

**Civil War Pensions:
Black Women as Legal Authorities in Veteran Pensions**

Lauren McGlothlin

Advisor: Elizabeth Varon
Second Reader: Christa Dierksheide

University of Virginia
Cochran Department of History
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Introduction:

There are about two million Civil War Pension files in the National Archives, as the U.S. federal government granted pensions to Union veterans, their widows, children, and dependent parents starting 1862.¹ These files often contain copies of vital records, like death certificates, birth records, and marriage certificates, along with information and questionnaires gathered from a multitude of voices in a veteran's life. Pensions were available to applicants of all races, including ex-slaves and free blacks who fought within Union regiments. However, while the pension system was in principle race-neutral, in practice it was discriminatory, with black veterans often receiving fewer and smaller pension awards than their white counterparts.² Despite the prejudiced nature of awarded pension files, the sources still offer an unrivaled view into black life during the nineteenth century. Black veteran pension claims in particular hold indispensable significance for the historiographies of black families, as their contents supplement and contribute to growing areas of historical conversation, especially around the role women played in offering testimony and legal legitimacy to pension applications. By analyzing Civil War pension files, readers can glean critical insights into the structure and experiences of black communities during and after the war. This thesis will argue that formerly enslaved women exerted crucial legal authority in pension cases, and that such authority was rooted in the formation and resilience of female communities that had been formed before emancipation and persisted into the postwar era.

The arguments in this thesis are an extension of the works of historians such as Deborah White, Tera Hunter, and Elizabeth Regosin and Donald Shaffer, who demonstrate that female

¹ Claire Prechtel-Kluszens, "Anatomy of a Union Civil War Pension File" (NGS Magazine. Vol. 34. No. 3, Prechtel-Kluszens), p 42.

² Elizabeth R Varon, "From Carter's Mountain to Morganza Bend A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part III)," (Black Virginians in Blue, January 2017)

slave networks were resilient sources of resistance during enslavement and during the postwar period. Deborah White in *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* notes that enslaved women created social and kinship networks “to develop their own means of resistance and survival.”³ This thesis focuses on how these networks persisted into the postwar period, and how women used their connections to one another to bolster their pension applications. White claims that if ex-slave women “seemed exceptionally strong it was partly because they often functioned in groups and derived strength from numbers.” Such reliance on one another is what was paramount to the successful pension claims cited in this thesis.⁴

Former slaves’ pension claims reveal the challenges to family life both under slavery and after emancipation. Some scholars, like Theda Skocpol in her work *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, argue that the Union pension system was one of the first major attempts to develop distributive social policies, one centered on the notion that the familial structure revolved around the male head of household.⁵ The Pension Bureau expected widows and any relatives who applied to be claimants of a pension to be able to verify that they were related to the veteran in question in some sort of legitimate capacity. Elizabeth R. Regosin and Donald R. Shaffer, in *Voice of Emancipation*, detail that pension legislation was flexible, as it “recognized that slaves’ family relationships existed outside of legal sanction, in not requiring former slaves to prove that their relationships had been ‘legal,’ but did hold them to proving them as binding.”⁶ There was a lack of documentary evidence of familial relationships between ex-slave veterans, as the

³ Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves In the Plantation South*, (New York: Norton, 1985) p. 119

⁴ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, p. 119

⁵ Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1992)

⁶ Elizabeth Ann Regosin and Donald Robert Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau files*, (New York: New York University Press. 2008), p. 113.

laws of slavery that existed pre-war failed to recognize slave marriages and families due to the denial of citizenship to the enslaved. Marriages and familial relations were only “binding” if they were recognized by the slaveholder. However, in the post-war period, many former slaveholders who might provide testimony were often inaccessible to the Pension Bureau, which meant that officials relied on the testimony of claimants and corroborating witnesses to verify family relationships.⁷

Because of this intense interest in verifying the legitimacy of pension claims, pension files contain records not only of the veteran’s claims, but also for all the claimants in relation to him—widows, children under sixteen, fathers, mothers, and anyone who was dependent upon a veteran who could file a claim with the Pension Bureau would have their testimonies and claims documented and kept. Pension files are filled with untold histories of black veterans and their families that allow historians a more significant understanding of the social and familial structures within slave and ex-slave communities, especially with regard to African American women. While male veterans are central to the pension claims, it is not uncommon for female voices to be heard within affidavit and deposition testimonies as legal authorities.

Widows constituted the second-largest group of pension claimants after veterans, which made verifying marriages a key aspect in the formation and acceptance of pension claims.⁸ Regosin and Shaffer write, “In the case of widows’ claims in particular, pension officials often used their own sense of morality as a measure by which to determine the legitimacy of many relationships,” which often led pension officials to not only look for testimony from widows to prove marriage, but also to other ex-slaves who had once been and often still were closely

⁷ Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, p. 9, p. 113.

⁸ Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, p 113.

associated with the widow and veteran in question.⁹ Noralee Frankel in *Freedom's Women* remarks about how community relationships were essential to the social structures of former slaves, as “during slavery, ‘marriage’ meant a union that was recognized by the community and was based on the intent and commitment of the participants in the relationship.”¹⁰ Because slave and even free black marriage held a different cultural meaning for African Americans in comparison to whites, many ex-slaves held complex attitudes toward legalized marriage through the state, and continued to live in a “married” relationship without ever legalizing previous or persisting marriages. Frankel writes that evidence from pension records suggest that African Americans were “comfortable with their community sanctioned marriages,” making the testimonies of those who witnessed and perceived slave marriage highly valuable to pension officials.¹¹

When it came to filing pension claims, black women especially had to be exceedingly careful in the language they used and the facts they told pension officials in order to obtain a pension. Tera Hunter in her book *Bound in Wedlock* details the difficulties ex-slave widows faced when presenting their claims to the Pension Bureau, stating that “widows walked a careful line of revealing as much relevant information as they could to obtain a pension without in any way endangering their eligibility...they had to play on the politics of respectability to win over agents reviewing and determining their eligibility.”¹² Hunter argues that pension officials automatically treated black women as suspect just by virtue of their race, and were keen to be scrutinizing of their pension claims out of fear that widows, especially those without marriage

⁹ Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, p. 113.

