

The Same File, Without the Method

A control experiment, unedited. On 2026-07-30, we sent all 10 pages of our published Thornedale specimen pension file to the same AI model that powers our reports (claude-opus-4-8), with none of our method: no evidentiary rulebook, no source-tier system, no mechanical checks, no review. Just the prompt an ordinary person would type:

> "Here are scans of my ancestor's Civil War pension file. Can you read it and tell me what it says about him and his family?"

Everything below is the AI's reply, reproduced verbatim. Judge it against the full A Soldier's Life Reports specimen of the same file, available at asoldierslifereports.com.

I'd be happy to walk you through what this pension file says. (I'll note up front, as the documents themselves repeatedly state, that this is a **demonstration specimen for a fictional soldier** — the pages say things like "typeset reconstruction of real record types. Not a genuine record." So while I can read it all for you, the person in it isn't a real historical individual.)

That said, here's the story the file tells:

The Soldier: Elias Thornedale

- **Rank/unit:** Private, Company C, 12th Regiment Delaware Infantry (Captain Lofland's Company)
- **Age at enlistment:** 24 years old
- **Occupation:** farmer
- **Enrolled:** August 9, 1862, at Smyrna, Delaware, for a 3-year term
- **Mustered in:** September 4, 1862, at Camp Brandywine, Wilmington, Delaware

His Service and Illness

The muster rolls track his presence:

- **Present** through early 1863
- **May–Sept 1863:** Absent, sick with **typhoid fever** — admitted June 21, 1863 to the U.S.A. General Hospital in Chester, Pennsylvania
- **Returned to duty** September 30, 1863
- **May–June 1864:** Absent again, sick at the depot hospital, City Point, Virginia (since June 4, 1864)

His Death

- **Died June 14, 1864**, at the depot field hospital, **City Point, Virginia**
- **Cause:** died of disease — **chronic diarrhoea** (a very common cause of death among Civil War soldiers)
- The death was certified by the War Department, Adjutant General's Office, March 3, 1865

The Family

From the **Widow's Declaration** (filed January 19, 1865):

- **Widow:** Margaret Thornedale (maiden name **Margaret Haslet**), age 26, resident of Smyrna, Kent County, Delaware. She signed with an "X mark," indicating she likely could not write.
- **Marriage:** Elias and Margaret were married **April 15, 1858**, at Odessa, Delaware, by Rev. Jonas Colburn (confirmed by a separate officiant's marriage certificate)
- **Children under sixteen:**
- **Sarah Ann Thornedale**, born February 2, 1859
- **William H. Thornedale**, born November 30, 1861

The Pension

- **Widow's Certificate No. 218,443** / Application No. 187,902
- Awarded under the **Act of July 14, 1862**
- Margaret's pension started at **\$8/month**, and was **increased to \$12/month** on March 19, 1886 under a new law

A couple of small inconsistencies worth noting (typical of real records too): the widow's declaration says Elias died "on or about the twelfth day of June, 1864," while the official records give **June 14, 1864**.

If you're researching a *real* ancestor, I'd be glad to help you figure out which record types these correspond to and where the genuine equivalents (like NARA pension files or compiled service records) would be found. Would that be helpful?