes his instrument; gazes thoughtfully at the ceiling, as he absently “picks upon the string;” and then commences singing the popular air, “Listen to the Mocking-Bird.” He is accompanied in the chorus by the sable ventriloquist, who imitates all the feathered tribe in his throat; and lo! as you listen, the room seems full of mocking-birds; the air is alive with the gay carol of robins, larks, jay-birds, orioles; the eyes of the ventriloquist roll rapturously like balls of snow against a wall of charcoal, and the guitar keeps up its harmonious accompaniment.<sup>22</sup>

Despite Cooke's use of unflattering racial stereotypes, his description of Bob and his accompanist honored the black performers by placing them at the center of attention and including them as part of Stuart's headquarters family. However, Cooke's recognition of Bob's status would not last, as was evidenced twenty years later when another member of Stuart's staff wrote a biography of his commander. The author, H. B. McClellan, did not offer an account of that evening in December 1861, probably because he did not join Stuart's staff until 1863. Nevertheless, Bob makes a brief appearance but not as the music maker who lifted the spirits of Stuart's staff. In McClellan's book Bob is an irresponsible servant with a weakness for the bottle. According to McClellan, Bob was put in charge of two of Stuart's favorite horses, Lady Margrave and Skylark, on a raid into Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, Bob got drunk, fell asleep, and was captured, along with Stuart's horses.<sup>23</sup>

In 1930 John W. Thomason, one of Stuart's most popular biographers, duly recorded Bob's unfortunate encounter with Yankee cavalry but, more important, replaced Bob as Stuart's music maker with a white

---

<sup>22</sup> John Esten Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray: Being Personal Portraits, Scenes and Adventures of the War* (1867; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 188–89.

<sup>23</sup> H[enry] B[rainerd] McClellan, *The Life and Campaigns of Major-General J. E. B. Stuart: Commander of the Cavalry of the Army of Northern Virginia* (1885; reprinted as *I Rode with Jeb Stuart: Life and Campaigns of Major-General J. E. B. Stuart*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 161.

minstrel from a blackface show that had been stranded in Richmond at the outbreak of war. The minstrel's name was Sweeny, and, according to Thomason, it was Sweeny who entertained the guests at Camp Qui Vive during the winter of 1861. In Thomason's book, Sweeny was Stuart's "personal gleeman, to discourse, at his [Stuart's] whim, with ready banjo and agreeable voice, melodies grave or gay."<sup>24</sup>

What happened to Bob?<sup>25</sup> Possibly, Thomason did not think that Stuart devotees in the age of Jim Crow would accept the notion that a black man with "the air, indeed, of a lady killer" could quicken the heart of a white woman. After all, Cooke had observed that "[t]he young lady listens and her eyes dance," as Bob strums his guitar. "Her cheeks grow more rosy, her smiles brighter; even her elderly companion relaxes somewhat from her rigidly hostile expression, and pays attention to the music."<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the reason for Thomason's replacing Bob with a white minstrel, Bob's disappearance reinforces the argument that anecdotes do not provide a reliable basis for drawing conclusions regarding black noncombatants with the Confederate army.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, there is another source of information about the service of these men. In fact, a large number of these men did leave a record of their service after the war, and, although the information recorded there is not as colorful as that found in the anecdotes recorded by Confederate veterans, it has the advantage of having been collected systematically and verified by witnesses. That source of information is their applications for Confederate pensions after the war.

---

<sup>24</sup> John W. Thomason, *Jeb Stuart* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 123. Bob's misfortune with Pennsylvania applejack can be found on page 317. Although Thomason said that Sweeny's first name was Joseph, later Stuart biographers called him Sam.

<sup>25</sup> Although the story of Bob's drunken episode continued to be retold, his role as Stuart's musician has been resurrected by more recent Stuart biographers relying on Cooke's memoirs as a primary source for their work (e.g., Burke Davis, *Jeb Stuart: The Last Cavalier* [New York: Bonanza Books, 1957], 68, and Emory M. Thomas, *Bold Dragoon: The Life of J. E. B. Stuart* [New York: Harper & Row, 1986], 93).

<sup>26</sup> Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray*, 189.

<sup>27</sup> For a thoughtful essay concerning the role of black southerners during the Civil War, see Clarence L. Mohr, "Bibliographical Essay: Southern Blacks in the Civil War: A Century of Historiography," *Journal of Negro History* 59 (April 1974): 177–95.

### *Black Confederate Pensioners*

Veterans of the Union army who were disabled as a result of their service during the Civil War were eligible for a federal pension as early as 1868. Disabled Confederate veterans had to wait until their representatives regained political control of the southern states after Reconstruction to apply for pensions sponsored by the individual states.<sup>28</sup> Although Confederate pensions were limited initially to disabled veterans, it was not long before eligibility was expanded to include veterans who were indigent. North Carolina and Florida led the way in 1885, and by 1898 all of the states that had seceded from the Union offered pensions to indigent Confederate veterans. Missouri and Kentucky followed suit in 1911 and 1912, respectively.<sup>29</sup>

These states, with the exception of Missouri, also extended coverage to indigent widows of veterans, as long as they did not remarry.<sup>30</sup> African Americans who had served with the Confederate army were not included. That situation changed in 1921, however, when Tennessee decided to offer pensions to African Americans who went to war as servants or cooks.<sup>31</sup> “A new feature in the pension appropriation of Tennessee makes an allowance for pensions to the faithful negroes who were in the war with their masters and served them to the end,” an editorial in the *Confederate Veteran* noted after Tennessee’s inclusion of black noncombatants was announced. “Doubtless other States of the South will make similar provision for their old negroes, whose loyalty under the circumstances showed a fine sense of honor not apparent in later generations of the race.”<sup>32</sup> Within six years, three other states followed

---

<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Gorman, “Confederate Pensions as Southern Social Welfare,” in Elna C. Green, ed., *Before the New Deal: Social Welfare in the South, 1830–1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 26. For a comprehensive assessment of the pension system for Union veterans, see William H. Glasson, *History of Military Pension Legislation in the United States*, vol. 12, no. 3 of *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1900).

