

Lemon, George (1837–1896) attorney

No 19th-century disability pension advocate was more prominent than George Lemon, himself a wounded and decorated Union army veteran. Lemon emphasized that all VETERANS had “been comrades in a mighty struggle for the preservation of the Nation’s existence,” and their comradeship united “Native and foreign born, Catholic and Protestant, Jew and Catholic, black and white.”

Although the exact date is unknown, Lemon was born in 1837 in Syracuse, New York. In 1862 he was commissioned a captain in the 125th New York Infantry. Within one month of his commission, Lemon was captured in the defense of Harper’s Ferry and freed through a prisoner exchange. In October 1863 Lemon was “struck by a Minie Ball in the right leg . . . in the battle of Bristoe Station while charging with the rest of his Reg’t in the face of a terrible fire flurry from the ranks of the enemy,” according to an affidavit in support of his Union pension application. For his war wounds he received a pension of \$10 per month commencing in 1865, which was raised to \$15 per month in 1870. Lemon started settling the financial accounts of other officers and served briefly as a clerk in the U.S. Treasury Department. This eventually led him to the pension business, though he had no formal legal training by today’s standards.

Lemon published the *National Tribune*, a weekly journal that became the largest and most influential veterans’ newspaper. By 1885 the *Tribune* had 112,000 paid subscribers. During this time, Lemon was handling up to 125,000 pension claims, more than the combined cases of the other Washington, D.C., pension attorneys. By 1889, according to the *Washington Post*, Lemon’s pension law firm was the largest pension business in the country. Lemon also owned a controlling interest in the National Bank of the Republic, also located in Washington. In 1888 Lemon was chairman of the finance committee for the inauguration of President Benjamin Harrison, a distinguished CIVIL WAR veteran and pension advocate.

Ironically, although most disabled veterans hired Lemon and other pension lawyers at high rates, pension claimants with severe and visible disabilities actually lowered their probability of being granted a pension increase when they used attorneys. Still, this finding was complicated by a number of factors related to the partisan nature of the pension system, such as there tended to be a substantial reduction in attorney usage when a Republican (or neutral) majority vote was present in the state of the claimant’s application. Another possible reason for the apparent negative attorney effect is those veterans who were severely disabled tended not to hire attorneys, presumably because their cases already were convincing to the Pension Bureau. Conversely, it is possible that those who hired attorneys had weaker claims, and these applicants received less favorable outcomes simply because they were not as debilitated, not because of their attorneys’ efforts.

Nevertheless, to maintain their lucrative businesses, pension attorneys fought for clients with their advertisements and newspapers and through lobbying efforts. Like Lemon, other prominent attorneys were owners of pro-pension newspapers or pamphlet services, and they mined the promising potential for profitability in the expanding business. Lemon and the pension attorneys were also the leading advocates of generous pension laws, lenient pension commissioners, and the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the Union veterans’ organization. In 1889 the

Washington Post editors wrote that Lemon was the man “the old soldiers always felt they could turn to when in trouble.” After his death in 1896, Lemon’s estate sold his pension business to another leading attorney of the day, Milo B. Stevens of Washington, D.C., and his firm became the largest in the country, handling around 100,000 cases.

The backlash against Lemon’s activities peaked during the later part of the 19th century when partisan tides changed and critics denounced him and other pension attorneys as parasites responsible for defrauding the government and their clients of hundreds of millions of dollars. Whether Lemon and other disability pension attorneys were dedicated advocates or shrewd businessmen, they helped create America’s first major disability welfare system, which served as the model for subsequent disability policies ranging from WORKERS’ COMPENSATION to Social Security policy. For years to come, Lemon and his cohort colored the rise of America’s organized legal profession as well as conceptions of disability advocacy. Historically, as in contemporary American society, other forces external to an individual’s disability—class, occupation, STIGMA, local and national business, and political interests—influence conceptions of disability legitimacy and deservingness.

George Lemon died on December 18, 1896, at Coronado Beach, California.

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Further Reading:

Blanck, Peter, with Liz Perry, Maureen De Armond, and Molly Sutter. “Civil War Pension Attorneys,” Burton Blatt Working Paper Series. Available online. URL: <http://bbi.syr.edu>. Accessed August 20, 2006

Lemann, Nicholas. *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.

Sternberg, Robert J., and Louise Spear-Swerling, eds. *Perspectives on Learning Disabilities: Biological, Cognitive, Contextual*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999.