

Pension office correspondence with special examiners, 1887–1931

In honor of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, this is the tenth in a series of articles about records at the National Archives and Records Administration that are useful in researching the war and its participants. This article describes a little-known series of administrative records about the men who investigated questionable pension claims.

Pension office policy was “to detect, in advance, any intended frauds, so far as possible,” and to promptly prosecute those who committed fraud despite its vigilance. Commissioner of Pensions Christopher C. Cox acknowledged in 1868 that “impositions are daily practiced upon this bureau” despite its best efforts at detection. In those days, pension office clerks stationed in Washington, DC, were assigned temporary duty to conduct in-person investigations of reported fraud in far-away locales. This was a “much sought for” assignment, for it was “customary to intrust this work to those who while on leave of absence desire to defray the expenses of the journey by some official occupation *in via*.” Thus clerks conducted compensated government business in the middle of personal travel.



*A few of the seventy-eight archival boxes containing
“Correspondence with Special Examiners, 1887-1931.”*



Peter L. Cole in 1931. He was a special examiner for over forty-nine years.

As the number of veterans, widows, and dependents on the pension rolls increased, it became clear that temporary investigative assignments were an inefficient means to combat questionable claims. Thus, beginning about 1882, the pension office assigned "special examiners" to long-term duty in specific geographic territories. They did a lot of work. In 1898, for example, special examiners submitted more than forty-one thousand reports, averaging 2.7 reports for each completed case.

Special examiners' official reports and correspondence with the pension office about a particular case were filed in the claimant's pension file, which makes them easy for today's researchers to locate.

From 1887 to 1931, however, the pension office *also* kept a separate records series called "Correspondence with Special Examiners," which is arranged in four subseries (roughly

San Francisco, Cal. December 31, 1911.

The Chief,
S. E. Division, Bureau of Pensions,
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

I have the honor to submit herewith, my annual report for the year 1911. While there does not appear to be a great falling off in receipts, it must be remembered that the territory is now much larger than originally. Work on Agency slips probably accounts for the difference in depositions and reports.

Month.	Depositions.	Cases Reported.	Credibility.	Miscellaneous.	Total Reports.	Cases Received.	Without Report.	Final Action.	Days in Court.	Agency Slips Rptd.	Total number of Miles traveled.	Per Diem and Expenses.
January.	46	9	0	0	9	10	0	3	0	0	2,331	192.04
February.	42	11	0	0	11	8	0	1	0	23	1,452	150.25
March.	41	11	0	1	13	13	0	7	0	3	2,251	167.45
April.	34	12	0	1	13	13	1	5	0	11	2,794	215.86
May.	31	11	0	3	13	12	1	7	5	3	3,116	197.10
June.	56	12	0	1	13	19	0	6	0	17	2,429	208.79
July.	49	13	0	1	14	11	5	4	0	2	1,632	174.40
August.	62	13	0	1	14	16	2	4	0	5	1,837	165.85
September.	58	5	0	3	8	4	3	7	0	1	2,859	212.59
October.	48	11	0	3	13	5	3	4	0	4	2,012	196.05
November.	35	7	0	3	10	5	0	5	0	2	2,363	178.60
December.	42	8	0	1	9	7	0	2	0	0	1,710	173.55
Totals.	544	123	0	16	139	127	18	55	5	71	28,716	\$2332.53.
1910	602	124	2	28	154	138	19	64	5	0	24,568	\$2120.11
1909	642				161	160				0	24,045	\$2133.35
1908	688				139	139				0	19,479	\$1688.10
1907	616				156	140				0	20,789	\$1755.89
1906	669				162	182				0	18,128	\$1548.01
1905	658				163	177				0	16,322	\$1708.95
1904	608				154	182				0	17,940	\$1798.20
1903	1068				195	191				0	15,076	\$1427.06

Respectfully submitted,
O. L. Sues
Special Examiner.

* To Mr. Hursh.
15 Days on criminal work not shown herein.
The work is gradually being scattered over a much larger territory.

Otto L. Sues summarized his work as a Special Examiner from 1903 to 1911.

1887–1908, 1909–21, 1922–29, and 1930–31) and then alphabetically by name of special examiner. These records are part of Record Group 15, Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Relatives of more than five hundred special examiners may find these correspondence files insightful into each man's personality, work habits, and government employment. Local historians may learn details about conditions in their area. An extremely lucky genealogist may find a letter concerning a relative's pension claim that is not part of the pension file. Naturally, the content of these files varies widely.