¹⁰ Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families In Civil War Era Mississippi*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p 80.

¹¹ Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women*. p 80.

¹² Tera W Hunter, *Bound In Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage In the Nineteenth Century*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 208

certificates, were aiming to abuse the social welfare of the Pension Bureau and commit fraud. Because of the need for claimants to present a certain image of themselves as upstanding citizens, readers of pension files must be mindful of what was at stake for black women in their claims, and as Hunter states, readers should be aware of “the careful ways they had to craft their applications in order to be successful.”¹³ It can be assumed that this mindfulness must be used within the cases presented in this thesis as well, and be noted that while these files provide profound insight into the roles that black women played as legal authorities in pension claims, the files by nature cannot reveal the *entire* truths of the lives at hand. Despite this, the letters, affidavits, and testimonies found within pension records represent some of the first opportunities that many black women had to act as legal authorities, and often their testimonies are crucial to substantiate the claims of other women. These statements illustrate the crucial importance that social networks played in the lives of black women during and after emancipation.

The expansive collection of Civil War pension files found within the University of Virginia digital database Black Virginians in Blue furnishes a plethora of sources available for research into these topics. In particular, these databases allow access to files related to all the known black Virginians from Albemarle County who served in the Union army or navy; this subset of U.S.C.T. families will serve as primary sources in my research process. This online database is home not to only many of the pension file documents themselves, but also commentary from historians and explicit detailing of the soldiers’ and their families’ relationships to one another. While the assortment of files available at the University of Virginia hosts information on hundreds of black veterans, several collections in particular hold exemplary evidence of the roles that women played as claimants and legal authorities.

¹³ Hunter, *Bound In Wedlock*, p. 208

This thesis focuses the ex-slaves of John Coles Carter, as many of the men enslaved to Carter enlisted in the Union Army in the latter years of the war. According to historian Elizabeth Varon in her work “From Carter’s Mountain to Morganza Bend: A USCT Odyssey,” John Coles Carter had a rather notable familial legacy in Virginia, as he was married to Thomas Jefferson’s great granddaughter Ellen Monroe (Bankhead) Carter.¹⁴ Varon writes that, “[Carter’s] own family was part of Virginia’s elite: John Coles Carter was the great great grandson of Robert (King) Carter, the wealthiest man in colonial Virginia, and great grandson of John Carter, who owned nearly 10,000 acres in Albemarle County, centered at Carter’s Mountain.”¹⁵ However, despite his strong roots in Albemarle, Carter would eventually move his plantation and his slaves West as he inherited 1,500 acres in Pike and Lincoln counties in Missouri from his mother Mary Eliza Carter, encouraging him to migrate from Virginia to Missouri in 1852.¹⁶ It was here in Missouri that his slaves left what was known as the Lick Farm in Lincoln County and another plantation in Pike County known as the Blenheim Plantation to enlist in the Union Army, many of them unfortunately losing their lives in service and leaving behind widows who would later have to prove their slave marriages when filing for widow’s pensions.

The documents related to the ex-slaves of John Coles Carter, particularly those in relation to widow’s pensions, are filled with the voices and transcriptions of black women. These files are rich with experiences and details of the life of the enslaved, as well as vital documents that illuminate familial and community structures in Civil War era America. Most notably, these testimonies reveal the importance that black women placed on forming strong social networks

¹⁴ Elizabeth R Varon, “From Carter’s Mountain to Morganza Bend A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part I).” (Black Virginians in Blue. January 2017)

¹⁵ Varon, “From Carter’s Mountain to Morganza Bend A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part I)”

¹⁶ Varon, “From Carter’s Mountain to Morganza Bend A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part I)”

during and after enslavement that allowed them to survive the perils that faced them, including the trepidations and hardships that came with applying for pension claims.

Nancy Redd's Widow's Claim:

Nancy Redd (not Red, which she clarifies in a deposition to a Pension Bureau special examiner in a 1904 testimony) was an ex-slave of John Coles Carter, whose only claim to pension was as a widow to her late husband Joseph Price.¹⁷ The pension file of Joseph Price, who served in the 68th USCT Regiment and died in 1865 in Barrancas, Florida, is filled with his service records and bursting at the seams with claims and testimonies regarding Nancy Redd, formerly Nancy Price, and prior to that Nancy Jackson (Nancy married a “Commodore Redd” after the death of Joseph Price). While Redd was ultimately successful in her claim to receive a widow’s pension, which commenced at twelve dollars a month in 1904, her claims represent a rather laborious legal journey that required multiple testimonies from herself and witnesses to prove the legality of her marriage to Joseph Price, as there was no documentation to be found that proved their slave marriage nor certified that the two children (who, by the time of the pension claim, were deceased) Redd had with Price were indeed indicative of their relationship. To establish the veracity of Redd’s claims, special examiners sought the testimonies of other ex-slaves who were closely associated with Redd during her enslavement and after, in order to supplement the often-conflicting statements that Redd gave regarding her marriage and life with Joseph Price. In doing so, the testimonies given by the ex-slaves reveal an in-depth picture of

¹⁷ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0763

slave life, as well as showcase the importance of community for black women before and after emancipation.

According to Nancy Redd in a deposition given in 1904, she and Joseph Price were both born into slavery in Albemarle County, Virginia, to John Coles Carter, whom she refers to as Captain Carter.¹⁸ Redd's transcription from the special examiner states that she was born "about seventy-two years ago" from 1904, which marks her birthyear around 1832, and that Price "was about three or four years older than me. I don't know much about his age. I can't read nor write."¹⁹ Redd claims to have lived as slave in Virginia until several years before the Civil War, when Captain Carter migrated with three hundred slaves to Missouri to live on Lick Farm.²⁰ There, on Lick Farm, Nancy Jackson became Nancy Price as she married Joseph on December 25th, Christmas Day. However, she cannot tell the year, and estimates that it "must have been five or six years before Joseph Price enlisted, perhaps longer," following her approximation by stating, "I can't keep run of the years the way you all do."²¹

The issue of misremembering, or not being able to recall or understand, dates and years was a consistent problem for Nancy Redd as she attempted her pension claim. Eight years prior

¹⁸ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0762

¹⁹ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0762

²⁰ According to Elizabeth Varon in her research on the Carter Family in "From Carter's Mountain to Morganza Bend A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part I)," John Carter migrated from Albemarle County with his slaves to Pike and Lincoln Counties, Missouri, in 1852. In contradiction to Redd's testimony, census records show that he owned 103 slaves in 1850, not 300. This would also put Nancy's birthyear around 1835 instead of 1832, as she was seventeen at the time of the migration. As Nancy states, she wasn't very adept at knowing the years when she was enslaved.

