

**Samuel Downing (1761-1867)**  
**American Revolutionary War Veteran**

In 1864, Reverend E.B. Hillard and two photographers embarked on a trip through New England to photograph and interview the six known surviving Revolutionary War veterans. All were over one hundred years old at the time. The photos were printed in a book titled *The Last Men of the Revolution*. Samuel Downing, born in Newburyport, MA in 1761, had enlisted at the age of sixteen. Claiming indigent status, in 1820 he began receiving a pension under the 1818 Pension Act. Because he lived in New York at the time, his name can be found in the New York pension list of 1820. His name appears on various pension lists for the next forty years. The far more liberal 1832 Pension Act gave full pay for life to both officers and enlisted men who had served for two years or more and partial pay for service of six months or more.

# The Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818

ANN BECKER



**Editor's Introduction.** *On August 26, 1776, the Continental Congress passed the first pension legislation for the American colonies. It provided half pay for Continental Army officers and enlisted men who became disabled due to their war service and were incapable of earning a living. The half pay was to continue for the duration of the disability. In 1780, the Continental Congress turned its attention to providing for the widows and orphans of Revolutionary War soldiers and passed an act offering pensions to those who met the act's requirements. In 1789, the first U.S. Congress passed a law providing that the so-called "invalid pensions" that some states had paid to their disabled soldiers be paid instead by the newly-established federal government for one year. Subsequent legislation extended the time limit. In 1806, the invalid pension law was significantly expanded so that disabled veterans of state troops and militia service would be eligible for federal pensions.<sup>1</sup>*

*In his annual message to Congress in December of 1817, President James Monroe called for a further expansion of the law to cover not only disabled veterans but all those "who are reduced to indigence, and even to real distress."<sup>2</sup> Passed in May, the 1818 Revolutionary War Pension Act represented a dramatic*

*change in Congressional policy. It extended pensions to all indigent Continental Army veterans. However, the act remained limited in that it only applied to former soldiers of the Continental Army. State militia veterans were deliberately excluded. This issue engendered heated debates in both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. In this article, historian Ann Becker explores these debates and the sectional and partisan divisions they reflected.*

*War Department records reveal that the vast majority of indigent pension claimants came from the North. The leading states were New York, Massachusetts, the District of Maine, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania. The entire absence of southern states from this list is indicative of the fact that primarily Northerners had served in the Continental Army. In contrast, in the South, Revolutionary War veterans had served almost exclusively in the state militias and support for Britain remained much higher. Congressional debates reflected these sectional divides. Although the initial draft of the bill passed by the House of Representatives included both Continental Army and state militia veterans, the Senate's version eliminated pension eligibility for militia members. House members sought to reinstate this provision but failed in their efforts.*

*One senator had estimated that only 1,614 Revolutionary War survivors remained alive in 1818. However, nearly 20,000 impoverished veterans applied for benefits. Later that year, the Secretary of War submitted the list of eligible pensioners to the Senate.<sup>3</sup> The 1818 Pension Roll (covering twenty-four states) is available online, as are the actual pension files (held at the National Archives).*

### **Continental Army Infantry Troops (right)**

Initially, the first Continental Congress was reluctant to authorize a national army. Many looked upon Europe's use of professional soldiers with disdain, likening them to either forced men or mercenaries. Some feared that a standing army might one day become an instrument of tyranny—the very thing the patriots were fighting against. Instead, the rebellion's leadership expected individual colonies to fend off the enemy with their own citizen militias with help from a corps of "provincial regiments." But following the clashes at Lexington and Concord, Congress quickly changed its mind. On June 14, 1775, the Continental Congress placed the Massachusetts militia under its authority and ordered the establishment of ten additional companies of infantry and riflemen. The following day, it named George Washington commander-in-chief. By war's end, as many as 175,000 soldiers had served in the Continental Army, although at any given moment troop levels never exceeded 20,000 men. At some points in the war, it dwindled to fewer than 5,000 soldiers. Source: Lithograph by Henry Alexander Ogden, c. 1897, Library of Congress.

*Revolutionary War pension records remain an important source of information for both genealogical researchers and social historians and provide a window into the economic problems experienced by many elderly veterans. Pension files often contain many types of records which would have otherwise been lost to historians, including military commissions and discharges, muster rolls, deeds, wills, marriage certificates, diaries, journals, newspaper clippings, and letters.<sup>4</sup>*

*Historian Ann Becker explores the young nation's reinvigorated spirit of patriotism which, combined with a growing sense of nostalgia, sentimentality, and calls for national unity following the divisive War of 1812, led to the successful passage of the 1818 Revolutionary War Pension Act. Becker has a Ph.D. in Early American History and has written extensively about Revolutionary War topics.*

