

Richard Wright Newsletter

Volume 12, Numbers 1 & 2

Fall 2004-Winter 2004/ Spring-Summer 2005

An Old Man and A Black Boy: Reimagining Two Richards

by

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Richard Wright wrote in his autobiography, *Black Boy* of his grandfather's military service in the Union Navy during the Civil War. According to Wright, after the war Wilson applied for a service pension. Neither Wilson, nor his widow Maggie Bolden ever received the award. Very little has been written about Wright's grandfather. It would seem, though, that any extension of the available knowledge about Richard Wright's early life and intellectual formation would illuminate the themes and depictions that arise in his artistic product. The relationship between Wright and his maternal grandfather is a case in point. Through the use of recently located documents which constitute the majority of the communication between Richard Wilson and the United States Navy Bureau of Pension I hope to allow for a more refined understanding of two Richards, an old man and a black boy.

Wright's depiction of his grandfather's pension battle takes place in Part one: Southern Night of his autobiography, *Black Boy*. Wright describes his grandfather as, "a tall, black, lean man with a long face, snow-white teeth, and a head of woolly white hair."¹ His most distinguishing characteristic as portrayed by Wright is his isolation. This characterization is drawn both from his own experiences with the man as well as stories that his grandmother told him. Richard Wilson himself offered Wright nothing about his past. Wright explains that his grandfather was never forthcoming about his personal history. It was, he says, "From Granny I learned - over the course of years - that he had been wounded in the Civil War and had never received his disability pension, a fact which

he hugged close to his heart with bitterness. I never heard him speak of white people; I think he hated them too much to talk of them."²

According to the version of these events that Wright presents as taken from his grandmother's descriptions, "in the process of being discharged from the Union Army," his grandfather, Richard Wilson, "had gone to a white officer to seek help in filling out his papers. In filling out the papers, the white officer misspelled Grandpa's name, making him Richard Vinson instead of Richard Wilson."³ He follows this up immediately with an observation that, while placing some responsibility for the mistake with his grandfather, still implicates the domination of whites. Wright posits that, "it was possible that Grandpa's southern accent and his illiteracy made him mispronounce his own name."⁴ It was rumored, "according to Wright, "that the white officer had been a Swede and had a poor knowledge of English. Another rumor had it that the white officer had been a Southerner and had deliberately falsified Grandpa's papers."⁵

The author validates his grandfather's overall innocence and naivete regarding the events, explaining that, "Grandpa did not discover that he had been discharged in the name of Richard Vinson until years later; when he applied to the War Department for a pension, no trace could be found of his ever having served in the Union Army under the name Richard Vinson until years later: when he applied to the War Department for a pension, no trace could be found of his ever having served in the Union Army under the

¹ Wright, Richard, *Black Boy*. Harper Collins (New York 1998), 138.

² *Black Boy*, 138.

³ *Black Boy*, 139.

⁴ *Black Boy*, 139.

⁵ *Black Boy*, 139.

name Richard Wilson.”⁶

Wright’s grandfather was not alone in his necessity to validate his pension claim. Many, many veterans sent copious information and documentation to the federal government to prove their military service, and to validate injuries, infirmities, and disabilities suffered in the line of duty. Wright states that, “For decades a long correspondence took place between Grandpa and the War Department; in letter after letter Grandpa would recount events and conversations always dictating these long accounts to others.”⁷

Wright describes his own great interest in this process. He claims to have asked “endless questions” and to constantly be on alert for new correspondence from the War Department. The arrival of these envelopes took on a ritualistic aspect for the young Wright. He describes the tense interaction between he and his grandfather as he read each new letter, always with the guarded hope that his grandfather’s service and sacrifice would be recognized.

Wright recounts these instances, which probably constituted his most significant interaction with his grandfather, “I would read him the letter - reading slowly and pronouncing each word with extreme care - telling him that his claims for a pension had not been substantiated and that his application had been rejected.”⁸ Apparently seething inside his impassive exterior, his grandfather would, “hiss, ‘it’s them goddamn rebels.’” Wilson would then put on his best and visit the neighborhood friends, having each one confirm what his grandson had read. When he had processed the rejection, adding it to the other indignities that no doubt peppered his lifetime, Wilson would again withdraw to the silent simmer of his “brooding.”

Ultimately, Wright states that he withdrew from his grandfather. The elder Richard’s dark and stormy demeanor eventually stifled whatever bond his grandson felt. And yet, thoughts of his grandfather’s quixotic quest clearly still occupied the mind of the young Richard Wright. Ultimately, “nothing came of it all.” Wright states that, “it was my conviction, supported by no evidence save my own emotional fear of whites, that Grandpa had been cheated out of his pension because of his opposition to white supremacy.”⁹

The brief moments of connection between

⁶ *Black Boy*, 139.

⁷ *Black Boy*, 139.

⁸ *Black Boy*, 139.

⁹ *Black Boy*, 141.

The Richard Wright Newsletter is published annually by:

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**The Richard Wright Circle is supported by the
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grandfather and grandson are presented in *Black Boy* as having had a profound effect on the young author to be. So much was Wright seemingly influenced by his grandfather's obsessive seeking that he spent some of his earliest creative writing mentally composing letters from the pension department. Wright's letters, an approximation of which appears in *Black Boy*, show remorse on the part of the Bureau of Pensions. They clearly realize their error, beg forgiveness, and seek to make amends. Wright's imagination validates his grandfather's claims in a way the U.S. Navy never would. Wright also seems to have participated in the darker fantasies of conspiracy and betrayal surrounding his grandfather.

In any case it seems apparent that Richard Wilson had a great impact on his grandson. Unfortunately, little comment or insight is offered regarding these events in either of the two notable biographies of Richard Wright. Margaret Walker writes in *Daemonic Genius* that, "Wright's grandfathers on both sides were examples of the remnants of slavery."¹⁰ In support of this contention, though, she has very little to offer. She essentially paraphrases Wright in evidence of her claim, stating that, "Grandfather Wilson has served as a Union soldier and had been given an honorable discharge, but he never received his pension."¹¹ Nonetheless, Walker clearly views Wright's elders, these tangible connection to Civil War era America, as significant to the form and content of Wright's artistic expression. Walker does bring to the table, however, a heady contextualization of what life was like in Natchez at that time.

Michel Fabre fares better than Walker in illuminating the person and history of Richard Wilson. His account, taken from interviews with Wright's family and some personal documents in their possession, does offer some information that support's Wright's depiction of Richard Wilson in *Black Boy*. His accounting of Wright's early days and family life is drawn from interviews with family members, friends, and a few documents in their possession.

According to Fabre's sources, Richard Wilson was, "born in slavery March 21, 1847, on a plantation near Woodville, Mississippi, in Wilkenson County, belonging to a certain John Charles Alexander. At the age of eighteen, he escaped from his master and

crossed the Southern lines with a band of slaves in order to join the Union Army. At Cairo, Illinois he was authorized to enlist for three years in the Federal Navy and so served in the Mississippi Flotilla from April 22 to July 27, 1865, as a landsman on the U.S.S. General Lyons, then at Memphis Hospital before returning to civilian life with an honorable discharge."¹² As for Richard Wilson's interaction with Wright, Fabre explains that, "A half-century later, when his grandson came to live with him, Richard Wilson, who seemed little more than an irascible and crippled old man."¹³

If we are to accurately and productively assess the relationship between these two Richards, if we are to understand the historical events that undergird a significant passage in Richard Wright's autobiography, we must put meat on the bones of the skeletal account provided by Walker and Fabre. Fortunately, if one knows where to look, a wealth of historical information awaits an interested researcher.