²¹ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0761

to her deposition in 1904, an affidavit was transcribed for Redd where she claims she did not understand the date of her marriage in her application for pension. The affidavit states:

Affidavit states that in her application for pension, she did not understand the date of her marriage to be 1857 as it was read to her and as she is informed...she now states that the application is in error in stating the marriage to have been 1857 instead of 1852 and that the correct date is December 25th, 1852 and should be so stated in the application.²²

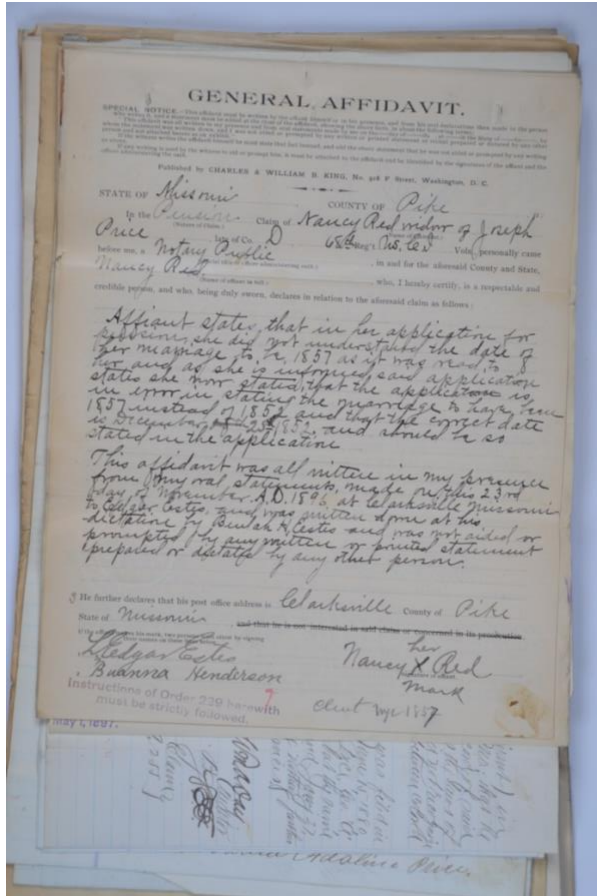
By this time in 1896, Redd had made it clear to the Pension Bureau that her marriage could only be proven by herself and word of mouth from the ex-slave community of the Carter Family, as she gave an affidavit citing that there are no records of her marriage. The 1896 affidavit reads as follows:

Affidavit States there no public or church records of her [Nancy Redd's] marriage so far as she knows and that the minister who married her Rev Thomas Cobb is now dead. She can not therefore furnish a transcript of record of her marriage nor the affidavit of the officiating minister.²³

As both the minister and her former slaveholder John Carter had passed away, it was left to the special examiners to determine the truth of Redd's statements in order for her to receive a widow's pension claim. These inconsistencies prompted delay in her claim, and led to the need for the Pension Bureau to locate corroborating testimony to ensure that, regardless of the year, Nancy was indeed married to Joseph Price prior to his service and death and was in the legal right to a pension claim.

²² Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0706

²³ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0704



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In 1896, Warner Carter, an ex-slave of John Carter who, like Joseph Price, escaped Lick Farm to enlist in the Missouri USCT regiments, gave an affidavit to affirm the marriage of Nancy Redd and Joseph Price. The affidavit transcription reads:

Affidavit states that he was present at the marriage of Nancy Red to soldier Joseph Price and states that said marriage occurred at the Lick Farm in Lincoln County, belonging to Cppt. Carter on the – day of December, about the year 1852 as well as officiant remembers. The ceremony was performed by Rev Thomas Cobb, colored who is now dead. These facts are known to me by reason of my being personally present at the time and place afore said. ²⁵

²⁴ This is an image of the transcribed affidavit cited in footnote number 20, which details Redd’s attempt to correct the date of her marriage to Joseph Price. Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0706

²⁵ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0721

While Warner Carter did not know the exact day, nor did he know the exact year, choosing to say to the special examiner “about” instead of affirming the year 1852, his testimony of being physically present and privy to the marriage adds truth to Nancy Redd’s statements. The inclusion of Reverend Thomas Cobb performing the ceremony corroborates Redd’s testimony, and also adds to the picture of life on Lick Farm for the slaves of John Carter, as Thomas Cobb is cited in multiple pension records to have performed the slave marriages on the farm. In the pension files of Warner Carter himself, his first wife Priscilla Carter (nee Jackson), states that it was Thomas Cobb who married she and Warner Carter as well.²⁶ However, Warner Carter’s testimony was only the first step into substantiating Redd’s claims, and it took the voices of the women who were present in her life before and after emancipation to render her claims to more credible to the Pension Bureau. In the Joseph Price files, there are others like Warner Carter who were available to aid Nancy in her claims, and their testimonies reveal a range of intimate relationships that black women held as the special examiners had to probe for intimate details of a claimant’s personal life.

In legal testimonies to a special examiner in 1897, Eveline Rudd corroborated the truths of Nancy Redd concerning her life as an enslaved woman at Lick Farm and gave intimate details about her children. Eveline Rudd was the niece of Joseph Price and lived as a slave with both Redd and Price on Lick Farm until emancipation allowed, she, Redd, and a few other ex-slaves to leave Missouri and find refuge in Quincy, Illinois in 1865.²⁷ In the first affidavit given on May

²⁶ Compiled Records, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Carter, Warner (Batch 3) photo 45.