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On December 2, 1817, President James Monroe (1758–1831) delivered his annual message to Congress. America was in “a prosperous and happy condition,” having recuperated from the exigencies of its recent war with Great Britain, and the country was experiencing a surge of patriotism and pride in its Democratic-Republicanism.<sup>5</sup> While the bulk of Monroe’s speech addressed foreign policy issues, domestic affairs were touched upon as well, primary among them the “gratifying” and “productive” state of public revenue. Monroe informed Congress that after satisfying annual appropriations, providing for needed fortifications and increases to the navy, paying the interest on the public debt, and retiring \$18 million of the same, the federal treasury anticipated a surplus of some \$2.7 million for the coming fiscal year. Looking toward continued prosperity, Monroe estimated surpluses of \$4 million annually over the next several years. Anticipating a rise in the value of public land, the president held out the promise of a bright, secure financial future for his young nation.

In the closing moments of his address, having duly informed Congress of the harmonious and promising future he anticipated for the United States, Monroe offered:

In contemplating the happy situation of the United States, our attention is drawn, with peculiar interest, to the surviving officers and soldiers of our Revolutionary Army, who so eminently contributed, by their services, to lay the foundation. Most of those very meritorious citizens have paid the debt of nature and gone to repose. It is believed, that among the survivors, there are some not provided for by existing laws, who are reduced to indigence, and even to real distress. These men have a claim on the gratitude of their country, and it will do honor to their country, to provide for them. The lapse of a few years more, and the opportunity will be forever lost; indeed, so long already has been the interval, that the number to be benefited by any provision which may be made, will not be great.<sup>6</sup>

This speech led to the introduction of the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818, which Monroe signed into law later that year. The law would soon thereafter undergo revisions because of key flaws that, like Monroe’s speech, relied on overly optimistic projections. In fact, in light of these later events, especially the rapid deterioration of America’s economy, much of Monroe’s speech now seems excessively optimistic, even naïve. Despite this, the law’s passage marked a significant shift in public policy toward veterans

and renewed the partisan and sectional debate over the relative value of the militia versus the Continental Army.

As I will show, the pension was developed both as an effort to reward long-neglected and meritorious service and as an attempt to engender patriotism in a young nation recovering from its “second American Revolution” (the War of 1812). This new policy had its beginnings in nostalgia for the Revolutionary era. Some forty years after the Declaration of Independence, the United States had begun to move toward a new national identity. By rewarding the authors of its liberty, the Continental Army, the president, and Congress took the first steps toward consolidating and strengthening the power of the federal government and enabled a young nation to congratulate itself on its survival as a republic.

At the start of the American Revolution, with the establishment of the Continental Army in 1775, over 16,000 of the more than 37,000 soldiers were from the colony of Massachusetts. This fact is not surprising, given that the war began in Lexington and Concord, and the city of Boston was under siege during the first months of the war. Men from Massachusetts continued to serve in large numbers throughout the war and were the largest contingent, except for the years of 1779 and 1780 when the fighting moved south and the number of Pennsylvania soldiers was larger.<sup>7</sup> As we discuss the establishment of a federal pension system, then, a high percentage of veterans from Massachusetts and Maine (a province of Massachusetts until 1820) were eligible and applied for these pensions once they were available.<sup>8</sup> Congressional representatives from Massachusetts were strongly in favor of the measure. According to the *Annals of Congress*, Massachusetts’ Senator Harrison Otis (1765-1848) “had contended for the first honors of the Revolution” as senators from across the country argued the importance of their region and its veterans to the success of the Revolution.<sup>9</sup>

## MONROE’S VIEW OF REVOLUTIONARY VETERANS

Monroe’s statements regarding revolutionary veterans deserve close scrutiny, as they mark a significant transformation in Americans’ views. While it had long been the policy of the United States to offer invalid pensions to its permanently disabled soldiers and to provide compensation for widows and orphans of men killed in the service of their country, the Pension Act of 1818 was the first governmental policy designed to assist able-bodied but impoverished and elderly citizens. It has been credited with setting precedents for later veterans programs.<sup>10</sup> By offering service pensions, this new federal policy “shattered 40 years of Congressional resistance against awarding



### **James Monroe, 1758-1831**

A major in the Continental Army, Monroe is considered the last of the "Founding Fathers" to serve as president. He served two terms, from 1813 to 1820. Image source: Bureau of Engraving and Printing

lifetime pensions for completing military service," and in so doing, changed the way Americans viewed the responsibilities of the national government in providing for the needs of its citizens.<sup>11</sup> Monroe's speech provided the impetus for this new type of pension system, and his sentiments bear further analysis.

Monroe was himself a Revolutionary War veteran and believed that the American Revolution had been more than simply a fight for independence from Britain. According to biographer Henry Ammon, Monroe shared with the more impassioned revolutionaries "an identification with a force greater than themselves."<sup>12</sup> This somewhat romanticized view of the revolution surely contributed to his sentiments in calling for veteran's compensation in 1817.