Like all bureaucracies, the U.S. Bureau of Pensions makes a habit of collecting documents. Every scrap of paper submitted as part of a pension claim was maintained. Today such documents, relating to Civil War veterans, are housed at the National Archives in Washington, DC. Research conducted there reveals a Richard Wilson from Mississippi, who also served under the name Richard Vincent. This corresponds with the confusion over his Grandfather's name as described by Wright. However, that is where the similarity between the account provided by Wright and the account supported by the historical documentation diverge. These two tales will not meet again until their conclusion. In neither the author's account nor the government's does Richard Wilson alias Richard Vincent ever receive his military pension.

What follows are significant excerpts from documents submitted by Wilson, or produced by the Departments of the Navy and the Bureau of Pension in the administration of Wilson's pension application. Because the duration and character of this interaction is so essential to Wright's account of his experience with his grandfather I have endeavored to maintain an inclusive narrative of the interaction between Wilson

¹⁰ Walker, Margaret. *Richard Wright Daemonic Genius*. Amistad (New York 1993), 15.

¹¹ Walker, 15.

¹² Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Ilni Books (Urbana 1993) 2.

¹³ Fabre, 2.

and the Pension Bureau. What emerges from these documents is a clearer picture of this essential figure in Richard Wright's early life. What we can interpret from this new information exists as an open challenge to which this paper in part responds.

The documents submitted by Wilson in the course of his pension application contain a treasure-trove of new information about his life in Mississippi and illuminate the bureaucratic conflicts that prevented the award of his pension. It appears that Richard Wilson, Wright's maternal grandfather, began applying for his military service pension in the mid-1880s. According to the date of his original pension application, Wilson first applied for his pension at the age of forty, in January of 1897.

On his January 8, 1897 "Declaration of Invalid Pension" Wilson listed his residence as Natchez, in Adams County, Mississippi. He claimed to have enrolled on September 1, 1864 on the U.S.S. General Lyons and later discharged at Mound City, Illinois in August of 1865. In an Affidavit filed by the claimant, Wilson, on October 2, 1896, he states that, "I am the identical person who served under the name of Richard Vincent alias Richard Wilson, U.S. Navy - on Steamer General Lyons - that I have not served in any military or navy service prior to April 22 '65 or since my discharge July 27, 1865...that said testimony was written in my presence only from my oral statements..."

In a January 29, 1897 letter from Wilson's legal representative, claims solicitor Nathan Bickford, to the U.S. Court of Claims in Washington, DC, Bickford states, "Your Attention is called to the case of Richard Wilson alias Vincent, who served as 1st Class Boy on the General Lyon, U.S. Navy and whose P.O. address is and has been, so far as I know, Natchez, Mississippi." Bickford's letter goes on to highlight some confusion as to what the correct claim number is for Wilson, as there seems, already, to be some confusion in his correspondence with the Pension Bureau.

A request to review the files of the service record of Richard Wilson was made on January 28, 1897 by D.L. Murphy, the "Honorable auditor for the Navy Department." In a February 4, 1897 letter from the Bureau of Pensions, the auditor on the case states that, "the name of Richard Wilson is not found on the rolls of the Gen. Lyon from Oct. 1863 to Aug. 1865. The Department of the Navy on February 10, 1897 requesting that they provide a "descriptive list and his-

tory of service of Richard Wilson alias Richard Vincent." A report was returned from the Surgeon-General of the U.S. Navy on February 17, 1897 indicating that a soldier named Richard Wilson had served on the General Lyons and that information relating to him was available in their medical records. Also included in the report was the presence of the soldier, Richard Wilson at the navy hospital and on the hospital ship Red Rover.

According to a Pension Bureau processing form, on April 6, 1897, thirty-two years, almost to the day, since his discharge Richard Wilson was denied his pension for the first time. The rejection was on the grounds that Wilson "did not serve 90 days during his rebellion." He and his family would seek to overturn that decision for the better part of another thirty years.

The first of many subsequent "Declaration of Pension" forms was filed by Wilson on November 22, 1898. In this document Wilson again claims military service as a sailor on the U.S.S. General Lyons beginning April 22, 1865. He claims to have been honorably discharged at Mound City, Illinois on July 27, 1865 and, "That while a member of the organization aforesaid, in the service and line of duty at or near Mound City about the 15th day of July, 1865, he contracted failure of eyesight and cramps, treated at Memphis in the Hospital by Surgeons Dr. Pinkney and Dr. Graham." Wilson states that prior to and subsequent to his term of service he worked as a farmer. His stated age at the time of this application was 50 years old. It is worth noting that one of the signed witnesses of this document was J.M. Bolden, clearly a relative of Wilson's wife, Maggie, with whom Wilson claimed 30 years of acquaintance.

On December 13, 1898, the Bureau of pensions made a request of B.D. Watkins, a Natchez, Mississippi, physician to examine Richard Wilson, to "look for and rate all disabilities found." The letter makes note of Wilson's claimed disabilities. In response, Watkins filed a "Surgeon's Certificate" detailing his examination of Wilson. The report, filed March 8, 1898 certifies that three physicians examined Wilson. The doctors note the infirmities noted by Wilson stating, "Eye sight has been failing ever since he was in service and trouble was originated by glare of sun on water, Has had cramps in feet and legs for 15 years, does not know causes - Has no regular work - makes on average about half a day." They note, "Upon examination we find the following objective conditions..."

height, five feet eight inches; weight 128 pounds; age 51 years." They further note, "poor muscular development" and "poor nutrition" with "skin relaxed - hands not much calloused, Tongue and teeth good." In conclusion, "we fail to find any evidence of trouble in legs or anything pointing to trouble alleged" and that the, "claimant uses glasses which improve vision - we fail to find trouble sufficient to rate." Finally, "In spite of failure to find any actual trouble specific in character, claimant is generally weak and debilitated and we consider that he by reason of this is not able to do more than half days work - we find no evidence of vicious habits."

An affidavit was filed by Richard Wilson April 5, 1899 in which Wilson states, "After my discharge from the navy service of the United States I moved back to Wilkinson County, Mississippi. I never had a physician to examine and prescribe for me during my residence in Wilkinson County but used patent medicine bought from the drug store in Woodville, Miss. I moved to Natchez, Miss. in 1894 and after I had lived here awhile, the cramps were so severe that I called in Dr. Banks and he has been my physician ever since."