Some correspondence relates to changes in the special examiner's duty station. The pension office could order the examiner to a new locale at any time, but gave consideration to individual preferences when possible. Fred Ketchum Armstrong was allowed to make Ann Arbor, Michigan, his headquarters during his



David Cornwell, a "General Dealer" in Monterey, Michigan, wrote a six page letter of complaint about Special Examiner H. L. Roethe on his store letterhead in 1893.

mother's final illness. In 1908, Otto L. Sues and his colleague, E. G. Hursh, decided that Hursh would take the transfer from San Francisco to either Billings, Montana, or Sheridan, Wyoming, rather than uproot Sues and his family of five school-age children who had only recently transferred from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Between 1909 and 1921, Frank L. Churchill moved between Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana.

Working away from the central office and direct control of a supervisor meant that special examiners exercised a great deal of discretion in planning and executing their work. When Charles F. Cain died in a single-vehicle automobile accident, in Peoria, Illinois, in 1930, the US Employees' Compensation Commission was told that Cain "was officially employed at the time he was killed" even though the pension office had no specific knowledge on which case Cain was working since he died before sending his daily report.

Special examiners constantly traveled and sometimes worked sixteen hours a day. Sues traveled 183,063 miles on official business from 1903 to 1911 at a cost of \$16,390. Writing from Sioux Falls on 19 May 1900, Sues said "I can only get on mixed trains scheduled at about fifteen miles an hour and it takes all day long to get anywhere." He spent \$3.29 on travel to Ellsworth, Minnesota, for the case of veteran Frederick Griffith, but had little to show for it since three witnesses he expected to find were gone: Oscar Graves had recently died, George

Halles was traveling for a machine company headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin, and Charles A. Halles was temporarily away at Crookston, Minnesota.

Special examiners also interviewed people after normal business hours, and often at odd locations. E. L. Howard in 1919 noted that one "strenuous day's work ended at ten [p.m.] in a [railroad] crossing flagman's shanty" where he got useful testimony to help close a case. Writing from Utah in May 1919, T. Quinn Jones said it was a good time of year "to find witnesses rambling around the fields and deserts."

The best special examiners showed unbounded dedication to the job. George H. Eells was called "a terror to pension frauds in this section" by Congressman Elijah A. Morse in 1891. In 1931, Peter L. Cole celebrated his seventy-ninth birthday and forty-ninth year as a pension examiner by declaring his intent to not retire for "at least" two more years. "Ever since I was 21 years old I've eaten, slept, and thought pensions" he declared to a writer for the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, and noted that 50–60 percent of the four thousand pension claims handled through the Brooklyn office had eventually been allowed. "We're endeavoring to help the deserving," he said.

Claimants sometimes expressed their appreciation. Lola Blanche Morrison of Anderson, Indiana, wrote in 1928 to compliment special examiner L. A. Jett for being a "courteous and an extremely kind gentleman." Veteran

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF PENSIONS

Fort Scott, Kansas, April 13, 1912.

The Commissioner of Pensions,
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

Replying to Bureau communication of the 8th relative to the necessity for economy and referring to my expenditures for bus fares, I have the honor to make the following statement:

There are three railroad stations in Ft. Scott, Kansas, my headquarters. They are the Mo. Pac., the M. K. & T. (commonly called the Katy) and the St. L. & S. F. (commonly called the Frisco). The Mo. Pac. and Katy stations are a little more than half a mile from my residence and the Frisco station is three quarters of a mile from my residence. These are the actual distances. A street car line passes one block from my residence but does not go near the early train on the Frisco nor on arriving at headquarters on a late train at night. This street car service is poor and unreliable at its best, yet I use it when available.

The general conditions in my district may be judged by the following detailed explanation of items in my March account, outside of Ft. Scott. Item at Coffeyville, Kas., on the 4th is explained in daily report. Hotel is about five blocks from Katy station and ten or twelve blocks from Mo. Pac. station at Independence, Kas. was incurred shortly after five o'clock in the morning when I rode to catch a 8:08 A. M. train at Carey, Kansas, where I walked six blocks to the Santa Fe station though a bus line is maintained and patronized by passengers for this train. Again at Collinsville, Okla. on this date, I walked from station to hotel, a distance of four or five madd blocks, though here again the bus was patronized by my fellow travelers. On this day I also went on "scout-town" full mile and return to see a witness than can be imagined by full mile and return through mud worse than made by me to save one who has not seen Collinsville and was made by me to save a livery hire. Had I been inclined to sacrifice economy to my personal convenience, two bus fares and a livery voucher would have been added to the day's expenses.