Although he never became a military hero, Monroe had enlisted in the Continental Army at age eighteen, served as a lieutenant with General George Washington in New York, and took part in the crossing of the Delaware. Wounded at Trenton, Monroe was unable to get another command and retired from service as a lieutenant colonel.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that his status as a veteran, as well as his high opinion of the motives and contributions of the Revolutionary generation, influenced his decision to request consideration by Congress of an expanded system of pensions.

In addition, his firsthand experiences might have persuaded the president that aid for survivors of the war was necessary. After his election in 1816, Monroe embarked upon a national tour and traveled the country speaking for national unity and patriotism. During the course of this extended inaugural tour, Monroe had occasion to meet with many Revolutionary War veterans. S. Putnam Waldo, who chronicled Monroe's tour, noted that he was particularly attentive to them and was moved by their "broken-down" condition and the "infirmities of old age" from which they suffered.<sup>14</sup> For example, at Fort Griswold, Connecticut, Monroe was introduced to two

elderly veterans, Parke and Ebenezer Avery, who were described this way: “Their scars were too conspicuous to permit them to escape the particular notice and kind attention” of the president.<sup>15</sup>

In early July, Monroe arrived in Boston, where he reviewed a militia troop, met with dignitaries, and visited factories.<sup>16</sup> During one address, the president spoke of “companions who had fallen in battle before independence was achieved” and reminded the gathering of those men “less fortunate than ourselves, [who] lived not to witness the perfect fulfillment of their hopes in the prosperity and happiness of our country.” He met survivors of the war at Bunker Hill in Charlestown, when three veterans (Thomas Miller, Timothy Thompson, and John Kettell) came out to meet their president. Monroe spoke to the crowd and was deeply affected by being at the sites so important to the country.<sup>17</sup> His encounters with aged and infirm veterans left a lasting impression on Monroe as he returned to Washington and undoubtedly contributed to his call for pensions for the unfortunate and suffering survivors of the war.

In each state, Monroe also spoke to veteran officers at local chapters of the *Society of the Cincinnati*, a patriotic organization founded in 1783 by Continental Army officers and French officers who had served in the Revolution.<sup>18</sup> Officials from the Cincinnati of Massachusetts addressed the president, asserting that: “Although time is fast reducing our original associates, we trust that . . . [while] one remains, he will never desert the standard of Freedom and his Country; nor do our sons forget the sacred duties their sires has sworn to discharge.” Elaborating upon the importance of the Revolutionary generation, they continued:

We fought to obtain security, self-government, and political happiness, and . . . can never be indifferent to the social designs which such a warfare contemplated; for among those purposes were included the restoration of good humour, good manners, good neighbourhood, [and] polished integrity with a spirit of mild and manly patriotism.<sup>19</sup>

Using these outbursts of sentimentality he observed during his travels in the summer of 1817 to support his call for pensions for Revolutionary War veterans, Monroe sought to capitalize on this nostalgia to further his goals of creating a unified national identity.<sup>20</sup> While his address to Congress was the driving force behind the Pension Act, public sentiment had been moving in that direction for some time. The upswing of patriotic reminiscences noted by Monroe had been building in the nation, and congressional pension



advocates were assuredly responding to a public outpouring of sentimentality toward Revolutionary veterans. This was an integral part of a growing patriotic spirit following the recent war.<sup>21</sup>

Monroe also hoped to heal divisions caused by the War of 1812 and sought to promote sectional and political unity through his tour. During the 1800s, sectionalism in America was reflected by the different lifestyles, social and cultural customs, and political values of the Northern and Southern regions of the country. The North industrialized while the Southern economy was rooted in plantation agriculture based on slave labor. The tensions caused by these differences manifested themselves during the War of 1812 as the restrictions on foreign trade severely and negatively impacted the Northern economy.<sup>22</sup> According to historian John Resch, “President Monroe linked this celebration of republican virtues attributed to common soldiers with appeals to the public’s conscience to aid aged veterans suffering in poverty.” By doing so, he hoped to foster a new sense of sectional and political unity in a nation so recently divided over war.<sup>23</sup>