Edward Bolden filed an Affidavit April 7, 1899 on behalf of Richard Wilson. Bolden states,

I am personally acquainted with the claimant herein and have known him for 31 years. I first became acquainted with him in Wilkinson County, Mississippi in the year 1868. From 1868 to 1894 when he moved away from Wilkinson County I was a near neighbor of his and saw him often every year. During this time he was an unhealthy man, as he was sick a good part of the time and complained of his eyes and severe cramps in his feet, legs and the lower part of abdomen and hips. From my acquaintance with him my opinion is that from the time I first met him until he moved away from Wilkinson County where I saw him every few days, he was incapacitated for the performance of labor at least two thirds. While I now live in Wilkinson County and the claimant lives in Natchez, Miss., I believe he is incapacitated to the same extent if not worse than when he moved to Natchez in 1894. I have seen him twice since he

moved to Natchez and I have every reason to believe and I do believe that physically he is in bad condition.

On September 9, 1899 Wilson was again, "approved for rejection" by the Pension Bureau examiners. This time, the reason stated for the rejection was that, "no disability from alleged failure of sight and cramps since date of filing" could be established. In response, a "Physician's Affidavit" was filed by Wilson's local doctor, A.W. Dumas of Natchez Mississippi on September 10, 1900. Also a "General Affidavit" was filed January 13, 1902 by Simon Williams on behalf of Richard Wilson. Williams, a 60 year old resident of Natchez, Mississippi, states that he was, "a neighbor of claimant" and "worked with him prior to Dec. 1898 - that he complained of defective sight of both eyes..." In general, Williams echoes the sentiments of others who had testified on Wilson's behalf to verify his medical claims. Marcus Parker, 70 also of Natchez, Mississippi, filed an additional, virtually identical "General Affidavit" on the same date. His account of Wilson's afflictions is much the same as Williams's.

Wilson filed an additional "Declaration for Pension" March 14, 1904. Accompanying the declaration was a March 30, 1904 "Physician's Affidavit" from Wilson's doctor A. W. Dumas of Natchez. In response to these materials, the Commissioner of Pensions sent a letter to Wilson's representative; Nathan Bickford dated April 4, 1904. He stated, "You are informed that the application filed by you march 21, 1904, on behalf of the claimant in the above entitled claim for pension under Act of June 27, 1890, warrants no action for the reason it is a duplicate of the claim filed January 16, 1897, which was rejected April 13, 1897, on the ground that the claimant did not serve ninety days during the War of the rebellion."

Bickford responded with an April 23, 1904 letter of appeal. Bickford states that,

This claimant enlisted on the U.S.S. 'General Lyon's April 22, 1865 and was discharged July 27, 1865. I am advised by the Chief of Navigation Bureau, War Department, that during this period the "General Lyons" was attached to the Mississippi Flotilla. The Mississippi Flotilla was distinctively a war organization, organized

and maintained for the suppression of the rebellion and for no other purposes. The claimant's service having been on a vessel attached to the Mississippi Flotilla, this appeal is taken on the ground that the Commissioner of Pensions is in error in holding this service was not "during the War of the Rebellion.

An extended response was provided in a subsequent letter to Bickford dated February 25, 1905 from the Pension Bureau Assistant Secretary. He states that Wilson, "enlisted April 22, 1865 in a loyal state (Illinois), and although he served for 90 days, his service cannot be considered as having been rendered in the war of the rebellion." The letter goes on to clarify that, "the claim was not rejected because the claimant failed to serve 90 days as appears to have been the view taken by his attorney. It was rejected on the ground that his service was not rendered during the war of rebellion or could not be so considered.

"The Department holds and has through a long line of decisions, that enlistments in the loyal states after April 13, 1865 cannot be deemed enlistments in or for the war of the rebellion, and any service rendered under such enlistment will be presumed not to have been rendered in the war of the rebellion, and to Establish to the contrary the claimant will be required to show affirmatively that his service was rendered in direct connection with active military duty in aid of suppressing the rebellion.

"The claimant enlisted on April 22, 1865, in the State of Illinois, which was a loyal state, and there is no proof showing affirmatively that his service was rendered in direct connection with active duty in aid of suppressing the rebellion: The claim was properly rejected..."

A "Physician's Affidavit" was filed July 13, 1906 by A. W. Dumas on behalf of Richard Wilson restating Wilson's medical conditions as previously described and again validated by Dumas.

Richard Wilson again filed a "Declaration for Pension" on July 21, 1905 claiming rheumatism, which developed from his military service. The claim was rejected on August 7 based on a lack of evidence.

The commissioner of pensions responded to Bickford's submission of the doctor's testimony on July 28, 1905. The letter states, "you are informed that the testimony of Dr. A. W. Dumas, recently filed, does not warrant the reopening of the claim for the

reason that it does not go to the ground of rejection."

A follow-up letter sent to Bickford by the commissioner on August 17, 1905 repeats the reasons for the rejection of Wilson's claim. The letter states, "that the above-entitled claim for pension, under the general law, is rejected on the ground of no record or other evidence showing origin in service of alleged rheumatism or existence at discharge or for thereafter, and claimant's inability during his naval service."

On the 10th of February 1906 Richard Wilson provided an affidavit as to the "Origin of Disability" Wilson testified that he served as a Landsman on the U.S.S. Gunboat General Lyons. He further states that, "I served as a "Landsman" on the U.S. Gunboat "General Lyons" for ninety days or more and was honorably discharged at Mound City, Pulaski Co. Ill. The Captain in charge of this vessel was a white man whose name was R.E. Burks, Chas. Dowin was paymaster and a man whose name was Hamilton was the engineer." He continues,

I remember distinctly the names of the Surgeons who treated me while I was in the Hospital at Memphis, Tenn. Their names were Dr. Pinkney and Dr. Graham...I do not remember whether they wore U.S. uniforms or not. When I has sufficiently recovered the attack of rheumatism I was sent to Mound City where I was again put on the vessel. I continued staying on the vessel until I was discharged, though I was not able to perform my duties...I can't remember the name of the Surgeon who was on the vessel. The first physician who treated me for rheumatism after I was mustered out of the U.S. service was a Dr. Walds who practiced in Woodville, Wilkinson Co., Miss. and who is now dead, having died about one year ago...I moved from Woodville to Natchez (where I am now living) and never has a physician wait on or prescribe for me again, until I had Dr. Banks. I think I had lived here two or three years before Dr. Banks called on me. I moved from Woodville to Natchez about eleven years ago. I used patent medicines after Dr. Walds quit treating me and have called on Dr. Banks and asked him to examine me, but he refused, saying that he was a member of the Board of Examining

Surgeons and could not make a statement in my case on account of same. I have also been treated by Dr. Dumas and Dr. Sessions for rheumatism, though these treatments have been in recent years and if the statement of either of the two last named would be of any service I expect I could get same... The General Lyons rant in connection with the Nashville from Cairo, Ill. to New Orleans, La., and took no part in battles, having carried munitions of War. Henry Hamilton whose affidavit I send herewith was on the vessel that I was. Jack Walker who is now dead and who resided in Natchez was also on the same vessel, and many others whose names and residences I have forgotten. When I was discharged a discharge certificate was given to me. I placed it in the hands of Col. Preston who was stationed in Natchez and have never seen or heard of it since. I was born in Woodville, Mississippi. I don't know whether the Drs. who treated men in Memphis are living or dead and I haven't the means to go there and find out and don't suppose either would remember me unless they has kept a record of treatment. I served the U.S. faithfully and conscientiously and do respectfully ask that my name be placed on the pension rolls of the United States and if the evidence filed is not sufficient to complete my case I respectfully ask that the same be placed in the hands of a special examiner to examine my case on its merits. Since my service I have been almost invalid and have not improved physically.