<sup>29</sup> “Confederate Pension Records,” <http://www.archives.gov/genealogy/military/civil-war/confederate/pension.html> (accessed September 26, 2006). For a detailed discussion of Confederate pension programs during the first decade of their existence, see M. B. Morton, “Federal and Confederate Pensions Contrasted,” *Forum* (September 1893): 68–74. B. U. Ratchford and K. C. Heise (“Confederate Pensions,” *Southern Economic Journal* 5 [October 1938]: 207–17) carry the discussion forward to 1936.

<sup>30</sup> Most of these states extended pensions to indigent widows at the same time they expanded coverage to include indigent veterans.

<sup>31</sup> “Colored Men’s Applications for Pension,” in *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?EntryID=C127> (accessed September 25, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> “Pensions for Faithful Negroes,” *Confederate Veteran* 29 (August 1921): 284.

suit: South Carolina in 1923, Virginia in 1924, and North Carolina in 1927.<sup>33</sup>

African Americans who applied for Confederate pensions in the 1920s were, for the most part, very old men. Consequently, the number of black pensioners was small compared to the large number of Confederate veterans in these states who had been allowed to apply for pensions decades earlier. But there was an exception to this chronology that the editors of the *Confederate Veteran* missed: Mississippi had included African Americans in that state's pension program from the beginning.

Mississippi's pension program for Confederate veterans was initiated in 1888. Initially, pensions were limited to soldiers or sailors with disabilities such as the loss of a limb, that prevented them from engaging in manual labor, and to unmarried women who had been widowed during the war. Interestingly, the pension program in Mississippi also included the soldiers' personal servants who were disabled as a result of wounds sustained during the war.<sup>34</sup> Four years later Mississippi expanded the eligibility for pensions to include veterans, their former servants, and unmarried widows "who are now resident in this State, and who are indigent and not able to earn support by their own labor."<sup>35</sup>

Pension applications from African Americans in Mississippi were forwarded to the state auditor's office by pension boards in each county. These applications are now on file in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), where they can be viewed on microfilm. MDAH also has pension rolls that were maintained by the state auditor's office to determine how much money each county would receive to distribute to individual pensioners. Unfortunately, there are

---

<sup>33</sup> Ratchford and Heise, "Confederate Pensions," 209, 212; Alexia J. Helsley, "South Carolina's Black Confederates," in Barrow, Segars, and Rosenburg, *Black Confederates*, 1090-91; Mary L. Wilson, "The Confederate Pension Systems in Texas, Georgia, and Virginia: The Programs and the People" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Texas, 2004), 134.

<sup>34</sup> The language of Mississippi's pension act is as follows: "To every such soldier or sailor [who had lost a leg, or an arm], or servant of the officers, soldiers and sailors of the late Confederacy who is now, or may hereafter be, otherwise incapacitated for manual labor by reason of a wound received in said service; and, to the widow remaining unmarried, of any soldier or sailor who lost his life in said service, while a citizen of this State" ("An act for the relief of certain soldiers and sailors and servants of officers, soldiers and sailors of the late war between the States," Chapter 12, *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at a Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature, Held in the City of Jackson, Commencing Jan'y 3, 1888, and Ending March 8, 1888* [Jackson, Miss.: R. H. Henry, 1888], 30).

<sup>35</sup> Chapter 80, *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at a Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature, Held in the City of Jackson, Commencing January 5, 1892, and Ending April 2, 1892* (Jackson, Miss.: R. H. Henry, 1892), 299-300.

gaps in both sets of records. MDAH has an almost complete run of pension rolls from 1910 to 1935, but only three rolls have survived from the preceding twenty-four years (1888 through 1909).<sup>36</sup> Consequently, fourteen percent of the applications from black pensioners listed on the pension rolls cannot be located.<sup>37</sup> Given the nature of these records, over two thousand African Americans who served with soldiers in the Confederate army can be identified from either pension applications or pension rolls at MDAH.

Applications for Confederate pensions from these African Americans are intermingled with applications from veterans, disabled soldiers, and widows at MDAH, all of which are filed alphabetically by last name. Black pensioners can be identified by the special application form that servants were required to use.<sup>38</sup> A review of the applications for Confederate pensions in Mississippi—about 36,000—reveals 1,739 applications from African Americans in MDAH files.<sup>39</sup> Two hundred and sixty-one or thirteen percent of these applications are from men whose name does not appear on the pension rolls. In almost every case, however, these applications were submitted prior to 1910, the year MDAH's run of pension rolls begins.

The auditor's office did not second-guess decisions made by the three-man county boards nor did it accept appeals. Consequently, applications certified by the chancery clerk in the county and forwarded to the state auditor's office for payment were, by default, valid applications. However, this administrative process was different in other states. Although pension applications in all five states originated at the county level, applications in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia were submit-

---

<sup>36</sup> The rolls for 1911, 1912, and 1915 are also missing. The rolls for 1920 and 1921 were consolidated into a single list. As far as the period from 1892 to 1909 is concerned, only the rolls for 1898, 1901, and 1903 have survived.

<sup>37</sup> The loss of data resulting from missing applications was offset to some degree in 1916 when applications prior to that year were voided, making it necessary for pensioners, white and black, to reapply if they wanted their pension to continue. Consequently, 1916 applications are on file for many black pensioners whose earlier application had been lost or misplaced. A similar purging of the pension rolls occurred in 1924, when widows and servants were required to file new applications.

<sup>38</sup> Applications from black pensioners are on file at MDAH from 1900 through 1938. Twelve different forms for servants were used during this period.

