

Mayer Frankel: A Tale from the National Archives' Service and Pension Records

Like so many other Civil War researchers, I have come to trust and even anticipate digging through a variety of sources to uncover the experiences of individual soldiers. And I've learned that for real hard-core facts and maybe even some deep, dark secrets, the service and pension records at the National Archives are an invaluable, and fun, trove of information. Service records give basic facts—muster in and out dates, whether or not a soldier was there for the monthly roll call. They sometimes note whether a soldier was killed or wounded at a particular battle. Pension records include even more details. When a veteran applied for a pension, he had to submit an affidavit, get a physical, and provide much other information. The pension records for one veteran show that he made a deathbed conversion to Catholicism. The records of another include comments from a doctor saying the veteran was very thin and obviously undernourished. And yet another veteran's files reveal that he became mentally ill at the end of the war: every document thereafter refers to him as “last name, first name (Insane).”

An interesting example of the value of these records is the case of Mayer (or Meyer or Myer, depending upon the source) Frankel. Frankel's descendants had much information on him, most gleaned from his 1907 obituary and from a 1977 taped interview with his daughter. Mayer Frankel was born in Bavaria in 1837, arrived in Philadelphia in 1860, enlisted in the Twenty-Seventh Pennsylvania, was wounded at Gettysburg, and suffered from an open wound on his leg throughout the war. On April 14, 1865, the night Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, Frankel was on guard duty at the White House. Following the Civil War, he moved to the “Bad Lands” region of Missouri where he served as a US Marshal until he relocated to Fremont, Ohio. There he joined the local Grand Army of the Republic post and remained active in it until his passing in 1907.¹

Frankel's family enlisted my help to learn more about his life. The information they had seemed straightforward enough, but my knowledge

¹ Obituary, *Fremont (Ohio) Weekly Messenger*, Mar. 22, 1907; Transcript of audio taped memories of Amelia Frankel, daughter of Mayer Frankel, 1977, in possession of the Frankel family; Roster, Eugene Rawson Post 32, Grand Army of the Republic, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, Ohio.

of the history of the regiment did not match with his history. The Twenty-Seventh enrolled as a three-year regiment in 1861 and mustered out of service in 1864. A little research in Samuel P. Bates's *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861–5* told me that Mayer Frankel was actually discharged in early 1862.² This tale became more and more curious. It was time to head to the National Archives.

Service records for Mayer Frankel are sparse, consisting of only a few microfilmed cards. He mustered into the Twenty-Seventh with many other German immigrants on May 30, 1861, and was discharged only seven months later. There are no other comments or notations. Frankel's pension records, however, answered many of the vexing questions. He never saw battle. While walking picket duty at Fairfax Court House, Virginia, in November 1861, he suffered "frozen feet"—specifically frostbite on his right foot—and was given a medical discharge at Hunter's Chapel, Virginia, on January 11, 1862. Obviously, he had not been on guard the night of April 14, 1865. He may, however, have been in Washington. After his discharge, Frankel found work with sutlers who set up shop near military camps and catered to the needs of the soldiers, and he eventually found employment with one as a clerk and bookkeeper in Washington. In 1865, Frankel headed west and worked in various communities near St. Louis, usually in the clothing trade. In 1870, he was an enumerator for that year's census, which was supervised by the US Marshals Service.³

Frankel settled with his wife and children in Fremont, Ohio, in 1875, where he joined the GAR post. In 1889, he made his initial pension application due to his foot problems, which was approved. Three years later, now suffering from rheumatism and heart disease, he applied for and received a pension increase.⁴

In his later years, Frankel regaled family and friends with his stories of life-and-death struggles on the front lines of the fight against the Confederacy, his exploits in the Indian-infested "Bad Lands" of Missouri, and general tales of humanity at its most desperate. On March 22, 1907, Mayer Frankel died following a stroke, leaving a wife, two daughters, and a son.⁵ He was buried in Fremont's Oakwood Cemetery, not far from the Grand Army of the Republic Highway.

² Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861–5* (Harrisburg, PA, 1896), 1:393, 397.

³ Pension file of Mayer Frankel, pension deposition, Nov. 9, 1889, pg. 2–4; and discharge certificate, Jan. 11, 1862, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁴ Pension file of Mayer Frankel, deposition, 3; invalid pensions increases, Dec. 12, 1892.

⁵ *Fremont Weekly Messenger*, Mar. 22, 1907.

Frankel's obituary celebrated a popular and well-respected member of the community who had served his country, albeit for a brief time. His family remembered his "storied" history and carried those tales long after his death. Mayer Frankel will always be in someone's memory dodging bullets on East Cemetery Hill turning back those desperate rebels—no matter what I found. But those who are willing to do some digging into dust-covered service and pension records at the National Archives and who have more than a little perseverance are likely to uncover some liberties with the truth and some very interesting details about the experiences of Pennsylvania's Civil War veterans. And that is what historic research is all about.

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