On February 6, 1906 Henry Hamilton filed an affidavit as to the "Origin of Disability" on behalf of Richard Wilson, 65, of Kinstry, Mississippi who served as Q.M. (Quarter Master on U.S.S. General Lyons. Hamilton states,

I was a shipmate on the general Lyons and was personally and intimately acquainted with Richard Wilson who served under the name of Richard Vincent and suffered with rheumatism while so serving and who became so incapacitated for the performance of his duty that he was taken to Memphis,

Tenn., and placed in the Hospital for treatment. I didn't help carry the claimant off the General Lyons when we landed at Memphis but I saw my comrades carry him off. He had to be carried because he was not able to walk, being drawn to some extent from the effects of rheumatism, the disease in which he was suffering from.

The claimant was serving on the aforesaid vessel when I enlisted but was apparently, well, healthy, strong and showed no sign whatever of being effected with rheumatism and never complained of having same or at least I never heard him complain nor did he show any sign of rheumatism from some time after I enlisted. I don't remember just how long it was but it was only a short time I know. He became so drawn and helpless that he had to be moved around by his comrades.

This vessel traveled between Mound City to New Orleans and the claimant was removed from the vessel to the Hospital in Memphis while we were en route from New Orleans to Mound City. I saw no more of the claimant until after the close of the war and he was still complaining of the aforementioned disease. I don't know what gave him rheumatism unless it was caused from heavy lifting and handling heavy freight, which he would have to lift and roll from one boat to another and to or on landings. I was with him a great-deal from the time that I enlisted until the time he was taken to the Hospital and know that he did not complain or suffer until some little time after I was mustered in and I also know that he suffered much during the latter part of his service...

Other materials submitted include a "Report of Medical Survey" date July 26th, 1865 was filed from U.S. Navy Hospital Ship Red Rover to which Wilson was transferred.

The report, addressed to Acting rear Admiral S. P. states, "Sir: In Obedience to your order of July 26th we have held a careful survey on Richard Vincent. Sands native of Miss. aged 18 shipped (blank), and beg to leave report as follows: 1. DISEASE: Phthisis Pulmonalis 2. DURATION: uncertain 3. ORIGIN:

There is no evidence that his Disease originated in the line of Duty. 4. RECOMMENDATION: We recommend his Discharge from the Service."

The report was forwarded, presumably along with "Vincent" himself from the Red Rover, to U.S. Navy Hospital Pinkney located at Memphis, Tennessee. Submitted in April of 1906 are hospital records relating to Wilson's claim. Two "Hospital Tickets" were included from Wilson's military service. The tickets were submitted on June 3, 1865 and Jul. 7, 1865 respectively. These records of a hospital stay by Wilson were from the U.S. Navy Hospital "Pinkney" (quotes in original) which was headed by the "Surgeon of the Fleet" Ninian Pinkney. Pinkney was an illustrious figure in Civil War histories and went on to other public service after war's end. On Wilson's June 3, 1865 review (submitted to Dr. William Grier) at the hospital, Navy Assistant Surgeon, Henry C. Eckstein includes these notes, "Richard Wilson, 1ds. At 17-years, Born Miss. shipped at Cairo, Diarrhoea, Chronica. Admitted to the List May 1st 1865, Complaining of acute pain in Bowels and frequent alvine-dejections, treatment, consisted in the administration of Calomel and Opium & Tannin & Opium with only temporary advantage. Disease originated in line of duty - through climatic influences."

A subsequent review conducted July 7, 1865 (submitted to Ninian Pinkney) by Navy Surgeon, William Grier, includes these notes, "Richard Wilson, 1ds. at 17 years, native Miss. Admitted into the hospital from the U.S.S. General Lyons, June 3, 1865 suffering from phthisis pul. There is no evidence that disease originated in line of duty." These documents were received by O.W. & N. Division April 3, 1906.

On April 25, 1906 a letter was sent to Richard Wilson by the Commissioner of Pensions discounting the utility of the affidavit filed by Henry Hamilton. Again, Wilson's pension application was denied, "for the reason that lay testimony cannot be accepted to establish origin in the service of disabilities." In response to this rejection of his attempt to re-open his case, Wilson again sought out the expert testimony of Dr. A. W. Dumas. On July 13, 1906, Dumas again filed an affidavit supporting Wilson's disability claims, regarding him as, "incapacitated for the performance of manual labor."

The pension department refused to consider reopening Wilson's case on the basis of the Dumas affidavit. The rejection is noted on a July 26, 1906

"Brief for Reopening."

A new "Declaration of Invalid Pension" was filed by Wilson on August 18, 1906. In this declaration he states that he was born in March 1847. The office of the Commissioner of Pensions was no more receptive to Wilson's new claim than it had been to his previous attempts. The letter, sent to Wilson on September 28, 1908 notes that, "no action is warranted on the application filed by you August 21, 1908, for the reason that it is a duplicate of a prior claim, which was rejected April 13, 1897, on the ground that you did not serve ninety days during the War of the rebellion."

Wilson would no doubt have been agitated by this shifting of the argument. It had, of course been years since he had encountered the issue of whether he served ninety days in the War. He had spent the last several years trying to provide adequate evidence of his medical conditions, and their origins in his Naval service. In all fairness, Wilson nor his lawyer, Bickford, had ever really responded to the policy of the pension Bureau to disallow pensions for men serving in loyal states after April 1, 1865. It should not be surprising that this rationale for rejection was resurrected by the pension department. In terms of the events described in *Black Boy* it is no doubt just this sort of action on the part of the government that would give rise to the obsessive paranoia that Wright conveys about his grandfather.

Wilson's reply came one month later on October 30, 1908. In his letter to the Bureau of pensions he states,

"If your records show that I did not serve ninety days in the late War of the Rebellion there must indeed be a discrepancy between your records and my discharge as my discharge shows that I served ninety-six days which if correct, and it indeed is, entitles me to a pension...I do not persist in trying to secure a pension by using unfair, unjust or underhanded methods but simply strive to be placed on the pension rolls of this great Union from the fact that I honestly and candidly believe that I am entitled to a pension, that I deserve a pension, and I assure you that a pension would be to me a God-send as I am totally blind in my right eye, a great sufferer of chronic rheumatism and am totally incapacitated for

the performance of manual labor.

"Now in conclusion I shall plead with you in the name of my Maker to open my case and give me a chance to prove to you that I am entitled to a pension if my memory is correct and figures are correct. If in the event you have enough evidence to reopen and continue my claim I would be only too glad if you would refer to a Special Examiner that he might examine and look into the most minute details of my claim for I truly believe that his verdict would be in the affirmative. I ask that you do not cast me aside but let me hear from you at your earliest convenience. I remain very respectfully your humble servant, Richard Vincent."