<sup>39</sup> It was common for veterans, widows, and servants to submit more than one application over the years as a result of changes in the pension law. Consequently, the estimate of 36,000 applications does not imply that 36,000 people applied for Confederate pensions in Mississippi.

ted to state pension boards for approval.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the existence of a pension application in the state archives for these states does not mean that information contained on that application was accurate. For example, a quarter of the approximately 280 applications from African Americans on microfilm in the Tennessee State Library and Archives in Nashville were rejected because of insufficient or unsubstantiated information.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, taking into account applications that were disallowed at the state level and other anomalies such as missing or misfiled applications, the number of valid applications in the five states that offered pensions to African Americans after the Civil War can be tabulated (see *Table 1* below).<sup>42</sup>

**TABLE 1**

NUMBER OF VALID APPLICATIONS FROM BLACK PENSIONERS

STATE	FIRST YR	MEDIAN YR	NO	% TOTAL	AVG AGE
MISSISSIPPI	1888	1916	1739	62%	75.3
NORTH CAROLINA	1927	1929	121	4%	85.7
SOUTH CAROLINA	1923	1923	328	12%	81.3
TENNESSEE	1921	1921	195	7%	79.9
VIRGINIA	1924	1925	424	15%	83.1
TOTAL/AVERAGE			2807		81.1

FIRST YR - First year in which African Americans were authorized to apply for Confederate pensions.

MEDIAN YR - Year by which fifty percent of black pensioners had applied.

AVG AGE - Average age of black pensioners when they submitted their applications.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see "Tennessee Confederate Pension Applications: Soldiers & Widows," <http://www.tennessee.gov/tsla/history/military/pension.htm> (accessed October 3, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Charles K. Barrow, J. H. Segars, and R. B. Rosenberg published a list of 267 black pensioners from Tennessee in *Black Confederates* ([Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co, 2004], 113–20, originally published as *Forgotten Confederates*) but did not distinguish between applicants who were approved and those who were rejected. H. C. Blackerby published a list of 284 black pensioners from Tennessee in *Blacks in Blue and Gray: Afro-American Service in the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Portals Press, 1979) without indicating that 69 had been rejected. Richard Rollins ("Servants and Soldiers: Tennessee's Black Southerners in Gray," in *Black Southerners in Gray*, 78–93) reviewed 285 pension applications from African Americans in Tennessee and reported that 21 lacked sufficient information to verify actual service. It is unclear whether Rollins was aware that three times as many had been rejected by the state board.

<sup>42</sup> Confederate pension applications in South Carolina and Virginia have been scanned and are available online. Some of these applications were either not scanned or illegible. Missing or misfiled applications in North Carolina and Tennessee also reduced the number of valid applications that could be included in this study.

Although the applications on file at MDAH account for almost two-thirds of those used for this study, applications submitted by black pensioners in the other four states are also valuable resources. Confederate pension programs in each state were established independently, and information from applications for pensions varied depending on the pension legislation for that state. Consequently, variations in questions on the applications reveal different aspects of the applicants' service, providing a broader perspective of the contribution of African Americans to the southern war effort than would be possible if Confederate pensions had been administered by a single, centralized agency, as was the case with pensions for Union soldiers.

### *Pension Applications*

Pension applications for African Americans were different from those used for soldiers or widows in all five states except North Carolina. Applications for servants asked for the applicant's name, the name of the person he had served during the Civil War, and the dates of his service.<sup>43</sup> These applications usually asked for the applicant's age, although South Carolina did not, and Mississippi stopped asking for the applicant's age in 1922.<sup>44</sup>

All five states except Virginia wanted to know the unit to which the applicant's master had been assigned.<sup>45</sup> This information, coupled with his master's name, allowed pension boards to verify the applicant's service by checking Confederate muster rolls. This step in the approval process was crucial, as contemporary records documenting the service of African Americans were nonexistent. There were no muster rolls for these men, most of whom had no last names at the time of their service.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Black Confederate pensioners in North Carolina, the last state to include servants, were required to use the standard soldier's form, resulting in the loss of information when sections deemed irrelevant to the applicant's service (e.g., dates of enlistment) were crossed out.

<sup>44</sup> After 1922 applicants in Mississippi often gave their age in the remarks section of the application.

<sup>45</sup> Use of the standard soldier's form for black applicants in North Carolina also resulted in the loss of information concerning this variable.

<sup>46</sup> A majority of the black applicants for Confederate pensions used their master's surname when they applied. For verification that the Confederate army did not keep records regarding the service of black servants, see Dunbar Rowland to Miss Mary Ratliff, September 21, 1922, letter book for 1922, MDAH.

The state pension board in Virginia was less interested in the master's unit than in the nature of the work the black applicant performed. Legislation in the other states, except North Carolina, limited pensions to African Americans who had gone to war as servants to their masters or who had been rented by their masters to cook for Confederate soldiers.<sup>47</sup> Eligibility for Confederate pensions in Virginia, however, was more inclusive; that state accepted applications from African Americans "who served the Confederate States in the war between the States as body servant of a soldier in service, cook, hostler, teamster, Confederate guard, or who buried the Confederate dead, worked on breastworks, in railroad shops, blacksmith shops, in Confederate hospitals, under the direction of the Confederate Government."<sup>48</sup> The phrase "under the direction of the Confederate government" was the key to eligibility under Virginia's pension law. A black teamster who drove a wagon hauling rations destined for the Confederate army was not eligible for a pension unless he came directly under the supervision of a Confederate commissary officer. Much correspondence associated with the applications from African Americans in Virginia dealt with issues concerning the nature of the applicant's service. Consequently, the applications from black pensioners in Virginia provide the most complete information concerning what African Americans did for the Confederate war effort.

The other states also wanted to know what black applicants had done in regard to their service during the war, but they limited the applicant's response to a single word or term, such as "body servant." Interestingly, Mississippi did not start asking for this information until 1922, the same year that the state stopped asking for the applicant's age.

Surprisingly, none of the states except Mississippi asked black applicants if they were wounded as a result of their service with the Confederate army. This omission did not mean, however, that such information did not find its way onto application forms, for all states allowed the applicant to state why he should be awarded a pension, and applicants were not hesitant to report wounds received during the war. Nevertheless, information about wounds was not systematically obtained from

---

<sup>47</sup> Slaves who were employed as cooks in the Confederate army as a result of the act passed by the Confederate Congress in April 1862 did not receive compensation for their service. Any money they earned was given to their masters (see enclosure, "Wanted, Negroes," in J. Bankhead Magruder's correspondence with S. Cooper, January 30, 1862, *Official Records*, Ser. I, vol. 51/2: 456-58).

<sup>48</sup> Heading on "Form No. 6" of Virginia pension applications.

black applicants except in Mississippi, and the county pension boards in Mississippi stopped collecting wound information in 1922.