At Fredonia, Kansas, the hotel is more than a half mile

from station, I judge.

At Iola, Kas. a street railway runs from hotel to Santa Fe station, but none to Mo. Pac. and Katy stations which are more than a quarter of a mile distant from my hotel, than a half mile from the hotel. I recall that when riding from station to hotel in that town in March, I commented with my fellow passengers on the waste of time and needless expense occasioned by railroad stations being built so far from the towns.

At Nowata, Kas. I should judge the distance from station to hotel to be three quarters of a mile.

At Emporia, Kas. I had to use a cab (entered in account as bus) from the residence of a witness to Katy station, fully a mile distant, in order to catch the train on which I wished to go to Burlington, Kansas. - No, it was Chanute, Kansas, to which I was going.

At Chanute, Kas. the hotel (Morrill) is just about five or six blocks from the Katy station and is quite near the Santa Fe station. At this place also appears an item for bus fare from residence of witness to hotel. It was raining too much to walk and I waited at the residence of the witness until the seal hour arrived before incurring the expense of a cab to my hotel.

At Eldorado, Mo., I estimate the distance from station to hotel to be slightly less than three-fourths mile - more than a half mile, I am certain.

At Coney, Kas. the distance from Mo. Pac. station to hotel is eight or nine blocks. The reference thereto as related to items of the 7th applied to the Santa Fe station.

At Samarkit, Kas. the Santa Fe station is about six blocks from the hotel and the Mo. Pac. is about four blocks. Very snowy and sloppy there on the 28th.

It will be observed that I paid no bus fare at Quenemo, Kas. on the 27th or 28th. I did, however, ride in the bus from the station to the hotel, some seven or eight blocks. The driver expected to collect the fare when he returned me to the station. This same bus takes the passengers from Quenemo to Lomax two miles distant. On the 28th when I was ready to go, the bus failed to call at the hotel at all and becoming uneasy, I telephoned to the bus office and learned that on account of the mud, the bus had gone direct to the train. I started on foot for the train only to learn that it had just gone. A local freight which stood in the yards also pulled out before I could reach it by only chance to get out for headquarters that day was to go to Lomax but before I could return to the hotel, the bus had started for Lomax. Although I carried a grip and a typewriter, I also started for Lomax on foot and accomplished the two miles in time to catch my train which was late. Being somewhat provoked

by my message from station to hotel on the day at large and for that reason I have made my March and find that the monthly expenditure for the month was an exceptional month with me in never before considered the matter particularly would have appeared cheap and naturally in connection will also state that I also surroundings to merit a reasonable and proper all who know me as a representative of

my methods extravagant but I shall ite of the appropriation for the month is such that it is inconsistent on special, and I shall willingly respect economy.

Respectfully,

Franklin Canaday
Special Examiner

Franklin Canaday's three page letter describes traveling conditions, including the distances between hotels and train stations, in his district in Kansas in 1912.

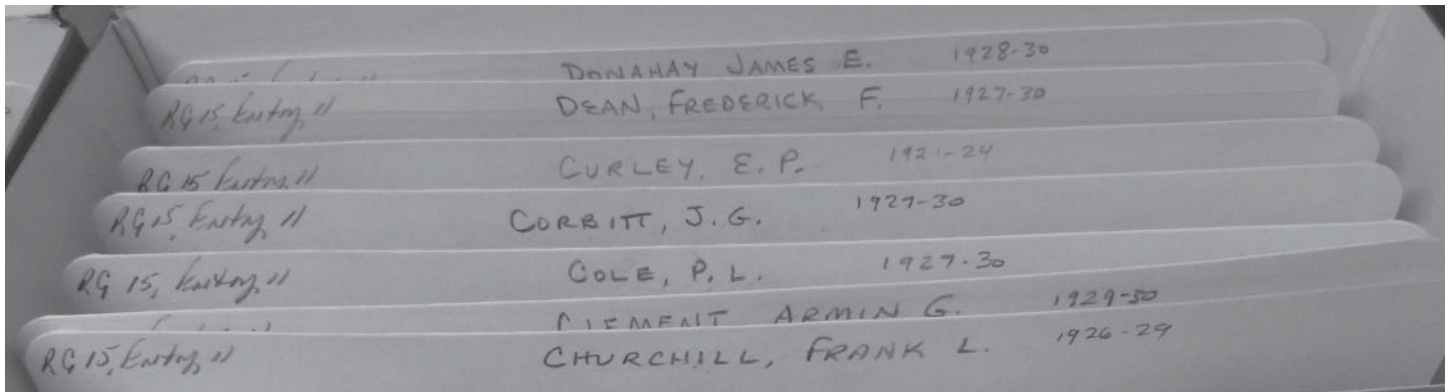
Charles C. Spencer, writing from the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers Western Branch in Kansas in 1923 said that special examiner Jackson A. Winner was an "efficient, conscientious, pains-taking official [who] has the Government's interest at heart and does every thing to strictly conform to law."