The reply from the pension bureau was no more sympathetic than it had been previously. Wilson was advised, in their letter of November 12, 1908, that,

"...the Department holds that enlistments in the loyal states after April 13, 1865, cannot be deemed enlistments in or for the war of the rebellion, and any service rendered under such enlistment will be presumed not to have been rendered in the war of the rebellion. It appears from the official records that you enlisted April 22, 1865, in the state of Illinois, a loyal state, and there is no proof showing affirmatively that your service was rendered in connection with active duty in aid of suppressing the rebellion. The rejection of your claim April 13, 1897, on the ground that you did not serve ninety days during the war of the rebellion was proper, and is adhered to."

Wilson renewed his quest for satisfaction from the government by once again filing for his pension on May 10, 1910 under the auspices of a new and more expansive pension act which had been enacted February 6, 1907. At the time, he was sixty-three. Wilson included, for the first time, with the application, his personal copy of his discharge certificate from the Union Navy. This document remains in the pension file to this day.

Soldiers and their families routinely sent all types of materials in to prove their terms of service.

Often included among the standard forms used by the federal government are personal diaries, family bibles, birth and marriage certificates, as well as gruesome photographs to show wounds and disabilities incurred during the war. Also included in Wilson's application materials is his most elaborate affidavit to date. He states as follows,

"I was born a slave in 1847, March 21st, in Wilkinson County, Miss. As a slave I was owned by Mr. John C. Alexander. At the age of eighteen years I was regularly enlisted as a Landsman on the United States Ship "General Lyons" which was anchored at Cairo, Illinois. The date of enlistment was April 22 1865 and was for three years, however I only served ninety-seven days as I was given an honorable discharge which I kept until some years ago. I gave it to Colonel Preston at Natchez, Miss. and he in some way lost or mislaid it, for he never could find my said original discharge paper after that. I then made application and secured a Certificate of Discharge which I submit here with together with my application for pension under the act of February 6th 1907.

He continues,

"During my enlistment and while in the service on the aforementioned vessel I was stricken down with rheumatism which necessitated my being removed to the Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. I can't now recall the exact period of time that I was in the hospital, but my recollection is that it wasn't very long for when I was dismissed from said hospital I immediately returned to the "General Lyons" and again took up my duties and served faithfully and conscientiously until I was Honorably Discharged at Mound City, Illinois, July 27th 1865."

As for his military service, Wilson states,

"When I enlisted I was thoroughly examined by the surgeons who accepted me and pronounced me a sound, healthy man. Indeed they made no mistake, for at that time and previous eighteen years of my life, I

was hail, hearty, sound, and healthy. I have always attributed my illness which has since caused me great suffering and incapacitated me to a great extent from doing manual labor and earning for myself a lively hood, but on the other hand am compelled, and am wholly dependent upon my children for support, all of which is due to being affected with rheumatism as I am to my Army life, for while I was in service I was exposed to the weather a great deal and then one of my chief duties was scrubbing the deck of the vessel and numerous other parts, which duty necessitated my standing in water each day while thus scrubbing..."

Wilson goes on to restate his dates of service as indicated on his discharge papers and to name numerous sailors who served along side him on the "General Lyon." Wilson continues,

"Having submitted my certificate of Discharge which I presume should be accepted as proof positive, together with this, my own affidavit which I have endeavored to explain in detail, I trust that you, the Honorable Commissioner will again look in to the merits of my case and deal with it accordingly. Thanking you in advance for a careful and considerate perusal of my claim, for indeed it means much to me. I am your obedient servant."

On May 31, 1912 Wilson was again rejected by the pension department. In their responses they cited the same reasons as in his previous rejection.

On September 10, 1912 Wilson persistently filed a new "Declaration for Pension," as another Act expanding pension claims had been enacted in May of 1912. There appears to be a long period of inaction after Wilson's filing of a new claim. However, in May of 1913 the correspondence again picks up steam. On May 9, 1913 internal correspondence between the Navy and the Pension Department shows an effort to verify the claims in Wilson's affidavit. Attention is giving to verify the service of the sailors and doctors named in the affidavit, conceivably so that they might be interviewed.

On June 11, 1913 a letter was sent to Wilson

asking him to restate several of the facts of his case including if he had ever before applied for a pension, why he enlisted under the name Richard Vincent, the names of soldiers with whom he served, and any concrete evidence he might be able to provide as to his date of birth. The letter concludes that, if the claimant is unable to furnish any of the evidence indicated he should state that fact, and the reasons why he is unable to furnish it, under oath. This must have been a frustrating letter for Wilson to receive. Wilson had of course previously submitted all of this information in sworn affidavits. His efforts to negotiate the federal bureaucracy continued.

Wilson responded on June 25, 1913. He stated that all requested papers had been previously sent to the pension bureau, which, "I trust will be all O.K. I enlisted as Richard Vincent my correct names are Richard Wilson. But that's the way they enlisted me." Once again Wilson left his affairs in the hands of the government. Another letter was sent by Wilson on July 8, 1913. Wilson says, "I have had no further reply to my said pending claim, and I now write you and ask that a report and settlement in matter of said claim be given me..."

On June 9, 1913, Richard Wilson provided additional personal information to the pension department relating to his marital status and his family. Wilson indicates that he is a married man and that his wife's maiden name was "Maggie Bolden." They were married in Wilkinson County by Reverend J.H. Harris. Wilson indicates that he has never previously been married. He also provides the names of his children with Maggie Bolden. He lists them as "Thomas Wilson born February 1872, Clark Wilson born March 1876, Ella Wilson born October 1883, Maggie Wilson born June 1886, and Addie Wilson born 1889.

The Bureau of Pensions responded in a letter dated July 29, 1913. Their reply indicates that they are waiting for a statement under oath as previously requested. Until such evidence is filed, the claim cannot be processed.

On August 11, 1913 Tanner Duncan appeared before a notary public in Natchez to provide the requested testimony. He spoke as to the severity and origin of Wilson's disabilities. Duncan claimed to have served alongside Wilson on the "General Lyons." On September 12, 1913 Duncan and an associate of Wilson's from Adam's county, Matthew Evans submitted an additional affidavit.

On September 17, 1913 the Navy sent a letter to Wilson, as usual, through his claims representative, Nathan Bickford. The letter acknowledges the new fee agreement between Bickford and Wilson and requests that the claimant, Wilson, "should state under oath whether he ever applied for pension prior to his January 1897 claim." One can imagine Wilson's consternation at being again asked to document materials that the Bureau of Pension no doubt already had in their files. The letter goes on to list a series of other information that Wilson should provide, if able. Frankly, the requests are merely a bureaucratic echo of previous letters. It concludes noting that if Wilson cannot provide documentation in the manner requested he should, "furnish instead thereof the name of the town or township, county and state in which he resided during the years 1850 and 1860, and the names in full of his parents, or...the names of the persons with whom he did live during these years."

A piece of Pension Bureau internal correspondence dated September 23, 1913 states that Wilson, "had a certificate of service from which much of the data that he gave was furnished, and much of the data to have been "manufactured" - He gives the wrong disability in his O.S. claim - Calls for prior claim, names of officers, and proof of birth have been made three times with no satisfactory results...Shall claim.. be reopened and all prepared sor Spl. Ex. or shall pending claim be submitted for rejection." Correspondence dated October 7, 1913 also suggests that Wilson be rejected on the ground that Wilson had not, "established identity with Richard Vincent." An October 8, 1913 document from the Bureau of Pension Board of Review recommends a special examination of the case.