Although the type of information in these applications would appear to be unambiguous, several factors affected its reliability. The biggest problem was ignorance and/or a faulty memory;<sup>49</sup> many of these men, almost all of whom were former slaves, did not know how old they were. Answers such as “about 80,” “over 80,” or “I don’t know,” were common in all five states, especially in the four states that did not extend pension eligibility to African Americans until the 1920s. Often these men could not recall the unit designation of their master’s regiment or the name of the commanding officer. Dates of service were frequently given in ambiguous terms as well—“from the start of the war to the end,” for example. In such a response it was unclear whether the applicant meant the actual end of the war in 1865 or the end of the war for the applicant, such as when his master sent him home after the surrender of Vicksburg.<sup>50</sup>

Another factor that affected the reliability of information in these applications was a built-in incentive to claim continuous service until 1865. Loyalty was a key component to a successful application, and being present at the surrender of his master’s unit at the end of the war was evidence that the black applicant had not deserted. This incentive alone would have encouraged applicants to exaggerate the length of time that they had served.

Between faulty memories and an incentive to exaggerate the applicant’s length of service, one might wonder whether the information contained in applications submitted by black pensioners could be used to draw meaningful conclusions. Fortunately, Confederate pension boards were aware of these problems, and all five states required that at least two witnesses, preferably former Confederate soldiers, sign affidavits under oath attesting that the information provided by the applicant was accurate. If a former Confederate soldier with knowledge of the applicant’s service could not be found, a reputable citizen in the community would do.<sup>51</sup> In later years when former soldiers were harder to locate because so many veterans had died, children of Confederate vet-

---

<sup>49</sup> Someone wrote, “This old negro is very foolish and has completely lost his memory and is very old[.] Some say he is at least 95” on David Scales’s application in 1924 (MDAH).

<sup>50</sup> For example, see application from Jack Johnson, Copiah County, Mississippi (MDAH).

<sup>51</sup> Jordan, *Black Confederates*, 198.

erans would serve as affiants for African Americans who had been their fathers' slaves. In these cases, an affiant would recall his or her father's talking about the slave's service with him in the war, even though the affiant may not have been born until after the war.<sup>52</sup> At any rate, black applicants claiming service from start to finish had to be backed by testimony under oath of two white people in the community.

By themselves, sworn affidavits were not enough to counter another problem that affected the reliability of information in pension applications: fraud. Pension fraud was a huge problem with the Union pension system, costing the federal government millions of dollars on fraudulent claims.<sup>53</sup> A man named Prince who lived in Maine was perhaps the greatest pension swindler of all. He filed fictitious claims for seven widows and was drawing a pension for every one when he was found out in 1878. Prince was able to pocket almost \$20,000 before he was caught because he had forged the names of his witnesses.<sup>54</sup>

Prince may have been able to perpetuate his fraud in Maine, but he would have failed in Mississippi and other states with Confederate pension programs.<sup>55</sup> The difference was that the federal pension program for Union soldiers was administered centrally in Washington, D.C., where a small group of overworked clerks attempted to sort through thousands of applications from all parts of the country.<sup>56</sup> Confederate pension programs, however, were administered by the states, and all applications, including affidavits, were completed at the county level, even in those states where final approval rested with a state pension board. As a result, applicants, white or black, were usually known by the people who requested information on pension applications and affidavits.<sup>57</sup>

Mississippi is a good example of how the county-based application process made it difficult for an applicant to file a fraudulent claim. In

---

<sup>52</sup> For example, see pension application for William Bibb from Rutherford County (Tennessee State Library and Archives [TSLA]).

<sup>53</sup> Glasson, *History of Military Pension Legislation*, 96–97.

<sup>54</sup> John W. Oliver, *History of the Civil War Military Pensions, 1861–1885*, Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin, no. 844 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1917), 41.

<sup>55</sup> For example, see William H. Glasson, "The State Military Pension System of Tennessee," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18 (November 1901): 98.

<sup>56</sup> Oliver, *History of the Civil War Military Pensions*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> For examples of affiants with personal knowledge of the black applicant and his service with the Confederate army, see pension applications for G. H. "Sam" Williams (Rutherford County), Rush McNeely, and Sam Collier (both Madison County), all on file at TSLA.

1920 the average number of Confederate pensioners in each county—soldiers, widows, and servants—was just over 100, of whom seven would have been black. The county pension boards that processed applications and distributed the pensions were composed primarily of Confederate veterans or members of their families who were residents of the community. Board members did not take their responsibility lightly nor would they be inclined during the Jim Crow period to give black applicants the benefit of the doubt. Very often black applicants had been slaves in that county before the war, and as a result members of the county pension board may have known the applicant for many years. Thus, the opportunity for an African American to present false claims or distort the information on his application was minimized by the scrutiny of the local white officials who handled the pension process.<sup>58</sup>

### *Black Noncombatants*

Of the four ways African Americans contributed to the Confederate war effort—producing foodstuffs and commodities on the home front, building and maintaining the South's military infrastructure, working in government industries, departments, and bureaus, and serving as noncombatants with the Confederate army—they became eligible for pensions, over time, for all but the first. *Table 2* provides a breakdown of the work these men performed.

The proportion of black pensioners in each category varied from state to state as a result of differences in the legislation authorizing pensions. North Carolina and Virginia extended eligibility to men who helped construct breastworks. Although exceptions were made in other states to include African Americans who performed this type of work,

---

<sup>58</sup> In 1922, the commander of the Mississippi Division of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), W. M. Wroten, circulated a broadside alleging that many widows and black pensioners were receiving benefits to which they were not entitled. Unable to convince the legislature that Confederate pensions for widows and black servants were unwarranted, Wroten argued, "It is the duty of [UCV] camps to attend the meetings of the pension board and see that this graft on the part of some counties is corrected." However, Wroten offered no evidence that fraud had occurred, concluding only that "We call special attention to the negro lists in some counties." In reality, Wroten resented the fact that African Americans were eligible for pensions, especially those who served with the Confederate army. "We owe the negro nothing financially," he argued. "If we ever owed him anything, we paid him long since. We have been paying taxes to educate his children and grandchildren for more than 50 years. Built a college and make an annual appropriation for its maintenance. The negro who remained at home and produced provisions to feed the army and took care of our mothers, wives, and children deserve a pension even more than these negro army servants" ("To Stockdale Camp, U. C. V.," from W. M. Wroten, August 18, 1922, broadside file, MDAH).