²⁷ Eveline Rudd confirms her familial relationship to Joseph Price in a deposition given in 1898. Found in: Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0788

10, 1897, Eveline Rudd's testimony regarding Nancy Redd's relationship to Joseph Price are transcribed as follows:

That she was been personally and may say intimately acquainted with the claimant Nancy Red for at least fifty years also with Joseph Price her first husband from his youth up to his marriage to claimant and then from his marriage to claimant to the time he was into the army. And know of my own knowledge that were never divorced from each other but on the contrary lived together and was recognized as man and wife up to the time Joseph Price enlisted in the army. ²⁸

Eveline Rudd, while she doesn't give the explicit personal detail of being present at the wedding of Nancy Redd and Joseph Price like Warner Carter in his testimony, provides valuable information to the Bureau because of her "intimate" relationship to Redd. Not only was she an ex-slave who lived on Lick Farm with the claimant and her husband, but she was someone who was very closely associated with them and could attest that she knew of their marriage and that they never divorced prior to Price's military service in the Civil War. Eveline Rudd being intimately acquainted with Nancy Redd in the post-war period attests to how important community, and family, were to ex-slaves in the post-war period. Regosin and Shaffer write that, "ultimately, former slaves' pension files speak to the significance of family to emotional and physical survival during slavery and after," and Eveline Rudd's testimony speaks to how important it was for ex-slaves to continue their familial communities together and support one another through the trials African Americans faced after the war, including filing for pension claims.

Nancy Redd also attempted to solidify her case for a widow's pension by maintaining that she had two children with Joseph Price during their marriage. She wasn't petitioning for a pension allocation for her children as both of them died in 1865, but instead was using the

²⁸ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0731

children as proof of her relationship to Joseph Price.²⁹ However, much like with the issues she had proving her marriage, she had no documentation of her children ever being born. Presumably in 1897 (the date on this particular affidavit is missing), Nancy Redd gave this testimony to a special examiner:

I am unable to furnish the first and second class of proof to establish the birth of my children Queen – and Thomas for the reason first there was no [legal] or public record made farther than my old master John Carter kept a family record of his colored people, but I do not know what became of it since his death. Second there was no attending physician. My mother and the midwife who were with me at the time are both dead.³⁰

Much like with her marriage, there was no legal documentation for Redd to rely on. This testimony rings true for many ex-slaves who applied for pensions, as the laws of slavery did not require documentation of births or marriages beyond records kept by slaveholders. Nancy Redd's claims reveal the hardships that many black widows faced in applying for pension claims; by the time Redd filed her application, she was already well into the later years of her life in her early seventies and faced with the difficulty of her former master being dead and many of her fellow ex-slaves that came from Lick Farm as well.

However, because of the tight bonds that Nancy Redd maintained with fellow women during and after slavery, their testimonies were able to corroborate her claims about her children and further solidify the previously undocumented reality of her relationship to Joseph Price. Eveline Rudd testifies again for a special examiner in regards to the birth of Nancy Redd's daughter Queen. The birth affidavit states:

²⁹ The deaths of Queen and Thomas are confirmed to have been in 1865 by an ex-slave of John Carter named Martha Williams in an affidavit given in 1897. Found in: Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0754

³⁰ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0708

I was not present at the birth of the above named child [Queen]. I lived within one hundred yards of the claimant at the time she was confined. I saw claimant within one week of her confinement and less than a week after her confinement saw the child nursing at claimant's breast during her sickness and after. Both during her sickness and afterwards I am unable to fit the exact date of birth but know it to have been in the early spring of 1860. My old master John Carter kept a family record of his colored people and from this I think I have been impressed as to the date having heard this accord read after a good many years ago.³¹

Eveline Rudd furnished intimate and clear details of the life Nancy Redd lived with her daughter, providing testimony that proved that Nancy had been confined in childbirth, had a child to nurse, and also that her child was sick. Much like Nancy Redd, Eveline Rudd struggled to remember the exact dates that the child was born, but was able to recall that the child was most likely born in the spring of 1860 based on the records that John Carter kept that were read aloud to her. This details a very vivid picture of life for not just Nancy, but for Eveline as well, as it reveals that more people than just Nancy were aware of the records that John Carter kept, and perhaps that it was a well-known record to most all that he enslaved. Even though those records were not given to the Pension Bureau—whether it be that they were lost or just unattainable—Eveline Rudd's testimony supports previous claims made by Nancy Redd. Regosin and Shaffer argue that “special examiners preferred the testimony of former slaveholders and other whites, believing their testimony was more comprehensible and therefore presumably more reliable,” and Eveline Rudd's corroborating the statements made by Redd, by confirming that their former white master accounted for Redd's daughter Queen, provides invaluable evidence to the Pension Bureau to support that Redd did indeed have children.³²

However, Eveline Rudd doesn't explicitly testify that the child in question, Queen, was in fact fathered by Joseph Price. To substantiate Nancy Redd's children did belong to Price and, by

³¹ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0746

³² Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, p 9.

relation, confirm her slave marriage to him, another ex-slave woman brings her testimony to the pension records. Martha Williams, an ex-slave of John Carter and housemate of Nancy Redd on Lick Farm, provides further and more detailed testimony about the birth of Redd's second child by Price, their son Thomas, and of her life around the family during enslavement. Martha Williams gave her testimony on May 19th, 1897:

That she was well acquainted with the family of the above named soldier during his life time that on the – day of September 1863 at Lick Farm Lincoln County Missouri the wife of soldier was confined and gave birth to a male child. Which was subsequently named Thomas. I was not present at the birth of said child but was living at the same house on the above named farm at the time the child was born by the mother. The evening the child was born saw her next morning after the birth of the child. Saw the child nursing at the mothers breast the next day after it was born and often afterward. I cannot give the exact date but have been always impressed that the date given above is correct. I get this impression from the fact that my master John Carter in his life time kept a family record of his colored people...³³

In her testimony, Martha Williams related Nancy Redd's son directly to Joseph Price, referring to him as the family of the soldier. Like Nancy and Eveline, Martha struggled to remember the exact date of birth, but has memory of it being in September because of the records that John Carter kept. She also refers to Nancy Redd as the wife of Joseph Price, showing that it was understood to her that they were married and having children together as a familial unit. Her close acquaintance to them comes closer than Eveline Rudd's one hundred yards as well, as Williams details that she was living in the same household on Lick Farm as the family in question. By using the term "family" to describe Nancy Redd, Joseph Price, and their children, Williams also affirms and underscores that family structures were an important part to slave life in the South, including on Lick Farm, where Reverend Thomas Cobb seemed to be consistently

³³ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0747

officiating slave marriages under the permission of John Carter, who documented families and kept detailed records of them. Her intimate proximity brings more trustworthiness to her claims as well, and this connection she has kept with Nancy Redd further proves Nancy's claims of her marriage to Joseph Price. This testimony makes Martha Williams a vital legal authority on behalf of Redd.