On October 24, 1913 a request was sent from the Bureau of Pensions to the Chief of the Navy Department Bureau of navigation for documents relating to Wilson's claim. Of particular interest are documents relating to Wilson's residence and any evidence linking Richard Wilson to the "sailor of record" Richard Vincent. The reply, dated November 5, 1913 states that the paperwork in question, "in case of the name change from Richard Vincent to Richard Wilson appear to have been mislaid or filed in the wrong place and cannot at this time be located." Wilson's appeal for special examination was not off to an auspicious start.

Richard Wilson again submitted a "Claimants

Affidavit" on November 10, 1913 for the purposes of clarifying, as was requested, the date of his initial pension claim. He states that to the best of his knowledge he made his application through a Colonel Preston in 1897. Subsequently, "I turned my claim over Nathan Bickford of Washington, DC...Bickford is the only attorney...I have had to prosecute my claim for a pension."

A pension bureau Board of Review document from November 13, 1913 calls for the Auditor of the Navy department to locate and compile any paperwork relating to the claim including bounty, back pay, and allowances that may appear on the sailor's account. The response from the auditor is dated November 19, 1913. The reply re-states Wilson's service records in accordance with what has already been described. Evidence verifying the soldier's identity is requested to determine if there are any existing favorable balances on this account. The request was forwarded by the Auditors office to the Treasury Department, which concluded that no "prize money was awarded to Richard Vincent" and that "no claim for bounty or arrears of pay has been received subsequent to January 1, 1898 and it is impractical to search the records prior to that date, unless the date of filing the claim is known."

The Board of Review of the pension department continued their internal correspondence on December 5, 1913. At that time, the record indicates, Wilson's claim was officially referred to the Chief of the Special examination Division in order to "determine identity of the claimant with the sailor of mine identity of the claimant with the sailor of record." The Chief of the Board of Review issued a report to claims reviewers, Roberts (Reviewer) and Neilson (Re-reviewer).

The report verifies certain elements of Wilson's account and casts doubts on others. The Colonel Preston described by Wilson is identified as "Simon W. Preston of Natchez, Mississippi, who was Colonel of the 55th U.S.C. Inf." The board chief also states that, "the question of identity does not seem to be in much doubt, the sailor having been known in service under both names, Wilson and Vincent." He further states that, "the question of primary importance seems to be whether this claimant had a service prior to April 22, 1865. He finds it questionable that Wilson claims to have enlisted as Landsman, rather than a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Class Boy as would have been more common. Finally, he seems perplexed as to why Wilson a, "na-

tive of Mississippi proceeded to Mound City, Illinois, to enlist when there was ample opportunity for him to enlist in the navy on the Mississippi river along the shores of his native state." A written acknowledgment of Wilson's referral was sent from R.E. Roberts, the primary reviewer on the case, dated December 10, 1913.

Another request was submitted to the Treasury Department through the Auditor of the Navy, this time requesting information on any claims or settlement agreement made relating to Wilson in 1867 or 1868. No record of any such payment was found according to the response from the Treasury Department dated January 7, 1914.

Also submitted on January 7, 1914 was a new affidavit from Richard Wilson. He restates the details of his case and goes into some detail about his family life, answering the questions recently raised by the bureau in regards to his parents. Wilson states, "I was born in Wilkinson County, State of Mississippi March 1st 1847, my father was named Bill Wilson; my mother was named Tomsana Wilson; my mother and father belonged to the late John Alexander, being his slaves; we were on his plantation during the years 1850 to 1860." Wilson then asserts that he left the plantation in 1865 and made his way to Cairo, Illinois where he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. From this point, the affidavit is much the same as his previous testimony.

Another affidavit was filed by Wilson on January 19, 1914. Accompanying the testimony was, according to the notary who transcribed the materials, "a copy of a Family Record printed by the American Citizen Co., in the City of Chicago, in the year 1899, in which appears the dates of birth of said Richard Wilson, his wife, Maggie Bolden, and of their nine children, and which record was transferred to said Richard Wilson, by Thomas B Wilson, of Jackson, Miss., his son, who was the agent for the work: "The Life and Merits of Admiral Dewey," in which the above stated family record appeared; the record reads: "Richard Wilson was born in Wilkinson County, Miss., near Woodville, on Percy's Creek, Mississippi, March 21st, A.D. 1847...The record was made over from an old Family History kept by his former Master, John C. Alexander, long since deceased, his death occurring in the year 1868, on Percy's Creek, in Wilkinson County, Mississippi."

On January 23, 1914, R.E. Roberts again indicates to the pension bureau that Wilson's claim has

been approved for review by special examiner. By this time it appears that Robert's review is well underway. He states that, "this action is not taken on the solicitation of a third party, but is based solely on the merits of the claim."

On January 31, 1914, the Special Examination Division made a request of the Record Division to provide current addresses for several sailors and other naval personnel of whom Wilson had spoken. This information relating to Wilson's "officers and comrades" was provided in a reply dated February 3, 1914. Further documentation was provided in a Library report from the Bureau of Pensions dated February 6, 1914. The report provided historical information about the ships on which Wilson served, including the dates of his service and the complement of officers on board. The report was prepared for the use of the Special Examiners.

The official certificate providing "Notice of Special Examination was filed February 18, 1914. This certificate, approved by Wilson via his mark, initiates an investigation of his claim. The examination is to proceed with the gathering of additional information in Natchez, Mississippi "and elsewhere if necessary."

Wilson's case was then placed in the queue of claims to be reviewed by the Special Examiners. Wilson, through his representative Nathan Bickford, had finally succeeded in having his claim turned over to the special examiner. Certainly, Wilson must have been feeling some renewed hope. He had always maintained in his correspondence with the Bureau of Pension that, if a full hearing were given to his case, his claim would be validated. Wilson's waiting was not over. An April 22, 1914 letter to Wilson states that his case, "has not reached in its turn on the special examiner's docket, but the inquiry will be taken up at the earliest date practicable."

It appears that Wilson's claim was finally submitted for review by the Special Examiner on June 27, 1914. On July 2, 1914 a request was made by the Bureau of Pension to the Bureau of navigation to provide documentation of the, "whereabouts of the 'General Lyons' from April 14 to 24, 1865, and whether at any time during that period it engaged the enemy." A similar request was made for information relating to any payments made to Wilson as a result of his military service.

The first request was answered on July 7, 1914.

The deck log of the *General Lyons* indicates, "that said vessel was lying at Mound City Navy Yard from April 14th to 24th, 1865. The records do not show that the 'General Lyons' was in any engagement with the enemy during that time." The second question, that of any payments due Wilson, was answered two days later on July 9, 1914. According to the naval Auditor, it appears that during Wilson's service on the *General Lyons*, "he drew clothing and small stores amounting to \$57.35 but no money."