**TABLE 2**  
**TYPE OF WORK PERFORMED BY BLACK CONFEDERATE PENSIONERS**

WORK PERFORMED*	MISS	NC	SC	TENN	VA	TOTAL	PERCENT
<b>ARMY</b>	1312	83	278	179	194	2046	85%
SERVANT	940	73	112	153	83	1361	56%
COOK/LAUNDRY	285	4	152	22	69	532	22%
TEAMSTER	35	1	1	4	2	43	2%
HOSTLER**	52	5	13		40	110	5%
<b>SUPPORT SERVICES</b>	91	15	7	11	24	148	6%
MINES	1	1			2	4	<1%
COMMISSARY	23	2		2	1	28	1%
CONSCRIPT WORK	1					1	<1%
HOSPITALS	27	2	1	4	17	51	2%
IRON WORKS	1				4	5	<1%
ORDNANCE	6					6	<1%
QUARTERMASTER	11	3		3		17	1%
SALT WORKS	4	2	1			7	<1%
STATE MILITIA	17	5	5	2		29	1%
<b>INFRASTRUCTURE</b>	37	23	43	2	121	226	9%
BREASTWORKS	33	23	43	2	120	221	9%
RAILROADS***	4				1	5	<1%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1440</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>328</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>2420</b>	

\* This information was not entered on every application, which explains why the total figure for each state is less than the total number of applicants for that state in Table 1.

\*\* In addition to hostlers, this category includes buglers, errand boys, drummers, and horseshoers.

\*\*\* This category also includes one pensioner who operated a ferry.

pensions in Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee were intended primarily to reward the service of servants or cooks whose masters were assigned to units in the Confederate army. Despite these variations, an overall pattern of service among the black pensioners is clear: on average, eighty-five percent of the black pensioners served as noncombatants, primarily as servants or cooks for the Confederate army.

Information about the units to which the masters of black pensioners were assigned was routinely collected on pension applications in Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. As indicated in *Table 3*, two out of three black noncombatants followed their masters into infantry units, although in some states, notably Tennessee, a large number of black noncombatants ended up with the cavalry.

**TABLE 3**

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS OF MASTERS BY PERCENTAGE

BRANCH	MISS	NC	SC	TENN	VA	TOT/AVG
TOTAL NUMBER	1312	36	204	155	N/A	1707
INFANTRY	57%	86%	66%	54%	N/A	66%
CAVALRY	33%	8%	25%	40%	N/A	27%
ARTILLERY	8%	0%	9%	1%	N/A	5%
GENERAL STAFF	2%	6%	<1%	5%	N/A	3%

NOTE: Information concerning unit assignments was often missing or incomplete, especially in North Carolina. These percentages are based on applications for which this information could be verified.

The number of black pensioners in Mississippi was large enough to indicate the distribution of black noncombatants within the Confederate army. Unit assignments can be identified for about 1,300 black applicants in Mississippi, of which almost 1,100 were with units raised in that state. Of the seventy-nine infantry and cavalry regiments or battalions with Mississippi designations during the war, only three (four percent) were not represented by at least one black pensioner after the war. One of the three was the First Choctaw Infantry, a battalion raised in the summer of 1862 among Choctaw Indians in central Mississippi.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> The Choctaw battalion was sent to Camp Moore in north Louisiana for training, where it was captured and then disbanded when the men were shipped off to the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory

The other units from Mississippi not represented by at least one black pensioner were two cavalry regiments, Ham's and Lay's, which were organized from state troops in the southern and southeastern sections of the state during the last year of the war.

As black pensioners served in ninety-six percent of the regiments and battalions from Mississippi, it is evident that African Americans served with every army, in every theater, both early in the war and late. Furthermore, they were at every major battle of the Civil War east of the Mississippi River. When the end came, black noncombatants with Mississippi units were at Appomattox and Bentonville, Mobile, and Selma. If information concerning unit assignments of black pensioners who lived in Mississippi is extended to include units from other states, a similar deduction can be made regarding the presence of African Americans in the Trans-Mississippi Department. Charlie Hutchins, for example, a black pensioner living in Bolivar County in 1922, was at Fort Washita in the Indian Nation when his master surrendered in 1865, albeit his master's unit in General Douglas Hancock Cooper's Brigade of Native Americans was not from Mississippi.

The age at which black noncombatants began serving with the Confederate army can be calculated from information from applications in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Virginia.<sup>60</sup> These data are presented in *Table 4*. Predictably, the entry age for black pensioners in the states that did not extend eligibility to African Americans until the 1920s was, on average, younger by almost six years than black pensioners in Mississippi. Although this age difference is clearly an artifact resulting from the date at which these pensions were made available, these differences are not uniform. The modal age (i.e., the age that occurs with the greatest frequency in the distribution) for all three states was seventeen, a finding suggesting that a preponderance of black noncombatants with the Confederate army were young men when they followed their masters into the service. Nevertheless, a closer look at the age distribution for black pensioners in Mississippi reveals a distribution that differed significantly from the other two states. About fifty percent of the ap-

---

by their captors before they could be exchanged (A. J. Brown, *History of Newton County from 1834 to 1894* [1894; reprint, Fulton, Miss.: Melvin Tingle, 1964], 96–97).

<sup>60</sup> Although South Carolina did not ask for the applicant's age, eight black pensioners volunteered that information. The average age in *Table 1* for black pensioners in South Carolina was calculated using those data. However, the number of respondents was deemed to be too small to determine a modal age for South Carolina's applicants in *Table 4*.

plicants in Tennessee and Virginia were at the modal age or younger when they went off to war. In Mississippi, only twenty-seven percent of the black applicants were seventeen or younger when they began their service. It is clear, then, that service with the Confederate army for black noncombatants was not limited to the young, a probability in both Tennessee and Virginia had they allowed African Americans to apply for Confederate pensions at an earlier date.