### **THE NILES WEEKLY REGISTER, SPIRIT OF NOSTALGIA AND CALLS FOR NATIONAL UNITY**

Further evidence of this new attitude toward Revolutionary War veterans can be found in a unique proposal made in Baltimore, Maryland’s *Niles Weekly Register* in November, 1816. In August of that year, an anonymous well-wisher from Charleston, South Carolina wrote to the publisher, Hezekiah Niles (1777–1839), suggesting that Niles should undertake the compilation and reproduction of “a volume of speeches and orations of our revolution.” The correspondent argued that it is “a most propitious period; the feelings and sentiments of ’76 were never so prevalent as present,” and that such a “moment and opportunity may pass and not immediately return; the events of the late war have imparted a glow of national feeling for everything Democratic-Republican. Let us then avail ourselves of the circumstance to make some deep impression.”<sup>24</sup> The editor of the *Boston Patriot* strongly endorsed Niles’ project, calling it the “duty of the present generation” to illuminate the ways that “the founders of our liberties were as deserving of their admiration as fiction has made a Romulus of Aeneas in Italy.”<sup>25</sup>

In his response, Niles applauded the idea. He then solicited comments from his subscribers. Receiving great encouragement, Niles announced his intention to go forward with the project in January 1817. In his call for papers, letters, and documents pertaining to the revolution, Niles indicated that his goal was the desire, “to embody, as it were, and preserve, a faithful

portraiture of the men and things of the revolution, and hold them up to posterity for edification and example."<sup>26</sup> In February, a correspondent from Kentucky wrote that: "To keep alive the flame of liberty, we must be careful to keep alive the sentiments and principles that inspired the bosoms of our fathers, and urged them to put on the armor of resistance to curb tyranny and arrest oppression."<sup>27</sup> The outpouring of support confirmed the belief that a spirit of patriotism had been renewed and that Americans were ready to celebrate the ideals of the Revolutionary era once again.

In the months that followed, as Niles collected and published Revolutionary speeches, other newspapers noticed and commented favorably. The editor of the *Boston Yankee* stated:

His [Niles's] object cannot fail to meet the approbation of everyone who feels any interest in the reputation of his country. The era of the American Revolution will be remembered by the remotest generations, as one whose importance makes all other eras of comparative insignificance. Now is the time, and almost the only time, to rescue from oblivion some of the interesting occurrences of that event.<sup>28</sup>

The sense of urgency conveyed here appeared to have pervaded the nation as well. Niles sought to "embody and . . . preserve a faithful portraiture of the men and things of the revolution, and hold them up to posterity for edification and example."<sup>29</sup>

Taken in this context, Monroe's call for pensions for surviving veterans can be viewed as aligning with increased nostalgia for and edification of Revolutionary memories and relics. Although there is also some evidence that antiquated local poor laws were increasingly unable to handle the burden of indigent veterans, issues of national unity and nostalgia were more important to Monroe.<sup>30</sup> As he embarked on his "Era of Good Feelings" (a phrase coined by a Boston Federalist newspaper in 1817), Monroe sought to capture a new sense of American community and purpose to unify the nation after the internal divisions and external threats created by the War of 1812.<sup>31</sup> His proposal was well received by the public and, more importantly, by Congress. Given the national sympathy toward the Revolutionary generation, and the felicitous state of the federal treasury, it is not surprising that Monroe's suggestion was accepted so readily, yet there would be debate, sometimes heated and intense, around several key issues, including cost and eligibility.

## “DESULTORY” HOUSE DEBATES: ELIGIBILITY, LENGTH OF SERVICE AND PROOF OF INDIGENT STATUS

The House of Representatives responded quickly to Monroe’s proposal. On December 12, 1817, only ten days after his address, a bill emerged from the Committee on Pensions and Revolutionary Claims. This committee had been established in 1813 “to take into consideration all such petitions, and matters, or things, touching military pensions; and also claims and demands originating in the Revolutionary War.” The bill was introduced by General Joseph Bloomfield of New Jersey (Democratic-Republican), himself a veteran officer of the war.<sup>32</sup> The committee’s original version provided that every commissioned and noncommissioned officer or soldier who had served in the Revolutionary Army and had been reduced to indigence, would receive half pay, based on rank, for life.<sup>33</sup>

Extraordinary in its generosity, the bill ended years of resistance against awarding lifetime pensions for simply completing military service and was, in effect, the first federal effort to aid the nation’s poor.<sup>34</sup> A leading Federalist Paper, the *Boston Columbian Sentinel*, argued that the “timely benevolence” in the generous bill would help veterans and quoted from a captain who served in the artillery during the Revolution “who was destitute of a cent” and forced to beg for food as an aged man.<sup>35</sup>

The majority of legislators clearly believed that a service pension for indigent veterans was in order, and passage of some kind of pension bill seemed assured. However, it would be significantly altered over the course of congressional debate, which began in the House on December 19, 1818. The issues raised in both Senate and House centered on various questions about eligibility, such as: How many veterans might apply? Would there be differences according to rank or length of service? Were all veterans or only indigent veterans eligible? And finally, which armies would be eligible? The colonies were defended solely by state militia troops, while the Continental Army fought primarily in the Northern and Middle colonies. This question revealed sharp differences in sectional attitudes.