On the same day, Martha Williams was able to give further testament about Nancy Redd's children and the unfortunate circumstances of their deaths by illness in 1865, as well as certify that the two children in question, Queen and Thomas, did belong to Joseph Price. As White claims in her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, "slave women were also dependent on each other for child care," and this relationship is shown between Martha Williams and Nancy Redd, as their bond through child care allowed for Williams to give ample testimony regarding the status of the children of Redd and Price.³⁴ These testimonies show how African American women were intimately equated with marriage and births in slave communities, often more so than men, and were thus called upon as legal authorities by the Pension Bureau. Because of the testaments of Eveline Rudd, Martha Williams, and Nancy Redd herself, these women were able to push past the hardships of not having legal documentation in order to substantiate and prove the claims of Nancy Redd regarding her marriage to Joseph Price, and subsequently her legal right to a widow's pension. Not only do these women step into roles of legal authority, but they also reveal, through their own words, a broader picture of the lives they lived as enslaved women and also as freedwomen after the war.

These pension files provide legal, under-oath testimonials by black women who are accounting for one another and placing the realities of slave life into legal records. Just from the

³⁴ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, p. 126

pension files of Joseph Price, a reader can see how slave communities were very connected via social and familial networks, with slaves constantly aware of their surroundings and staying up to date on even the records that John Carter kept of families. These files contain a very rich history of family life among slaves and ex-slaves, detailing how they lived together, how they accounted for one another, and how many stayed together after emancipation. Martha Williams was with Nancy Redd in Quincy, Illinois when her children passed away in 1865, displaying how they moved away from Lick Farm together after emancipation.³⁵

In accordance with Noralee Frankel's arguments in *Freedom's Women* concerning slave marriage, the Joseph Price files, and ultimately Nancy Redd's and the other women's personal experiences and testimonies showcase how important marriage was to slave life, even if it wasn't legal in the eyes of free society. In many of these testaments, the women refer to Redd as Price's wife, or he her husband, and refer to them and their children as a familial unit. It was up to the slave community to confirm and acknowledge marriage and what family meant to enslaved peoples. Even though there is mention of records kept by John Coles Carter, they are never given to the Pension Bureau, and thus it is the legal testimonies of these women and their affirmations that the relationship held between Nancy Redd and Joseph Price was indeed the same as a legal marriage because they confirmed it to be so. There are no marriage records, no birth records, nothing that legally ties Nancy Redd to the late Joseph Price as his widow, yet it was the testimony of black women and their knowledge and belief in their familial connections that allowed Nancy Redd a widow's pension.

³⁵ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0754

Jane Carter's Widow's Claim

Also found within the expansive collection of Civil War pension files found within the Black Virginians in Blue online database is the pension claim of Jane Carter. Like Nancy Redd, Jane Carter was an ex-slave of John Coles Carter, and her social network of the black women from the Blenheim Plantation, Missouri aided her in her widow pension claims. While there were men who supported Jane Carter's claims, namely John Carter's comrades George Scott and Peter Walden, the pension file testimonies are mostly made up of black women.

Jane Carter (formerly Irwin), was the widow of John Sellers (who enlisted under and took the name John Carter, like several of the ex-slaves of John Coles Carter did upon enlistment) and began applying for a pension in 1882, nearly twenty years after the death of her husband during the war in 1864. John Carter served in the 68th USCT Regiment and spent much of his tenure at the Benton Barracks in St. Louis, Missouri, bringing his wife Jane to live there as well.³⁶ Much like Nancy Redd, Jane and John Carter were married on the Blenheim Plantation in 1863 and did not receive any legal documentation of their slave marriage, which placed Jane Carter in a similar situation of scrutiny to the Pension Bureau, especially given the conflicting testimonies regarding who married the couple. To prove her marriage to her husband, special examiners collected testimonies from several of the ex-slaves and acquaintances that were familiar with Jane Carter before and after the war. The pension file of John Carter is especially rich with testaments from black women, and reveals an interconnecting web of social networks that were crucial to Jane Carter being awarded a pension of ten dollars a month in 1884.

³⁶ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0463 ; John Carter served in the same regiment as Joseph Price, and given that they lived on neighboring plantations, it can be assumed that they enlisted around the same time.

According to Jane Carter in a statement given on September 29th, 1883, at the time of her filing, Carter was fifty-four years old and living in St. Louis Missouri; however, she like most of the other ex-slaves, was born in Albemarle County, Virginia. During this statement, Carter remembered her exact birthdate of October 20th, 1829, and answered special examiner questions regarding her previous marriage and her history with the man she claimed to be her husband. Before marrying John Carter, Jane was the widow of a man named Thomas Irwin, whom she married on John Coles Carter's plantation in Virginia before migrating to Missouri and had two daughters with.³⁷ Because of her previous marriage to Thomas Irwin, Jane Carter is often referred to as Jane Irwin by special examiners when questioning witnesses when in regards to Carter's time before her marriage to John Carter.