**TABLE 4**

## BLACK NONCOMBATANTS WITH THE CONFEDERATE ARMY\*

	MISS	SC	TENN	VA	TOT/AVG
NUMBER WITH THE ARMY	1609	279	183	196	2267
AVG. AGE BEGAN SERVICE	23.8	N/A	18.3	18.1	20.1
MODAL AGE	17	N/A	17	17	
EQUAL OR YOUNGER		21%	N/A	53%	53%
OLDER		79%	N/A	47%	47%
AVG. NO. YEARS SERVED	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6
SERVED LESS THAN 1 YEAR	7%	3%	1%	3%	4%
SERVED 1 TO 2 YEARS	17%	22%	17%	18%	18%
SERVED 2 TO 3 YEARS	25%	23%	24%	23%	24%
SERVED 3 TO 4 YEARS	29%	23%	33%	26%	28%
SERVED 4 OR MORE YEARS	22%	29%	25%	30%	26%
ENTERED SERVICE IN 1861	34%	42%	36%	39%	38%
ENTERED SERVICE IN 1862	38%	26%	40%	34%	34%
ENTERED SERVICE IN 1863	20%	17%	22%	16%	19%
ENTERED SERVICE IN 1864	7%	15%	2%	10%	8%
ENTERED SERVICE IN 1865	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%
LEFT SERVICE IN 1861	0%	1%	0%	1%	1%
LEFT SERVICE IN 1862	3%	4%	3%	3%	3%
LEFT SERVICE IN 1863	10%	5%	9%	9%	8%
LEFT SERVICE IN 1864	16%	10%	11%	10%	12%
LEFT SERVICE IN 1865	71%	80%	77%	77%	76%

\* Information concerning the applicant's age and dates of service was not collected in North Carolina.

The record for having the oldest entry age in Mississippi was held by Spencer Edwards of Choctaw County, who claimed to be 100 years old when he submitted his application in 1900. That would have made him sixty-two in 1862 when he followed his master to war with the 15th Mississippi Infantry. He returned home the next year after the regiment was captured at Vicksburg and did not return to the army. In contrast, the oldest black noncombatant among Tennessee pensioners was forty when he entered the service, one of only four black pensioners from that state over thirty. The comparable statistic for Virginia was a black noncombatant who was forty-six years old when he went off to war, one of only six over thirty. By comparison, there were 251 black pensioners in Mississippi who were over thirty when they followed their masters into the army.

Despite differences in entry age, all of the states were remarkably similar regarding the average length of time these black noncombatants served with the Confederate army (2.6 years). A breakdown of the length of time served, when noncombatants entered service, and when they left shows, again, consistency across the states. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that more than a quarter of these men claimed to have served throughout the war (i.e., four years or more). And although more than seventy percent went off to war within the first two years of the conflict, seventy-six percent claimed to have served to the end. Even taking into account the incentive to exaggerate length of service, the overall picture that emerges from these data challenges the commonly held assumption that most of these black noncombatants were sent home after the second year of the war.

A central question about these men is whether some of them ever became soldiers. Unfortunately, applications submitted by black pensioners do not address this question. By filling out a servant's application, they acknowledged at the onset that they were noncombatants, not soldiers. African Americans who may have enlisted as soldiers in the Confederate army, entitling them to a larger pension, would have used a soldier's pension form. If African Americans enlisted as soldiers in the Confederate army, and if these men applied for a Confederate pension after the war, their names would not appear on the pension rolls

used for this study. Nevertheless, three names did emerge during this research that bear further scrutiny: Holt Collier in Mississippi, Thomas Tobe in South Carolina, and Levi Miller in Virginia.<sup>61</sup>

Occasionally it is suggested that white pension boards arbitrarily disallowed pensions for black veterans by crossing out “soldier” and writing “servant” on the application. It is true that some of the applications for black noncombatants were submitted on the form used by soldiers, with the word “servant of” inserted before the word “soldier,” but it is equally true, at least among the applications in Mississippi, that some white soldiers applied for pensions using a servant’s form.<sup>62</sup>

There is a simple explanation for the inconsistent use of pension forms. The various forms for soldiers, widows, and servants, each asking questions relevant to that category, were printed by the state and distributed to the counties. In a time before photocopy machines, these forms could not be easily duplicated, and all of the states mandated that applications had to be submitted on a state form. Not surprisingly, when a county clerk ran out of a particular form, he or she would use a form for another category, modifying it as needed. There are numerous examples among the pension applications in Mississippi and North Carolina of black noncombatants using soldiers’ forms and vice versa.

Evidence is more substantial regarding the question of whether black noncombatants were shot. Two sources of such information appear in black pension applications. All five states asked an open-ended question along the lines of “Give the nature of your disability and destitution,”

---

<sup>61</sup> Both Tobe and Miller applied for and received pensions as Confederate soldiers in 1919 and 1907, respectively, long before South Carolina or Virginia extended eligibility to African Americans. Tobe had been a free man of color; Miller had been a slave. Holt Collier applied for a pension in 1906 using a servant’s form, despite a letter from the Mississippi Division of the United Confederate Veterans stating that Collier “is the only negro ever enrolled in our army.” His name appears on the pension rolls for the first time in 1913 as a servant. Collier used a servant’s form again in 1916 when the State Auditor’s Office purged the pension rolls, but he switched to a soldier’s form in 1924. Nevertheless, the Auditor’s Office continued to pay him a servant’s pension. Collier reapplied in 1928, again using a soldier’s form, and this time he was awarded a soldier’s pension, which he continued to receive until he died in 1930 (MDAH). Minor F. Buchanan has written a biography of Collier entitled, *Holt Collier: His Life, the Roosevelt Hunts, and the Origin of the Teddy Bear* (Jackson, Miss.: Centennial Press, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Sometimes the applicant made a statement at the beginning of the form to indicate that he was using the wrong form to apply. Black noncombatant Jerry Commander, for example, instructed the person filling out his application to write “I apply as servant to Lieut. AG Proctor [,] Co. b[.] 6th Miss Inftry” at the top of the soldier’s form he was using (MDAH). S. W. Harland, a white Confederate veteran of the 12th Mississippi Infantry from Claiborne County, used a servant’s form in 1907 but crossed out “What was the name of the party whom you served?”