New Jersey Representative John Linn, a Democratic-Republican, immediately requested an amendment to the bill that would insure that only Continental Army veterans were eligible for service pensions. In light of the ultimate flood of pension applications, this early effort to limit the liberality of the bill was prescient. However, Linn’s attempt to restrict eligibility to the men who served on the continental line implied superior service and devalued the contributions of the militia. Linn, himself a continental veteran, alluded to the unique nature of militia service during the Revolutionary War, stating

that “few of them but had been in some grade, and at some time or other in the service,” suggesting that, at times, every citizen believed he or she had contributed in some way to the war effort. Possibly because of his own wartime service, Linn was able to anticipate some of the later problems an open-handed pension policy might produce. These same arguments were to be raised again during the debate, and in fact, this alteration was the major change the Senate made to the bill some weeks later.

There were twenty Massachusetts representatives in the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress. The Massachusetts delegation was almost equally divided: it included eleven members of the Federalist Party and nine members of the Democratic-Republicans. Early in the discussion, representatives from Massachusetts worked to enhance the bill to better serve the veterans in their state and preclude paying those who had sufficient resources currently. John Holmes (1773-1843) suggested an amendment to clarify the application requirements, “because as at present worded it would entitle to a pension not only those who were in need of it, those also who, though in affluence, were disabled by age or infirmity.” Representative Benjamin Orr (1772-1828) proposed an amendment that was moved to the bill providing the pension for “every officer or soldier, who served in any manner during the Revolutionary War and now surviving.”<sup>36</sup> As debate continued, Massachusetts representative Albion Parris (1788-1857), a Democratic-Republican, proposed a successful



Depiction of Robert Logan, and aging, poor, crippled, and forgotten Revolutionary War veteran among the well-to-do of Charleston, South Carolina, in 1810. One can imagine a similar scene in the lives of many wounded veterans. By 1818 such scenes had aroused the conscience of the nation. Image courtesy of Gary Zaboly.

amendment to add officers and mariners who served in the navy to the eligible list.<sup>37</sup> Given the large number of men who served in these capacities from his region, Parris was working to protect his constituents.

Some representatives objected to the qualification of indigence, preferring that the House, in its beneficence, allow a pension to all surviving soldiers of the Revolution, regardless of the state of their personal finances. This sentiment spoke to the fact that the veterans, having served with merit, and without reward in many cases, deserved to receive the generosity of their nation without being subjected to the degradation of submitting proof of indigence. Over the course of the debate, several referred to the fact that soldiers had been cheated out of their just compensation in a variety of ways, mainly due to the young government's inability to pay soldiers' salaries in 1783 due to financial limitations.<sup>38</sup> While accepting the fact that the government was indebted to its veterans, Congress contended:

The resources of the nation would never repay the debt of gratitude which is due to the patriots and sages of the Revolution, whose counsels and acknowledgments so essentially contributed to the establishment of that freedom and independence from which so many blessings flow, yet necessity requires that the munificence of the Government should have some limitation.<sup>39</sup>

The original bill did not insist on arduous proof of indigence; its tenor implied that only applicants who were in need of assistance were likely to apply and swear the oath required which attested to financial hardship.

As the House debate continued, several congressmen argued strenuously in favor of maintaining the provision granting pensions for state and militia troops as well as those who served in the Continental Army. Virginia Representative George Strother, a Democratic-Republican, lauded the proposed pension bill as "gratifying evidence of the re-connection of public feeling with the principles of the Revolution" and took umbrage at the desire of some congressmen to discriminate between the militia and continental soldiers. He also objected to qualifying eligibility based on length of service, and argued that, as the bill had emanated "from feelings of mingled respect and sympathy; as an homage paid to that stoic fortitude and heroic courage that reclaimed a hemisphere from slavery; as a tribute of respect to sage who conceived and framed a government," it should apply equally to all those who contributed to the development of the American political fabric, not only to soldiers of the continental line and regardless of rank or length of service.<sup>40</sup>

Considering the limited number of men that Congress believed might be eligible to receive pensions and the fact that Strother was from a Southern state, it is not surprising that he argued in favor of providing service pensions for militiamen. Given that, during much of the war, the Southern colonies were defended solely by state militia troops while the Continental Army fought primarily in the Northern and Middle colonies, sectional attitudes differed over this aspect of the pension policy.