Loyalty and dedication to the work occasionally caused financial hardship. In 1931, T. Quinn Jones traveled in his personal automobile from Joplin to Buffalo and Bolivar, Missouri, on official business accompanied by his wife and son "who went for the ride." During the return trip in the dark, Jones crashed into a car that some "roving gypsies" had illegally parked on the road without any warning lights. Jones had no insurance on his \$300 car, and it was going to cost him about \$250 to repair it. Jones' supervisor, M. L. Dawkins, regretfully informed him that there was no law allowing Jones to be compensated for his repairs. A change in duty station caused Sues to sell furniture worth more than \$1,000 for less than

\$300 when he was transferred from Sioux Falls to San Francisco.

Of course, there were some examiners whose work and conduct was subpar. Some were chastised in letters (and a few officially investigated) for "faulty work" or other misconduct, including John Camden Gall, George W. McKean, A. B. Parkey, Ivan Powers, R. D. Redfern, Clark Stanton, Joseph R. Tedrow, and others. John Leo Buckey lost some pension files. The pension office criticized Joseph Hall's work in the cases of the minor children of Oliver H. Perry (1898), Horatio Wheeler (1903), and Frank Gruetzmacher (1905).

Sometimes even good special examiners had problems completing work because of personal or family illness. Edwin B. Olmsted's 17-year-old son had severe illness and surgeries in 1923, and his wife and daughter were sick at the same time. E. C. DePutron was sick and exhausted in 1902. Franklin Canaday and his wife were both sick with "lagrippe" in early 1908. After suffering stomach, heart, and nervous problems



Folders in one box of "Correspondence with Special Examiners, 1887-1931."

for several months, Mrs. Henry N. Snyder was confined to her home because of pregnancy in December 1889. Mrs. Charles H. Weschler had "several severe heart attacks" while her husband was stationed at Burlington, Vermont, in 1931.

The government made sure the examiners refrained from extravagant expenses, filled out reports properly, and sent them in on time. In 1908, James J. Reilly forgot to mail two of his daily reports on time, so he had to explain why the pension office received three from him on one day. In July 1920, F. E. Keith reported that during the past year he had "averaged 8 1/6 reports per month and 61 3/4 depositions at a cost in travel of \$2.75 per report" and said he would "endeavor to do better this year," to which Keith received a very stern admonition to shape up or risk losing his position. Franklin Canaday was reminded in March 1905 that he could not be reimbursed for the five cent trolley fare between his home and office in Fort Scott, Kansas.

The pension office cultivated good relations with veterans' organizations by sending some Washington office clerks on temporary duty to the city in which a Grand Army of the Republic national encampment or Union Veterans Legion meeting was scheduled. For example, Dr. John F. Keenan and R. D. Rush were sent to Gettysburg in 1916, A. J. Wagstaff to Boston in 1917, and Fred K. Swett to Indianapolis in 1921.

How to access these records

Names of special examiners have been indexed as part of the Online Public Catalog at <http://www.archives.gov/research/search>. Enter "2538361" (the National Archives Identifier) as the search term. Click on "Correspondence with Special Examiners, 1887-1931" then click on the link that reads "file(s) described in the catalog," which will lead to additional links that briefly describe each file. If you know the surname of a special examiner, you may search specifically for that surname. These records are in the National Archives Building, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20408. For more information or to access these records e-mail archives1reference@nara.gov. 🌳

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