On July 20, 1914 a report from H.M. Vandervort was filed with the Board of Review. Vandervort was the "Reviewer" of Wilson's claim. In this report, he states,

"I regret the length of my presentation of this case but the loss of papers in the Navy Department necessitates the analysis...It is believed that identity is far from proved in this claim. So much is lacking, the discrepancies so many and of such quality, that doubt is raised, whether the claimant was more than a civilian employee or a hanger on, only sufficiently conversant with the actual service rendered that in his attempt to get on the pension rolls, discloses on close observation an attempt to impersonate the man who rendered the service."

Vandervort continues,

"Now let us take up the claimant: - He claims to have entered the service on board the Chillicothe at Ft. Adams, Miss, 'in May or June or maybe March,' transferred to the *General Lyons* anchored at Fort Adams, and made a quick trip to Mound City, (engaging the enemy en route), where he was given a thorough physical examination and equipped with a uniform and a sword, etc."

Vandervort also contends that Wilson,

"fails to give a satisfactory reason for the assumption of an alias or having it forced on him, or why he was taken all the way from Ft. Adams Miss, to Mound City, before perfecting his enlistment. Attention is invited to the report of July 14, 1914 that at

the time the claimant alleges he was en route on the *General Lyons*, that the vessel was lying at Mound City Navy Yard and had not engaged the enemy as claimed..."

Furthermore, Wilson's,

"statements as to his whereabouts and disabilities do not agree with the records. He twice emphatically states under oath before Spl. Examiner Steed that he did not serve and was never on the *Great Western*, (an important vessel in those days) or the *Red Rover*. It naturally follows that he then cannot be the sailor of record on these boats, and it does not appear proper or wise to force him upon them when he so emphatically swears that he was not there... He further states that he drilled daily with swords, when a fact as shown by witness John Lowe, Carpenter's Mate on the *General Lyons*, (Spl. Ex. report 3 pg 3) that the Negroes were on the lower deck, did no drilling, and that none of the men on the boat were armed..."

Finally, Vandervort takes issue with the Medical problems claimed by Wilson and their conflict with naval records, "He claims that he was disabled and treated for rheumatism which not on record, and even were he the Richard Wilson shown in reports, it's strange he does not remember the diarrhea and treatment thereof for a month. On the other hand he does not remember having any bowel trouble."

Vandervort's estimation of Wilson's claim is extremely bleak. A different opinion was voiced in the report of Calvin Neilson, the secondary reviewer of Wilson's case. In his report, filed July 21, 1914, he states,

"I cannot concur in rejection of this claim as I am satisfied that claimant is the man who served in the navy under the name Richard Vincent as alleged. His statement as to age and birthplace, names of affiliations, place of enlistment, agree in respects with the record and we have the testimony of one shipmate who on special examination positively identifies him...It is not strange that he only remembers the *General Lyon* as that was

the vessel on which he actually served. The Great Western was simply the receiving ship and he was on it only three days. The Pinkney was the hospital boat and he was sent to the red Rover only a short time before discharge. I am willing to accept identity and admit the claim."

A summary report was submitted to the Board of Review on August 6, 1914. The report draws primarily from Vandervort's account. Ultimately, Wilson's claim was recommended for rejection by Special Examiners. A letter detailing this rejection was sent to Wilson at his address, #207 Woodlawn Street in Natchez, Mississippi, for once, not in the care of Nathan Bickford. The letter, dated August 17, 1914, states that Wilson's claim was rejected on the grounds that, "the case fails to show that you are identical with the Richard Vincent who is shown by a report from the records of the Navy Department to have served as a landsman in the U.S. Navy."

This rejection must have come as a tremendous blow to Wilson. He and his legal representative had struggled to bring his case before the Special Examiner. And yet Wilson pressed on. On January 15, 1915 Richard Wilson's quest for his pension continued with a "General Affidavit" filed by Abraham Green, who represented himself as a long acquaintance of Wilson. He states that they lived on adjoining places before the war, and that during the war they both belonged to the Navy." Green validates Wilson's claims of service and goes on to state that he himself served on the Chilli Coffey. This was the boat that Wilson told the Special Examiner's office that he had taken north from Fort Adams, Mississippi.

Several of the documents in the pension file have deteriorated and the record becomes spotty at this point. A notation on one of Wilson's card file jackets seems to state that as of January 15, 1915, Nathan Bickford sent a letter requesting information on the date and causes of rejection for Wilson's claims. A response came on January 21, 1915, which curiously, referenced the claim rejected in August of 1905, rather than the most recent one. Again the cause cited is a general lack of evidence regarding Wilson's claimed service.

A similarly themed letter was sent to Wilson a few months later on March 13, 1915. This letter does cite and describe Wilson's most recent rejection in

August of 1914. The letter also noted that the testimony of Abram Green, filed in January, "does not warrant a reopening of the claim for the reason that said testimony is vague and indefinite and does not show any actual personal knowledge on the part of the affiant of the claimant's alleged service." Another letter was sent May 28, 1915 by the pension department in response to continuing correspondence from Bickford. This letter simply advises Wilson that the status of his claim has remained the same since their last communication in March.

On September 16, 1915 a "General Affidavit" was filed on behalf of Richard Wilson containing the testimony of Benjamin J. Mack, alias Bill Mack. Mack claims to have served with Richard Wilson on the General Lyons as an Ordinary Seaman. Mack states that he has known Wilson since 1865 and that Wilson is the selfsame individual who served on the General Lyons. In response to Mack's testimony, the Bureau of Pensions sent a letter dated November 6, 1915 to the Auditor of the Navy Department inquiring of his record of service. The Auditor's response is dated November 12, 1915. The letter states that Mack served from December 31, 1863 to August 3, 1865 on the General Lyons. This is in accordance with his claim of serving alongside Richard Wilson. A "Brief for Reopening" of Richard Wilson's pension claim was filed November 17, 1915 based on the confirmation of Bill Mack's testimony.

On December 8, 1915 internal correspondence of the Bureau of Pension indicates that Wilson's case was referred to the office of the Special Examiner for an evaluation and cross-examination of Bill Mack. Responsibility for the case was transferred subsequently to the representatives of the Special Examiners office in Adams, County Mississippi.

The documents of the Special Examiners office are only partially included among Wilson's pension documents. Their interviews with Wilson in the earlier examination were not present in the case file. The same is true of whatever investigation was conducted into the veracity of Bill Mack's testimony. Whatever inquiries were conducted they were not sufficient to sustain Richard Wilson's pension claim, which was again rejected as of April 7, 1916. This is echoed in a May 10, 1916 letter to Wilson, which again states his failure to evidence that he was the exact sailor that served on the *General Lyons*.

An unexpected boon to Wilson's cause came

in the form of a revised discharge certificate issued to Wilson by the War Department. Nathan Bickford calls the attention of the pension bureau to this fact in a May 27, 1916 letter. Bickford asserts that, "his identity to the satisfaction of the Department having been established it would seem such identity should be satisfactory in his claim for pension." The sense of vindication is palpable in Bickford's overwrought prose. In response, the Commissioner of Pensions informed Bickford in a July 6, 1916 letter that the status of Wilson's claim had not changed and that the affidavits submitted by Wilson did not adequately respond to the "adverse evidence" on file.