The treasury surplus helped to alleviate anxiety over the liberality of the measure. This, in addition to the satisfying image of a nation rushing to the aid of its poor veterans, allowed Congress to portray the pension law as a test of the post-Revolutionary generation's honor, virtue, and sense of justice.<sup>41</sup> Public opinion, as well, supported a liberal Pension Act. For example, a lengthy article in the *New York Evening Post* on February 18, 1818, as Congress debated the pension bill, supported a petition also before Congress to compensate officers of the Revolution for the half-pay certificates issued at the end of the war, which the government had not been able to redeem at full value. Although it did not specifically address the 1818 pension policy, the article supported the officers' claims with many of the same arguments being used in the Congressional debates. Invoking the honor of the nation, the author asserted that "The government of the United States is a guardian of the national honour, which must be unblemished, respected at home and abroad. The critical eyes of Europe observe this new empire."<sup>42</sup> The protection of American honor, and the standing of the young nation in the world community, was an important theme that recurred regularly during the discussion of the need for service pensions for indigent veterans.

The House debates on the question of indigence and eligibility again raised the issue of proof. John Forsyth of Georgia, a Democratic-Republican, argued against forcing veterans to undergo "the humiliating necessity of searching for evidence of the precise quantum of their property or producing surgeon[']s certificate of the state of their bodily strength." Forsyth's views prevailed, and no burden of proof was imposed on the veterans other than their word in an oath sworn before a local magistrate, offering specifics as to their service only. The statute prescribed no method of proof of the claimant's need of assistance, but the regulations of the War Department, which administered the pensions, required the oath and a judge's certificate to attest to that need.<sup>43</sup> The House was willing to risk the possibility of overpayment and fraud rather than impose rigorous and degrading qualification procedures on the recipients of its beneficence. Given the assumption that applicants would be few, and the cost of the program insignificant, this attitude was not surprising, although ultimately costly as it resulted in some abuses.<sup>44</sup>

The final issue of contention addressed by the House concerned the length of service required for an ex-soldier to be eligible. Richard Mentor Johnson, a Democratic-Republican from Kentucky, objected to limiting the benefit to soldiers who enlisted for a minimum three-year term and to the requirement that only officers who had continued in service through the conclusion of the war in 1783 could receive a pension. Johnson raised the valid point that the war had effectively ended in 1781, with the surrender at Yorktown, and thus if these conditions were imposed fully, half of the fighting force would be excluded from the benefit of the bill. This argument was readily accepted, and the term of service changed to one year. With this final amendment, the pension bill was passed and sent on to the Senate.

As approved by the House, its final version allowed for lifetime pensions for surviving soldiers in the amount of \$20 per month for officers and \$8 per month for rank-and-file soldiers and sailors. Given that the average monthly income for laborers was about \$16, the pension would have provided bare necessities at best for the bulk of the rank-and-file recipients, and obviously favored officers.<sup>45</sup> All men who had served for at least one year were eligible for a pension if they declared themselves indigent and in need, even though no proof was required.

In the House discussions, it was clear that the underlying sentiment toward the bill was positive. Buoyed by the postwar surge of patriotism, Congress deemed this the appropriate time to offer homage and succor to those of the Revolutionary generation who had risked life and limb in the battle for liberty. Congressmen felt that hard-won liberty would be enhanced and strengthened by a show of gratitude toward its authors. Judging from the desultory tone of much of the debate and its rapid passage, most members appeared to believe that the proposed pension policy would be inexpensive, laudatory, and provide much-needed relief for a few venerable veterans. The House avoided partisan and sectional conflict by including the militia and state troops in their version of the bill. Attempts to restrict eligibility were defeated; Congress deemed all soldiers who served during the revolution deserving of a pension. The bill passed overwhelmingly on a voice vote and was sent on to the Senate for consideration.

## **PATRIOTIC CONSENSUS AMIDST CONTENTION**

The glorification of the Revolutionary generation continued in the Senate's debates. Urging passage of the bill for patriotic reasons, Senator David Morrill, a Democratic-Republican from New Hampshire, spoke eloquently of the sacrifices made by the soldiers of the Revolution and of

the oppressions and degradations they had fought against. Quoting Thomas Paine, the senator recalled “a time that tried men’s souls” and asked if the country would “suffer the grey hairs of these veterans of the Revolution to come down with sorrow to the grave?” Addressing the issue of justice, Morrill argued, “many of the infirmities under which they are now groaning, are in consequence of the privations and exposures endured while in the service of their country.” It was, in his view, the obligation of the federal government to provide for its needy veterans, and he pledged to exert himself for “the mitigation of the necessities of those who by their valor, toils and blood, achieved the civil and religious privilege which we now enjoy.”<sup>46</sup>

In the Senate, as in the House and the court of public opinion, there was near-unanimous acceptance of the intent of the bill to relieve the suffering of needy veterans. However, serious conflict arose in the Senate over the particulars and inclusiveness of the bill. Few legislators commented on the



### **The Revolutionary Generation in the 1840s**

Elderly residents of Bennington, Vermont who were alive during the American Revolution pose for a daguerreotype in the 1840s. Benjamin Harwood (seated far left) fought in the war. Samuel Stafford (seated at far right) is also believed to have served. Photo courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society.



precedent-shattering nature of the bill, as it moved American pension policy away from the realm of compensation for wounded soldiers or the dependents of those killed in service and into a new area of federal social relief. Perhaps the extraordinarily inaccurate estimates of the costs and numbers of eligible survivors assuaged fear of new entitlements. It is striking, however, that so little was made of the fact that this new policy broke long-standing and strongly-held ideals of self-sufficiency and the proper place of charity. By couching the benefits in terms of patriotism, gratitude, and honor, Congress seemed able to avoid confronting the fact that it was creating a new system of federal charity.

