

Borrowed Identity

A Case Study of Three USCT Regiments from South Carolina
by

[John Raymond Gourdin](#)

Perhaps the most imposing obstacle faced by historical and genealogical researchers is crossing the 1870 Census barrier and identifying Black Americans prior to the Civil War. This is a particularly daunting experience when conducting research in southern states where the vast majority of the Black population were held in slavery. One of the primary reasons for this obstacle is a tendency of former slaves to change their names after gaining their freedom.¹

This obstacle is not isolated to research in southern states due to the migratory pattern of former slaves. After the turn of the century the grand majority of Black Americans who migrated out of South Carolina settled in northern states. In fact, during the period from 1930 to 1940, more than 50 percent settled in just two northern Mecca -- the state of New York, with 37.2 percent (No. 1) and the District of Columbia, with 13.4 percent (No. 2).²

This migratory pattern is evidenced by the change in black representation in southern states versus northern states during the first half of the twentieth century. The percentage of the black population of South Carolina shrunk from 58.4 percent³ in 1900 to 42.9 percent⁴ in 1940 -- a decrease of 26.5 percent, and ironically, for the District of Columbia, from 31.1 percent⁵ to 28.2 percent⁶ -- a decrease of 9.3 percent.

During the same period the ratio of the black population of the state of New York grew from 1.4 percent⁷ to 4.2 percent⁸ -- an astonishing increase of 209.7 percent. Although there are many other factors that attributed to the tremendous growth in the black population in New York state during this forty-year period it is important that genealogical researchers from northern states look to the South as a valuable source for gathering information on the ancestry of Black Americans in New York.

In order to assess the magnitude and impact of this name-changing phenomenon this researcher compiled a database consisting of a wide variety of data extracted from nearly 400 pension records of the 103rd, 104th and 128th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiments. These regiments were organized in South Carolina during the Spring of 1865, and the enlisted ranks were composed entirely of newly freed slaves drawn generally from plantations in counties surrounding the city of Charleston.

These compiled data identified that names were changed in assorted forms and for a variety of reasons. In most cases the pensioner went by the surnames of their mothers, prior to the war; served in the army under the surnames of their former owners, during to war; then, took the surnames of their fathers, after the war. The foregoing statement is merely a generalized observation because a wide variety of other name-changing conventions have been identified. This article provides several examples of these name-changes and discusses the impact it might have on researchers who utilize this information.

¹ The 1870 Census was the first census taken where former slaves were listed by name and by family units. All previous censuses listed slaves in the census records only by age, gender, and color, or merely as a head count.

² George A. Devlin. *South Carolina and Black Migration, 1865-1940: In Search of the Promised Land*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989). p. 379-382.

³ U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Population, Volume 1, Part 1:cxiv. NOTE: The black percentage of the population in South Carolina in 1900 (58.4%) is second only to the that of the state of Mississippi (58.5%).

⁴ U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population, Volume IV, Part 4:345. Note: Race classification was grouped as 'White' and 'Nonwhite'. The percentage used in this article is based on the Nonwhite representation of the total population, which include 'Other Races.'

⁵ *Ibid.*, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Volume II, Part 1:956.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Volume II, Part 5:17.

Borrowed Identity

Some veterans changed their names to avoid identification after running away from their plantation to join the army. They knew that if they were captured by Confederate soldiers before reaching the Union lines their captors would return them to their owners and be severely punished. Bonus McDonald, a veteran who served with Company A, 104th U.S. Colored Infantry stated in his deposition filed during February 1909:

"I was born in 1843 and raised in Williamsburg County, and was owned by Mr. George McDonald. I lived on his place until I ran away to join the army. Before the war my name was Bonus McDonald, after my master, but when I enlisted I told them Lewis since I was a runaway -- I don't know where I come across the name Lewis. I served in the army under the name of Lewis McDonald. About a year after the war I took the name of Clark, and have gone by that name ever since."⁹

Other soldiers changed their names to avoid identification after the war for fear of being returned to their former owner or for fear of retaliation by local Whites for their participation in the war. In a deposition submitted by Frank Gadison during March 1912, a Private with Company G, 128th U.S. Colored Infantry regiment, he stated:

"My correct name is now Frank Gadison, but my name was formerly Thomas Trowell. I enlisted in the Union Army under the name of Thomas Trowell. My owner's name at the time of the Civil War was James Trowell who lived in Barnwell District, SC. I changed my name to Frank Gadison because I did not wish to return to my owner in South Carolina, and so I came to Texas under the name of Frank Gadison."¹⁰

While many names were changed to meet the conventional standards of the time or inadvertently changed due to mispronunciation or administrative errors, some veterans openly protested against being forced to use a slave owners name. An excellent case is that of Robert Butler, a private who served with Company D, 103rd U.S. Colored Infantry. In his affidavit filed during July 1906 he demanded that his proper surname be used on all of his pension documents. He sternly stated that:

"Before my enlistment I was known only by the name of Robert on the plantation where I lived. When I enlisted in order that I might have two names [first & last name] as was customary, I was given the name of Sinclair by the enrolling officer, which was the name of my owner as a slave. When I was discharged from the army ... I took the name of my father and have been known by that name [Sinclair] in the community where I live since that time. By placing me on the pension roll under my slave name would be a discrimination against me on account of my previous condition of servitude and contrary to the policy of our Government with respect to the ex-slaves of the Southern States. I respectfully ask that on the pension roll and on my pension certificate, I be given as my true and proper name, the name of my father, Butler, the name to which I am known in the community where I live and not the name put upon me as a slave."¹¹

Not all veterans changed their names immediately after the war. Nero Dingle, a private who served with Company D, 104th Regiment, waited more than twenty years before changing his name. In his deposition filed during September 1901 he stated that:

⁹ Deposition of Bonus Clark (Sumter, Sumter, SC), 17 Feb 1909, Civil War Pension File of Lewis McDonald aka Bonus Clark, Private, Widow's Certificate 0850.038 (Elsie Clark), Company A, 104th United States Colored Troops, Records of the Veterans Administration, Record Group 15; National Archives Records Administration, Washington, District of Columbia.

¹⁰ Deposition of Thomas Trowell now known as Frank Gadison (La Grange, Fayette, TX), 12 Mar 1912, Pension File of Frank Gadison aka Thomas Trowell, Pvt, SC C-2.476.756; Co. G, 128th USCT; VA Records, RG-15; NARA, WDC.

¹¹ Claimant's Affidavit of Robert Butler (Eadytown, Berkeley, SC), 16 Jul 1906, Pension File of Robert Sinclair known as Robert Butler, Pvt, WC 0696.481; Co. D, 103rd USCT; VA Records, RG-15; NARA, WDC.

Borrowed Identity

"I was born in Berkeley County, the slave of Capt. Theodore L. Gourdine. My father was Crapps Dingle. I served under the name of Nero Gourdine. I changed my name to Dingle about fifteen years ago. Up to that time I was called Gourdine. I pay taxes under the name of Dingle. If it is the same to the government I should like to have my name changed to Negro Dingle on the pension certificate."¹²

These detailed accounts of name changes by Black veteran soldiers of the Civil War resulted from government scrutiny of pension applications to ensure only eligible applicants received pension benefits. Because the federal government was wary of false claims, examiners spared no question in the search to verify claims. In most cases soldiers had to offer information about their slave masters, birthplaces, spouses, children, residences before and after the War, enlistment date and location, commanding officers, discharge status, physical characteristics and occupation.

Two very important questions found in the many pension documents were: 1) "Were you a slave prior to enlisting in the army?" and 2) "Have you ever been known by any names other than that given in your application for pension?" Answers to these two key questions were instrumental in determining the validity of the applicants' claim and is vital information to researchers.

In order to determine the impact of these name change data were compiled from a wide variety of documents in pension folders, but primarily from pension application summaries prepared by special examiners from the Department of Interior.

Applications were filed by veteran soldiers or their widows, or by guardians of soldiers dependent children--in cases where both the soldier and his widow were deceased or incapacitated. In order to substantiate the applicant's claim of service a number of depositions and affidavits were taken from family, friends, neighbors, or other significant individuals of the community. This diversity of inputs add a great deal of credibility to information provided by applicants.

The initial set of data was compiled from a research of the *General Index to Pension Files*¹³ and the *Organization Index to Pension Files of Veterans who Served Between 1861 and 1900*.¹⁴ A total of 2,063 discrete pension applications were filed by soldiers of the 103rd, 104th, and 128th U.S. Colored Infantry regiments. Applications were filed typically during the period of about 1890 to about 1915. In order to extract the necessary data a set of three criterion were developed. The criterion used to select only certain files were: (1) enlisted soldiers; (2) pension certificate; and (3) alias name.