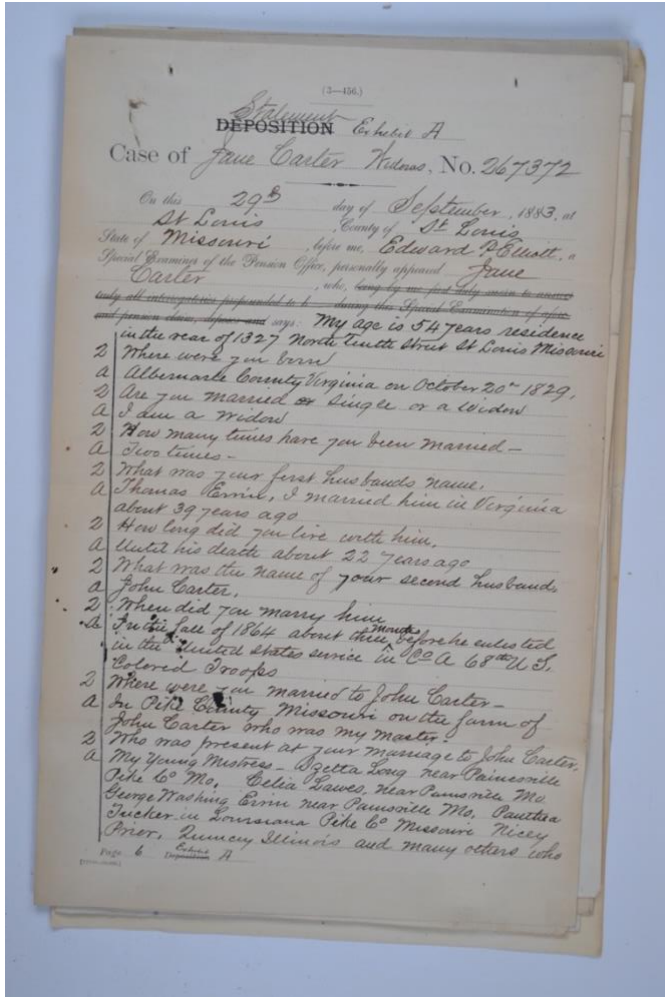
Carter had a very clear memory regarding dates and who attended her wedding ceremony, detailing several of names and current addresses of attendees, some of whom testified on her behalf in the pension filing process and others who she perhaps named to provide further evidence beyond the testimony that had already been given. She named three women whose testaments are not find in the file: Celia Lawes, Paulthea Tucker, and Nicey Prior, the latter of whom resided in Quincy, Illinois, where several other female ex-slaves migrated to after emancipation, like Nancy Redd. In fact, Carter actually claimed to have moved to Quincy for one month before returning to St. Louis to be closer to her husband, which reveals that Nancy Redd and her close acquaintances were not the only ex-slaves of John Coles Carter to travel to Illinois. While neither Redd nor her associates who testified for her in her pension claim are called upon in Carter's claim, most likely due to the distance and time spent apart, it is not a stretch to

³⁷ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0462

assume that the women were at one time a part of the same social network that Nancy Redd and her acquaintances were apart of on Lick Farm during slavery, even though Jane Carter and Nancy Redd were in fact on different plantations owned by John Coles Carter. It suggests that the bonds that ex-slaves created with another transcended location and links were made because these women were all owned by the same master. Jane Carter's testimony reinforces the argument of Noralee Frankel, showcasing how community relationships were essential to the social structures of former slaves, as Carter's migrations centered around the social groups she formed during slavery.³⁸ The testimonies in the Carter file also detail that there were more than likely multiple social circles and networks that were built by the slaves on the Missouri plantation, and that several persisted and intertwined after emancipation.

Jane Carter's pension claim was bolstered by the voices of many women, most all of them ex-slaves that she continued to have relationships with after leaving the plantation. Many of the testimonies given in this case were recorded in a question-and-answer style, with the special examiner writing what questions were asked of the witness and then transcribing their verbal response. Because of this method, many of the witnesses were asked the same questions in the same fashion, with some of the depositions and statements recorded on note paper and stamp dated with an official Pension Bureau signature and others filling the lines of official deposition documents. The testimonies read more like interviews than statements, and allowed witnesses to give quite curt, but sometimes detailed responses to verify the validity of Jane Carter's claims.

³⁸ Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p 80.



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On November 9th, 1883, Polly James was questioned by a special examiner and gave a deposition supporting Carter’s claims of marriage and her relationship to John Carter. In her claims, James confirms that she, too, was an ex-slave of John Coles Carter, and that she was still living in Pike County, Missouri. James also stated that while she wasn’t present at the marriage ceremony of Jane and John Carter, she knew them to be married because “they lived together as

³⁹ This image is the first page of Jane Carter’s testimony given on September 29th, 1883, which shows how the special examiner interviews were conducted and recorded. In this particular document, one can see how Carter was questions about birthdate, her previous marriage, her relationship to John Carter, and who she could remember being present at her wedding. Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0462

husband and wife and call each other husband and wife she came here to Louisiana where he was a soldier and followed him to St. Louis MO.”⁴⁰ James’ testimony echoes the testaments given in the Nancy Redd case, citing that, while many marriages were not witness nor documented legally, it was the slave community that acknowledged that a marriage bond existed. Slave couples that lived together and called each other husband and wife were often accepted to be so by the community because they lived their lives as if they were married and united in a familial unit.⁴¹

In this particular testimony from Polly James, she also detailed how John Sellers was not the only ex-slave who changed his last name to Carter upon enlistment. Her testimony is transcribed as:

Q: Did Sellers go by any other name

A: I think he enlisted under the name of John Carter. My brother Matthew Walker enlisted either with him or in the same place they left home together and my bro enlisted as Matthew Carter not walker as his name was at home...⁴²

In his book *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans*, Donald Shaffer offers brief insight as to why black soldiers might have changed their surnames. Shaffer writes, “before the war, a slave, if referred to by last name at all, was generally known by his owner’s surname, at least to white people. African-American soldiers who had been slaves usually entered the Union army under those names.”⁴³ Shaffer argues that slave families had no official standing, so soldiers adapted to what would allow them the easiest standing with white Union soldiers. What

⁴⁰ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0447

⁴¹ Donald Robert Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 103

⁴² Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0447

⁴³ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, p. 100

is interesting in the case of Jane Carter is that she, too, quickly took upon the name Carter after John's enlistment, solidifying her connection to him through marriage by taking upon whatever name he so chose, even if it was that of their former master. Polly James' testimony verified just how closely bonded that Jane and John Carter were to each other, and also that she, a longstanding member of their slave community and the social network that Jane maintained after the war, believed them to be married because of how they lived together and how Jane followed John throughout his migrations as a soldier.

