

The 13th Annual Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition International Conference at Yale University

## **Beyond Freedom: New Directions in the Study of Emancipation**

November 11-12, 2011  
Yale University  
New Haven, Connecticut

### *Recovering the Political Voices of Poor Black Women in post-Civil War America*

Brandi C. Brimmer, University of Maryland, College Park

Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/emancipation/brimmer.pdf>  
© Do not cite or circulate without the author's permission

This presentation raises questions about black women's political claims in post-Civil War America. In the broadest sense, it is an analysis of black women's relationship to the U.S. legal system and to federal institutions during the late nineteenth century. I argue that black Union war widows challenged the U.S. Pension Bureau's definition of widowhood, not only by calling attention to issues of poverty and economic need but also by interpolating them into the bureaucratized language of individual rights. These women viewed their benefits as a political issue, and they positioned themselves as honorable widows while challenging the Bureau's tendency to dismiss their claims with gendered personal language that cast them as sexually immoral, bad mothers, and deceitful. While I will draw attention to one case study, my analysis is based on my reading of over 500 Civil War pension files of black women from North Carolina, where the Union recruited more than 5,000 black soldiers.

## **Presentation Outline**

- I. Southern Black Women and the U.S. Pension Bureau
  - A. The retroactive recognition of “slave marriage” in pension bureau policy
    - 1. The federal government’s 1866 policy regarding black Union soldiers and their survivors
    - 2. Implications for formerly enslaved women
    - 3. Black women’s use of the U.S. pension system
- II. Methodology and Conceptual Framework
- III. Case Studies from Craven County, North Carolina:
  - A. Charlotte Banks
  - B. Mary Lee
- IV. Conclusions

**Table 1. Civil War Widows and Other Dependent Survivors, Craven County, North Carolina, 1866-1925: Summary by Years**

**1866-1925 = 175 Claims**

Widows = 164	Mothers = 7	Minors = 4
158 Black	7 Black	3 Black
6 White	0 White	1 White

**1866-1869 = 37 Claims**

Widows = 31	Mothers = 5	Minors = 1
30 Black	5 Black	0 Black
1 White	0 White	1 White

**1870-1880 = 13 Claims**

Widows = 10	Mothers = 1	Minors = 2
10 Black	1 Black	2 Black
0 White	0 White	0 White

**1885-1895 = 71 Claims**

Widows = 67	Mothers = 1	Minors = 1
63 Black	1 Black	1 Black
4 White	0 White	0 White

**1896-1900 = 14 Claims**

Widows = 14	Mothers = 0	Minors = 0
13 Black	0 Black	0 Black
1 White	0 White	0 White

**1900-1925 = 40 Claims**

Widows = 40	Mothers = 0	Minors = 0
40 Black	0 Black	0 Black
0 White	0 White	0 White

**Total Claims 1866-1925**

Widows 164  
 Mothers 7  
 Minors 4