and black noncombatants were not shy about drawing attention to their wounds. Consequently, unsolicited reports of wounds appear in applications for all five states. However, these spontaneous wound reports were infrequent, and even if they are dramatic stories—as in the case of Monroe Jones in Tennessee, who had both legs shot off at Snyder’s Bluff during the Vicksburg campaign—they tell us little about the risk black noncombatants faced in general.<sup>63</sup>

Pension applications in Mississippi allow for a more systematic approach to this question. Until 1922, the application forms for black pensioners in Mississippi asked, “Were you ever wounded while in actual service?” followed by three questions asking for specific information if the answer to the first question was *yes*. Of the more than 1,200 responses by black pensioners to the first question, fourteen percent answered in the affirmative. The follow-up questions on these applications reveal that more than a third of those answering *yes* had suffered an injury caused by working around animals and heavy equipment. Jack Barnes from Lee County, Mississippi, for example, reported, “I got one eye knocked out shoeing a horse for Capt. Deford.”<sup>64</sup> Ruptures from lifting or digging and accidents involving horses and mules were the most common.

The remaining nine percent of black pensioners in Mississippi answering affirmatively to the wound question reported being wounded under combat conditions. Some wounds were apparently caused by artillery over-shots or stray rounds landing among the wagons and horses held in the rear. For example, Charley Harris from Tallahatchie County reported that a spent ball knocked out his front teeth. But other respondents suffered more severe wounds, suggesting that they were much closer to the front. William Campbell from Hinds County had his “left hand shot to pieces in the siege of Vicksburg,” Henry Watson from Tunica County was injured by charging cavalry, and Henry Walls from Kemper County was hit in the shoulder by a Minie ball as he was carrying a wounded soldier off the field.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Jones applied initially for a Confederate pension in Mississippi but reapplied in Tennessee after he moved to that state (pension application for Monroe Jones from Warren County, Mississippi (1900, MDAH), and from Shelby County, Tennessee (1921, TSLA).

<sup>64</sup> Pension application (1906) for Jack Barnes, MDAH. Barnes’s master served in the 41st Mississippi Infantry.

<sup>65</sup> Respective pensions applications for Charley Harris (1915), William M. Campbell (1922), Henry Watson (1910), and Henry Walls (1916), all in MDAH.

Although applications from black pensioners provide relatively straightforward answers to questions involving quantitative measures, such as wounds and their nature, they have serious limitations when it comes to dealing with more subjective issues. The question of the black noncombatants' motivation, for example, is only partially resolved by information from pension applications. Questions about motivation did not appear on application forms, and the vast majority of African Americans who labored for the Confederate war effort were slaves. While it is true that many of the slaves who served as black noncombatants may have served willingly, how many—and how willingly—is a matter of speculation. Some African Americans did volunteer. In Virginia, fifteen (eight percent) of the 196 black noncombatants who received pensions after the war were free men of color. Of these, twelve (eighty percent) worked as cooks, a job for which they would have been paid \$20 a month, explaining perhaps their motivation to serve.<sup>66</sup>

Loyalty to the Confederate cause is another issue that has received a good bit of attention. After Reconstruction, Confederate veterans made much of the loyalty of black noncombatants. In fact, loyalty was the rationale for expanding the eligibility for Confederate pensions to include this group. Correspondence from pension files in all five states suggests that most black noncombatants were loyal to their masters and that this loyalty was reciprocated. For example, several black noncombatants went to prisoner-of-war camps with their masters rather than accept offers of freedom when they were captured, a circumstance that can be verified by correspondence in the *Official Records*.<sup>67</sup> However, there is another way to assess the loyalty of black noncombatants from their pension applications: an analysis of the units in which their masters served.

It was noted earlier that all but three of the seventy-nine regiments or battalions raised in Mississippi were represented by at least one black pensioner after the war. Although there were significantly fewer black pensioners in South Carolina than in Mississippi, a similar pat-

---

<sup>66</sup> A private in the Confederate army received \$12 a month.

<sup>67</sup> For example, see Monroe Sudduth (Choctaw County) and Frank Watson (Montgomery County) in Mississippi, and Richard Johnson (Shelby County) in Tennessee (MDAH and TSLA, respectively); Wm. S. Pierson to William Hoffman with two enclosures, October 19, 1863, concerning servants captured at Port Hudson in *Official Records*, II, 6: 397–98.

tern can be noted in that state as well.<sup>68</sup> Not only do these unit assignments document the pervasiveness of black noncombatants within the Confederate army, they also tell us something about their loyalty to the Confederate cause.

Many of the cavalry units named in the applications of black pensioners patrolled the no-man's land between opposing armies or conducted raids behind Union lines. At a time when slave owners were shunting their field hands into the interior of the Confederacy or across the river to Texas to keep them away from the Union army, black noncombatants with the Confederate army were being taken on raids into Union-controlled territory. More specifically, the pension files in Mississippi and Tennessee, in particular, have dozens of applications from black noncombatants who rode with units that served under Nathan Bedford Forrest. From their applications it is clear that these black pensioners had not been left behind when Forrest struck out for Tennessee or Kentucky.<sup>69</sup>

Some of the units named in the applications submitted by black pensioners operated for long periods in areas not directly under Confederate control. For example, Wirt Adams's Mississippi Cavalry Regiment spent the latter half of the war in the contested parts of north Mississippi and, remarkably, had sixty-one of its black alumni on pension rolls in Mississippi. Along these lines, nine black pensioners in Mississippi could verify that they had served with Bradford's Mississippi Battalion of Scouts, a cavalry unit formed to maintain communications between the Trans-Mississippi Department and the rest of the Confederacy after Vicksburg surrendered.<sup>70</sup> Even Henderson's Scouts, a small company of cavalry operating continuously behind Union lines, had two black

---

<sup>68</sup> Although the number of black pensioners in South Carolina with identifiable unit assignments is one-sixth that of Mississippi, eighty-three percent of the forty-eight regiments and battalions raised in South Carolina were represented by African Americans on the pension rolls for that state after the Civil War.