However, despite overwhelming evidence from women like Polly James who confirmed that the community sanctioned the marriage of John and Jane Carter, there was conflicting testimony as to *who* married them. According to Jane Carter in her aforementioned deposition on September 29th, 1883, she claimed to have been married by Thomas Cobb, the same Baptist preacher who married Nancy Redd and Joseph Price. Conversely, there are several statements made by witnesses in her pension claims that state that it was not Thomas Cobb who married the couple of Jane and John Carter, but instead it was a woman by the name of Isaetta Long. Isaetta Long was one of the witnesses who claimed this, as well as Betsy Walker, the mother of Polly James and Matthew Carter.

Isaetta Long was the white daughter of the plantation owner John Coles Carter.⁴⁴ In her testimonies and statements given, Long appeared to be well acquainted with John and Jane Carter while they were enslaved on the Blenheim Plantation, or was at least very aware of their marriage and their relationship to one another, given that she was present on the day of their marriage in September, 1863. Jane Carter herself confirms that Isaetta Long was present on the wedding day, citing in her testimony on September 29th, 1883, that "my young mistress, Isaetta

⁴⁴ John Carter (68th USCT). Black Virginians in Blue Database

Long,” was in attendance along with the others she listed.⁴⁵ However, in this testimony, Carter claims that it was Thomas Cobb who married she and John, contradicting a testimony that Isaetta Long would give on November 28th of the same year. Long’s testimony is transcribed as follows:

Q: Did she again marry if so whom did she marry and who performed the ceremony
A: She married a man named John Sellers owned by my father John C Carter Sr who was known on the plantation as Sellers but enlisted under the name of John Carter...A Plantation Preacher named Thomas Cobb was to have married them but when the wedding was all ready the water prevented Cobb from getting there and I performed the ceremony reading of the marriage ceremony of the episcopal church. ⁴⁶

Long’s claims are corroborated by the testimony of Betsy Walker, an ex-slave of the Blenheim Plantation, who in a statement on November 21st stated that “Isaetta Carter my young misses now Sr. Long’s wife married them. Thomas Cobb the Plantation Preacher was to do it but did [not get] there in time.”⁴⁷ The conflicting claims surrounding who performed the marriage ceremony are of particular interest as they bring about questions of whether some of the witnesses, Jane Carter included, were concerned about walking a careful line only revealing relevant information in order to make the case as presentable as possible. Unlike Nancy Redd, the conflicting statements surrounding whether it was Iseatta Long or Thomas Cobb who married the couple don’t seem to stem from a lack of memory, but instead purposeful choice to omit details.

The ex-slave women from Blenheim Plantation, aside from Betsy Walker, all testified that it was Thomas Cobb who married John and Jane Carter in September of 1863. Polly James, Fanny Tucker, Anna Minor, and Jane Carter herself all attested that the ceremony was performed

⁴⁵ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0462

⁴⁶ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0445

⁴⁷ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0452

by Preacher Cobb. In her statements on September 29th, 1883, Jane Carter gave confirmation that she was married by Cobb, transcribed as:

Q: Were you married to John Carter by a preacher

A: Yes sir Thomas Cobb by name but he is now dead so I have heard ⁴⁸

On October 5th of the same year, Anna Minor gave a testimony:

Q: Can you fix the date of her marriage?

A: ...She was married by a colored preacher named Thomas Cobb he belonged to my master John Carter and he lived on the other plantation that belonged to my master and which was situated in Lincoln County Missouri. It has been so long ago that they were married and being ignorant I did not fix the date...

Later, on November 9th, Fanny Tucker testified:

Q: Who did Jane marry do you know

A: She married John Sellers. Thomas Cobb married them I think. I was not present but that is what the Plantation folds said as they live together as man and wife. ⁴⁹

On the very same day that Fanny Tucker was interviewed by a special examiner, so was Polly James, who was simply asked if she knew Thomas Cobb, to which she replied “yes sir he is dead.”⁵⁰

The wording of the question given to Jane Carter suggests that the special examiner was expecting, and perhaps wanted to hear, that Carter had indeed been married by a preacher, not just another slave, or even the daughter of her master John Coles Carter. The interest in who

⁴⁸ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0463

⁴⁹ It can be assumed that by the term “Plantation folds,” Fanny is referring to the records that Nancy Redd and the women from Lick Farm claim that their master John C Carter kept to record his slaves. Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0455

⁵⁰ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0446

married John and Jane Carter, and the emphasis that many of the witnesses place on the fact being that it was Thomas Cobb and not Isaetta Long, details how slave marriage went beyond the what Regosin and Shaffer claim in *Voices of Emancipation*, which is that marriages between slaves existed only as long as *owners* allowed.⁵¹ While their claim is true, the John Carter pension file and the emphasis on the involvement of a preacher in the marriage ceremony of the couple reveals that there was also an importance of the Christianity in regards to marriage, for in the case of Jane Carter, her marriage needed to be not just in the records of her owner and of her witnesses, but also be sanctified by God. The need for witness testimony that a preacher presided over the ceremony and not just the daughter of the master of the plantation reveals another hardship that black widows had to overcome in order to be awarded pension, as they had to be mindful to note that not only did their masters accept their marriages, but that it was done according to some kind of known Christian standard. There was a pressure upon the ex-slave women to portray the marriage ceremony to be as ‘legal’ as a slave-marriage could be, which is why it was perhaps in their best interest to place Thomas Cobb as the one who married the couple instead of Isaetta Long.

Aside from the older Betsy Walker, all the other ex-slave women from the Blenheim Plantation agreed upon the fact that it was Thomas Cobb who married John and Jane Carter. In order to be more likely to be awarded a pension. The issue of who performed the ceremony and the conflicting claims given relate to the arguments of Tera Hunter in *Bound in Wedlock*, as she states that black widows had to be careful in the way they had to craft their applications in order for their claims to be successful.⁵² While it is possible that the details of John and Jane Carter’s wedding day became hazy to those who witnessed and heard about it over the years before

⁵¹ Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, p 28.