Colonial precedent certainly did not allow for such outright grants to soldiers. Long repugnant to advocates of democracy—before, during, and after the Revolution—suggestions to offer half pay for officers throughout the course of the Revolution had been vehemently debated and often opposed, for fear of creating a privileged class of service pensioners.<sup>47</sup> Evidence of the unpopularity of the half-pay proposals can be found in a petition presented to the House of Representatives in December of 1818, in which the committee response to the petition included the statement that “the half pay for life was regarded by their fellow-citizens as savoring too much of the spirit of a privileged order, which rendered the measure unpopular with many of the community.”<sup>48</sup> Yet the new spirit of benevolence and patriotism evident in 1817 seemed to have overcome such objections to pensions. In the interest of fostering national unity, and with the felicitous state of the federal treasury, the Democratic-Republican Party in particular seemed bent on using this issue to further its political agenda by approving pensions for veterans.

### **HEATED SENATE DEBATES: OFFICERS, CONTINENTAL ARMY, AND/OR MILITIA SOLDIERS?**

Although the debate over the pension bill in the House was described several times in the *Annals of Congress* as “desultory,” the Senate reaction to the bill engendered more heated discussion. When the pension bill emerged from the Committee on Military Affairs to be debated by the Committee of the Whole, its wording had been changed to offer eligibility only for veterans of the Continental Army. This major alteration was hotly debated and proved to be the most contentious issue in Senate discussion. Several attempts were made to restore eligibility to militia veterans, and this issue engendered much patriotic rhetoric as well. In an apparent attempt to control the spending in the House, in offering pensions to all who fought in the Revolutionary War, several other amendments were introduced in the Senate to eliminate,

variously, rank-and-file soldiers and seamen, and to offer pensions only to officers of the continental line. Each of these reflected different political and sectional attitudes and bear further discussion here.

The amendment to limit eligibility to officers only was sponsored by Rufus King, a New York Federalist. In an effort to lessen the financial impact of the House version of the bill, Senator King urged caution and argued that the country could not afford to provide pensions for all soldiers. He argued that officers, being of a certain rank in society, should be selected as the first recipients of the government's largesse and, if feasible, soldiers could be allotted pensions at a later date.<sup>49</sup> The Federalist coalition in the Senate, comprised of both Federalist and non-party senators, consistently viewed the Pension Act as purely charitable in intent, while Democratic-Republicans saw the bill in more patriotic terms, and conceived it as a conventional military pension.

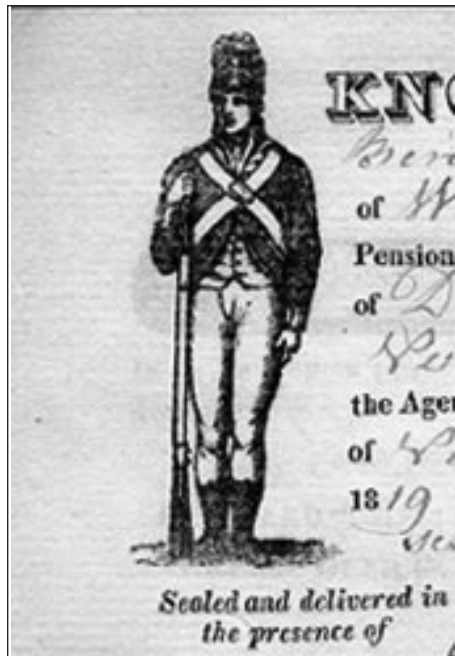
Democratic-Republicans opposed any attempt to reduce the scope of the bill as casting a slur upon the patriotism of the veterans and upon the generosity of the nation.<sup>50</sup> After the War of 1812, the Democratic-Republican Party represented itself as the party of "honor and patriotism" and as such was eager to capitalize on the growing sentimentality for the Revolution by taking care of the war's veterans in an honorable and discreet manner.<sup>51</sup> As a member of the Federalist Party, King might have been predisposed toward catering to the upper echelon of society, and it was not surprising that he supported pensioning officers over soldiers. Senator William Smith of South Carolina took great offense at this reasoning, stating that to make such a distinction would be unconstitutional and "repugnant to the principles of our Government, and at war with good sense and public justice." A Democratic-Republican, Smith argued persuasively that if the motive of the bill was to relieve the indigent and arose from benevolence, sympathy, and gratitude, Congress should not draw a line between the soldier and the officer, even if only temporarily. He credited the nation with being sensible on this issue and believed that the American people would not countenance the timid, procrastinating policy proposed here, but would magnanimously want all soldiers included in the pension plan, were it approved.<sup>52</sup>