<sup>69</sup> Wiley reported that black noncombatants riding with Forrest had a pecking order that corresponded to the rank of the officer they served. Forrest's servant, for example, was referred to by other black noncombatants as the "Gin'ral" (Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, 140).

<sup>70</sup> This description of Bradford's Scouts comes from Barrett Dawson's 1909 application for a servant's pension (Wilkinson County, MDAH). Also see F. W. Marston to C. T. Christensen, December 12, 1864, *Officials Records*, Ser. I, vol. 41/4: 833.

noncombatants who lived long enough to draw Confederate pensions in Mississippi.<sup>71</sup>

Some black noncombatants probably took advantage of the opportunity to slip away when in the vicinity of Union troops. But the fact that a large number, serving with units in areas offering opportunities for escape from slavery, did not act on those opportunities is evidence that the service of most of these men was motivated by loyalty to the man or men they served.

It is tempting to assume that the loyalty of many black noncombatants was representative of black southerners in general, but this conclusion is not warranted. Black southerners who were recognized in Confederate memoirs, eulogized at Confederate reunions, and eventually awarded Confederate pensions, were selected from a select group. They were a select group in the first place because they were allowed to accompany their masters to the army. Clearly, a slave-owning Confederate soldier who was about to embark on the hazards of active army life would not take a trouble-maker, a slacker, or an unreliable slave with him to war. It is reasonable to assume that black noncombatants were picked to accompany their masters because of the loyalty they had demonstrated long before there was a prospect of war. But this select group was narrowed further by another criterion that was unwritten but applied universally. To receive a Confederate pension, the black pensioner must have remained loyal to his former master's cause during Reconstruction. Wade Gordon, an ancient pensioner (106 years old) from Lee County in Mississippi, did not even have to answer the questions of his application form in 1907 for it to be approved. "This negro wants a pension[.]" the chancery clerk scrawled across the form. "He belongs to Charlie Kirkpatrick and is a good negro, so they say." In Tennessee, the county trustee for Shelby County endorsed a pension application from Sam McNeil with this sentence: "Sam is a fine old negro of the

---

<sup>71</sup> Matt Gordon [Gooden], Adams County, and Lem Hardeman [Hardaman], Grenada County (MDAH). Reports of Union troop strength and movements from Henderson's Scouts appear throughout the *Official Records*. On May 18, 1864, Colonel G. E. Waring, commander of a cavalry brigade in Grierson's Division, complained to Major General C. C. Washburn, the Union commander in West Tennessee, "I don't understand why Henderson's scouts are constantly about us" (*Official Records*, Ser. I, vol. 34/2: 77).

ante-bellum type, and has always been a Democrat and a white man's negro."<sup>72</sup>

Expecting pensioners to have been loyal to the Confederacy during the war and afterwards was not limited to black applicants. White applicants were also expected to be members of the community in good standing.<sup>73</sup> Lacking the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the federal government, the former Confederate states had to use their limited resources wisely, and providing a pension to someone, white or black, who had not consistently endorsed the Confederate cause was deemed inappropriate.<sup>74</sup>

Have we found Bob? If not Bob himself, at least we have found hundreds of men like him who filled out applications for Confederate pensions after the Civil War. Their responses to questions on those applications reinforces the conviction that black noncombatants were an important part of the Confederate armies. They were in every army, on every front, and they were not just clustered around the headquarters tent. They were with the troops, cooking for them and grooming their horses. As casualties mounted, their service became more important, not less. They were not shipped home after 1862, when the going got tough. More of them came to the front as the South mobilized her resources, and many of them served until the end. Although they would have lived in segregated quarters, their tasks were well integrated with the mission of Confederate forces. This state of affairs will come as no surprise when one considers that this was the way things worked at home. As slaves, African Americans were an integral part of the southern way of life before the war, and the Confederate army reflected the society from which it had come.<sup>75</sup>

As an individual, however, Bob is still missing. There are four applicants named Robert among the black pensioners in Virginia, but none

---

<sup>72</sup> Wade Gordon and Sam McNeil's pension applications, MDAH and TSLA, respectively. Wade Gordon's application was one of the very few suggesting that some black applicants were awarded pensions without the customary scrutiny of the county board. Gordon's age was probably the factor that warranted an exception in his case.

<sup>73</sup> Gorman, "Confederate Pensions as Social Welfare," 34–37.

<sup>74</sup> For a book-length treatment of the relationship between commemoration of the Confederate cause and benefits for Confederate veterans, particularly as it related to Confederate soldiers' homes, see R. B. Rosenberg, *Living Monuments: Confederate Soldiers' Homes in the New South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

<sup>75</sup> For example, see Stephen Cresswell, *Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race: Mississippi after Reconstruction, 1877–1917* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 52.

of them were Stuart's music maker.<sup>76</sup> The most likely explanation for his absence on the roll of Confederate pensioners in Virginia is that he failed to live long enough to apply. After all, he would have been over eighty in 1924. But perhaps Bob moved to another state, one of the eight southern states that gave pensions to Confederate veterans and their widows but failed to include the Confederacy's loyal servants. And there is also the possibility that, if he survived the war, Bob took the promise of freedom seriously by actively supporting the Republican Party during Reconstruction. If that was the case, it would have been useless for Bob to apply for a Confederate pension, even had he stayed in Virginia and lived into his eighties.

The applications from black Confederate pensioners tell us much about their service that we did not know, but they are silent in regard to the service of African Americans who died before they could apply, lived in the wrong state, or openly expressed the desire to have a say in the government under which they lived. Although almost three thousand applications from black pensioners shed some light on what they did to support the Confederate war effort, these documents fail to answer many of the most important questions raised about African American service with the Confederate army, leaving one of the great stories of the Civil War still untold.

---

<sup>76</sup> Robert Brown and Robert Webster were cooks, not musicians. Robert Pitts's master served with an infantry unit, and although Robert Booth's master was in the cavalry, his regiment was not organized until a year after Bob's riveting performance at Camp Qui Vive.