⁵² Hunter, *Bound In Wedlock*, p. 208

Carter's pension claim, it is also entirely possible that these women were aware that it was necessary for it to appear as if Thomas Cobb himself married the couple. Even though Isaetta Long was a respectable young white woman at the time she allegedly performed the marriage, she was not technically of any religious or gendered authority to marry the slave couple. It is presumable that the claim that Thomas Cobb, a Baptist minister who married most all of the couples between the Blenheim and Lick Farm plantations, despite being an enslaved black man, appeared to be more presentable to the Pension Bureau.

Aside from the conflicting testimony regarding who married the couple, almost all other accounts that the witnesses were questioned about resulted in very similar answers. Even if some of the women couldn't remember the exact date of the wedding ceremony, they almost all recalled that it was in the fall of 1863, and all confirmed that after the ceremony, John and Jane Carter lived their lives together as man and wife. In the case of Betsy Walker, the older woman was asked: "Did you ever see them sleep together as man and wife in same bed," to which she answered, "A Lord! Yes sah many time I know they were man and wife and John provided for her he was a starring man sah," further presenting John and Jane Carter not just as a married couple, but as one that was happy and fulfilling the roles of man and wife within their relationship.⁵³ Much like within the case of Nancy Redd, it was because of the impressive testimony from black women that Jane Carter was awarded a pension of ten dollars a month in 1884.

⁵³ Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0452

Conclusion:

Together, these ex-slave women were stronger than they would have been as individuals due to the resilience of black female communities that had been formed before emancipation and persisted into the postwar era. Deborah White argues that “the supportive atmosphere of the female community was buffer enough against the depersonalizing regime of plantation work and the general dehumanizing nature of slavery. When we consider how much more confined to the plantation women were than men...we realize just how important the female community was to its members,” and this case studies of Nancy Redd and Jane Carter bolster this argument, revealing that not only was a black female community paramount to the survival of women during enslavement, but also afterward in the post-war period.⁵⁴

Many of these bond-women knew and supported each other since childhood on the Lick Farm and Blenheim plantations, as Eveline Rudd knew Nancy Redd, in her transcribed words, “from youth to marriage” and beyond, and Anna Minor, in the case of Jane Carter, claimed to “have known her ever since I was a child.”⁵⁵ The legal authority that these ex-slave women were able to contribute to these pension claims was rooted in their resilient and lasting community and network that they built together in order to survive in a white, and male, dominated landscape of the South. These two case studies of Nancy Redd and Jane Carter in particular showcase how these networks survived long after emancipation and how they seemingly intertwined across plantation lines, with Jane Carter at one point living and associating with women who migrated to Quincy, Illinois, before returning to follow her husband to the Benton Barracks in St. Louis,

⁵⁴ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, p. 131-132

⁵⁵ Compiled Records, Box 44031, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Accessed via UVABox under Joseph Price Pension. Image: DSC_0731 ; Compiled Records, Box 34647, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Accessed via UVABox under John Carter Pension. Image: DSC_0468

Missouri. These female slave networks were vast, vibrant, and integral to the survival of ex-slaves after emancipation, with many of these women keeping close association and assisting one another through the hardships they faced in the South, including the difficulties that came with applying for pension and verifying slave marriage.

Not only are these cases exemplary in uncovering the depth of black female social networks, but they also detail how, when it came to pension files and perhaps beyond in the broader postwar society, it was black women who were relied upon to verify the validity of slave marriages that occurred before and during the Civil War. These widow's pension files provide legal, under oath testimonies where black women's voices and testaments are featured and heavily relied upon to substantiate widow claims of marriage to a Union veteran, as Hunter writes that slave marriage "was ultimately a mutual exchange of affections and services, a chosen emotional and social bond," one that was most often authenticated through the acceptance of matrimony by a slave community who witnesses the social bonds of a man and wife first hand during enslavement.⁵⁶ Black women were most often the witnesses called upon by special examiners to authenticate slave marriages, as their close to one another provided them ample authority to validate another woman's claim as a widow to a veteran. When it came to determining factual information regarding a black applicant for pension, in the words of Regosin and Shaffer, "who better to ask than other former slaves who had once been and often still were closely associated with that same person in the postwar period?"⁵⁷

However, as Tera Hunter details in *Bound in Wedlock* and the cases of Nancy Redd and Jane Carter reveal, it was not always concrete, factual information found within the testimonies of pension files. Instead, what often lies within these folders is conflicting evidence, cases of lost

⁵⁶ Hunter, *Bound In Wedlock*, p. 8

⁵⁷ Regosin and Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation*, p. 9

memory and contradictory dates and occurrences, which reveal the careful line that black women had to walk in order to successfully obtain a pension in the face of unfair federal system that favored whites and often scrutinized black voices. Because of the discriminatory nature of the pension filing process, black women came together to provide the most viable testimonies for widows in order to successfully claim pensions that they believed the widows were deserving of, even if that meant offering conflicting statements regarding who performed or when it occurred in order to, in Hunter's words, "play on the politics of respectability" in order to "win over" the special examiners and award widows like Redd and Carter a pension.⁵⁸ The conflicting testimonies reveal the resilience and determination these bond-women had when it came to working together to ensure the prosperity of one of their own.

Pension claims, particularly those for black veterans and their families, offer a window into the some of the first roles that black women played as legal authorities, with their testimonies being sought after, listened to, and used to award federal pensions to black women who didn't have any other legal documentation of their marriages to their husbands beyond the acceptance and acknowledgement of a slave marriage by black women in a slave community. These communal ties persisted long after emancipation, with the social networks that African-Americans built during slavery being tied even stronger in the postwar period, as many of these women migrated to new cities together and continued to work together to ensure their survival and prosperity in the South. The cases of Nancy Redd and Jane Carter of exemplary insights into the existing historical conversations surrounding female slave networks and demonstrate that women's legal authority was rooted in their resilient communities.

⁵⁸ Hunter, *Bound In Wedlock*, p. 208

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