A June 28, 1916 "Brief for Reopening" shows that Wilson's claim had already been rejected. Richard Wilson, now sixty-nine years old had been seeking after his Navy pension for twenty years without success. Several times since his initial rejection it must have seemed that he was close to victory, only to have it snatched away by the seemingly arbitrary determinations of governmental bureaucracy. Still, Wilson pressed onward. A February 17, 1917 letter sent directly to Wilson at his 12 Henderson St. address in Natchez, Mississippi makes it clear that Wilson had not ceased trying to overturn the decision of the Bureau of Pensions. The letter from the Commissioner states plainly - almost plaintively that Wilson already knew, that his application for a naval service pension was disallowed because of his own inability to prove that he is the sailor of record, serving as Landsman in the United States Navy under the name Richard Wilson on the U.S.S. General Lyons. This would be the last record of correspondence documenting Richard Wilson's quest for his pension.

Richard Wilson died November 8, 1922 in Jackson, Mississippi, never having received the award that he felt he deserved and fought so hard to obtain for a quarter century. This quest did not end with his death. His wife, Richard Wright's grandmother Maggie Wilson, applied for a "Widows Pension" based on her husband's service. Ultimately though, her endeavors were no more successful than those of her husband. She, too, would die without ever seeing the benefits of her husband's pension.

In the preceding pages, we have observed the horrendous difficulties that faced Richard Wright's

grandfather in his pursuit of his naval service pension, a struggle that outlasted his own life. The documents obtained from Wilson's pension file illuminate the brief but significant passage devoted to him in Richard Wright's autobiography. Seldom does one have the opportunity to observe with such detail the complicated historical reality that exists behind a literary work. Ultimately, the purpose of this historical research has been to return to the text of *Black Boy* equipped with a more complete understanding of Wright as an artist.

It does not seem that the material in these documents overturn our ideas of Wilson, but they certainly complicate them. We know much more of the man. The documents in Wilson's pension file are repetitive, but they abound with detail. The materials provide secondary source confirmation as well as a significant expansion of material previously published in other works. Any conclusions or refinements of our understanding of Wilson will necessarily affect our understanding of Wright.

In reviewing these heretofore unexamined documents I have endeavored to provide a sense of narrative to the information contained therein. Given this copious documentation, what is to be made of Wright's depiction of these same events in *Black Boy*? The historical record is revealed to differ sharply from the "impressionistic" simplification provided by Wright. This is not surprising. Autobiography is a constructed past. There is no question as to whether liberties are taken in the process. The question is how to judge the significance of these deviations from historical fact.

Wright claims, in *Black Boy*, that the information he presents about his grandfather came exclusively from grandmother, Maggie Bolden. No doubt she was the source of many of the rumors and suppositions surrounding Richard Wilson. And yet, Wright also claims to have been privy to his grandfather's letters and correspondence with the Bureau of Pensions. Wright states that Richard Wilson could not read the materials himself and was dependent on his family members to convey the information to him. That much is backed up by numerous affidavits in the pension file. The idle speculation about why his grandfather was rejected, the "rumors" Wright speaks of, would have been dispelled by even a fragmentary exposure to the correspondence his grandfather kept with the pension bureau.

Furthermore, there is no mention in *Black Boy*

of Nathan Bickford, the ever-present claims solicitor who was Wilson's legal representative for the entire twenty-five years of the pension application process. Wright's account of one man against a monolithic bureaucracy full of racial intrigue and white culpability would certainly have been complicated by the inclusion of Bickford, a presumably white Washington, DC attorney.

It appears that the author allows the account of the pension fight to be based on childhood fantasy and tall tales he knew not to be true. His relationship with his grandfather is defined by the old man's obsession and Wright indicates strongly that he too became bound up in these fantasies of betrayal. Thematically similar incidents can be found throughout *Black Boy*. Wright structures the narrative of his life, from naive youth to wary adulthood, around incidents in which he is confronted by social institutions. He seems, always, to be looking for an entity that will validate his trust and provide a sense of community. The incident of his grandfather's pension application is one of many occurrences where Wright depicts the failure of social institutions and the emotional consequences caused by that failure.

In *Black Boy*, Wright compares his grandfather's plight to the protagonist "K" of Kafka's novel *The Castle*, who, "tried desperately to persuade the authorities of this true identity right up to the day of his death, and failed."¹⁴ No doubt it is the image that seemed most resonant as the adult Wright reviewed his death, and failed."¹⁵ No doubt it is the image that seemed most resonant as the adult Wright reviewed his childhood memory. As for myself, with the benefit of reviewing the actual substance of his pension files (and with the benefit of several additional decades of cultural texts to draw from) I cannot but be reminded of the character Sam Lowry from Terry Gilliam's 1985 film *Brazil*. The film depicts one man's conflict with his flawed bureaucratic society. In Gilliam's world receipts and reference numbers have replaced human interaction. Violations from procedure are a moral failing punishable by death. Mistakes in processing paperwork really can take one's life away. In *Brazil*, the protagonist, Lowry, is destroyed by the state while seeking the object of his dreams, just like Richard Wilson, and just like Richard Wright.

Author's Note: I am indebted to Calvin Burke, a long-time National Archives employee and expert in Military Service pensions who helped me locate the Wilson File.

¹⁴ *Black Boy*, p 140.

¹⁵ *Black Boy*, p 140.
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RICHARD WRIGHT: THE CENTENARY CELEBRATION

The American University of Paris announces the International Richard Wright Centennial Conference. It will be held 19-20 June 2008 at The American University of Paris and at the Musée des Années Trente (Museum of the Nineteen Thirties), in Boulogne-Billancourt.

The Conference will encourage broad international and interdisciplinary explorations of Wright's life and writing, with a special emphasis on the Paris he inhabited (1947-1960), both what it was and what it is today as a result of the marks he left behind, and on his experiences in Africa. Stressing the importance of Richard Wright, the conference hopes to be an international point of intersection for all those interested in Wright's work from literary and cultural critics, to political activists, poets, musicians, publishers and historians. We seek the widest range of academic and public intellectual discussion around Wright's work which has influenced so many and so much.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Wright in the black Atlantic: Transnationalism and transatlanticism
- Wright and expatriate Paris
- Wright as exile and travel writer
- The reception of Wright's work in various non-U.S. settings
- Wright and African American satire, irony, and comedy
- Wright and the African American literary canon
- Wright, whiteness, and black masculinity
- Wright and African American confinement literature
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- Wright's cultural criticism
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- Wright and films
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Paper/presentation proposals should include:

1. A brief (250-300 word) abstract.
2. A brief (1-2 pp.) vita.

The deadline is January 15, 2008. Submit abstracts to:
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or William.Dow@wanadoo.fr

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As you receive this issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter, we want to remind you to renew your membership in the Richard Wright Circle. The yearly \$10 membership fee runs for one calendar year and entitles you to one double issue of the Newsletter: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. In order to continue your membership, you need to fill out and send us the form below (to ensure that we have your latest address and relevant information) along with a \$10 check or money order (made out to the Richard Wright Circle). Please remember that your membership dues still constitute the primary funding for the Circle and Newsletter is greatly appreciated.

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