•**Enlisted Soldiers:** Only pension files of enlisted soldiers were included in the analysis. With the exception of two colored officers¹⁵ all colored soldiers in these three regiments were enlisted men, so by omitting the officers' pension files from the count, a total of 118 records or about six percent were dropped from the selection candidates, leaving 1,945.

•**Pension Certificate:** Out of the 1,945 applications filed by colored enlisted soldiers, 799, or 41.1 percent, were rejected for a variety of reasons but usually because the applicant's name could not be located in pension records at the War Department. Of course, in many cases, the names were not found because the application was filed under the soldier's post-war name, which did not

¹² Deposition of Nero Gourdine or Dingle (St. Stephens, Berkeley, SC), 20 Oct 1901, Pension File of Nero Gourdine aka Nero Dingle, Pvt, WA XC-2648.969; Co. D, 104th USCT; VA Records, RG-15; NARA, WDC.

¹³ T288 - General Index to Pension Files, NARA, WDC. An alphabetical card index (microfilmed) to pension files for the period of 1861 to 1934. Each card in the general index gives a veteran's name, rank, unit, an term of service; names of dependent(s); his filing date; the application number; the certificate number; and the state from which the claim was filed.

¹⁴ T289 - Organization Index to Pension Files of Veterans who Served Between 1861 and 1900, NARA, WDC. A card index (microfilmed) similar to that found in the General Index, T288. Unlike the alphabetical General Index, however, this index groups applicants according to the units in which they served. The cards are arranged alphabetically by State; alphabetically by ranch of service; numerically by regiment; then alphabetically by veteran's name.

¹⁵ Major Martin R. Delany and Captain O.S.B. Wall were colored officers who served with the 104th U.S. Colored Infantry regiment.

Borrowed Identity

match the War Department records.¹⁶ In many cases, usually after subsequent searches were made, applications were approved. Other reasons for the disapproval included the lack of sufficient documentation of medical disability. This criterion further reduced the selection from 1,945 to 1,146.

•**Alias Name:** Files were chosen so that only soldiers who changed their names after the war would be selected and used in this analysis. A further review of the T288 and T289 index cards and pension files identified 384, or 33.5 percent of the 1,146 soldiers, had either changed their names or needed to explain why the name on their pension applications differed from the names on their service records.

Finally, a detailed review of the 387 files¹⁷ was conducted to substantiate the changes in names indicated on the T288 and T289 index cards. Based on the information provided in depositions and affidavits by veteran soldiers, family members, and other witnesses for the soldier it is clear that more than one-third of these soldiers had names changed either intentionally and deliberately, or changed due to administrative errors.

It has also been determined that the most prevalent pattern of name change is that slave children were given the surnames of their mothers; and when they left the plantation and enlisted in the army, they took or were given the surnames of their former owners; then, after the war, they took the surnames of their fathers.

Researchers must remain aware that these data are compiled from pension records of servicemen who were born, raised, and served in regiments organized in South Carolina.¹⁸ While the stated pattern of name-changing may be applicable for soldiers who served in regiments organized in other southern states it is expected that they will differ significantly for northern regiments.¹⁹

John Raymond Gourdin is a Senior Fellow with the United States Colored Troops; board member with the United States Colored Troops Living History Association; a retired Marine; and, a reenactor with the 54th Massachusetts Infantry. John resides in Florence, South Carolina with his wife Gloria.

[RETURN to SCUSCT](#)

Last Updated: November 16, 2011

¹⁶ J. Raymond Gourdin. *104th Infantry Regiment - USCT, Colored Civil War Soldiers from South Carolina*. Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1997. p. xv. Based on a detailed review of each pension application filed for service rendered in the 104th Regiments.

¹⁷ Out of the 45.3 percent of the application rejected by the Bureau of Pension about half were rejected due to no listing in the War Departments of service by the applicant.

¹⁸ Each files consisted, typically, of 200 or more pages of documents so nearly 16,000 pages of pension documents were reviewed to complete the analysis.

¹⁹ Based on the data compiled from the 387 files less than one percent of soldiers who served in the 103rd, 104th, and 128th regiments were born outside of the state of South Carolina.