The amendment that precluded the militia from pension eligibility was clearly rooted in sectional and political differences. The debate over this issue developed along sectional lines, with Southern senators such as Smith, James Barbour of Virginia (a member of the Anti-Democrat and States Rights party), and Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina (a Democratic-Republican) arguing strenuously for the inclusion of the militia, against the opinion of the majority.<sup>53</sup> Macon, although not disparaging the contributions of the

Continental Army, eloquently argued the case for pensioning the men who had served in the militia as well. Describing conditions in the South during much of the Revolution as frightening and calamitous, Senator Macon stated that “Many gallant actions were performed in this neighborhood war . . . and many gallant and patriotic men fell.”<sup>54</sup>

These Southern senators argued repeatedly that, although the service of the Continental Army was invaluable to the war effort, the contribution of the militia was equally vital. This attitude is not surprising, given the way the war was fought in the South. The presence of the Continental Army was little felt in North and South Carolina. Senator Smith pointed out that prior to 1781, all continental troops sent southward were actually defeated by the British. Citing the defeats of General Benjamin Lincoln, who was ultimately captured by the enemy, and the inglorious behavior of General Horatio Gates, who fled the battlefield at Camden, Smith argued forcefully against the exclusion of the militia from the benefits of the proposed bill.<sup>55</sup>

In an effort to persuade his fellow senators of the propriety of pensioning militiamen, Smith recalled the numerous battles of the Revolution fought before the existence of the Continental Army, such as the battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. During his arguments, Smith nearly deified the contribution of the Southern militia, stating that these men were willing and able to muster at a moment’s notice and always fought courageously, successfully, and without cost to the government at places like Cow Pens and Kings Mountain.<sup>56</sup> Although this characterization of the militia was clearly an exaggeration and was disputed even by the commander-in-chief, southern senators seemed to feel duty-bound to fight aggressively for their constituents.



**Pension Payment Voucher,  
March 1820**

Source: Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, RG 217

## SOUTHERN SENATORS SMITH AND MACON CONTINUE ARGUING FOR MILITIA VETERANS

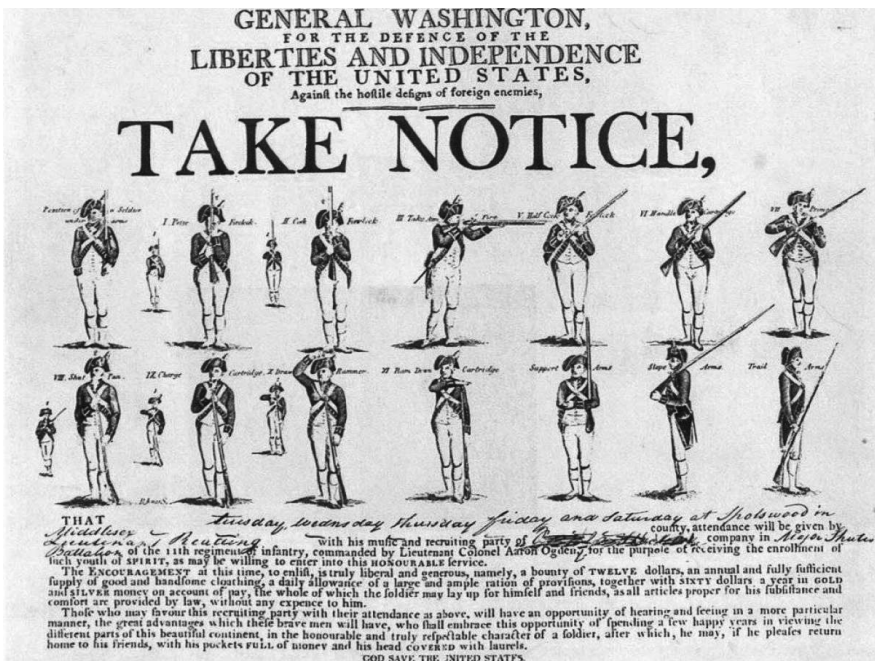
Given the pattern of enlistment in the Continental Army, it is certain that both Senator Macon and Senator Smith realized that few Southerners would be eligible for pensions if the militia were excluded. Given the nostalgic tone of much of the rhetoric surrounding the pensions, these words must have painted powerful images that reminded the men of the value of the militia in the early days of the war. Later War Department records (1819) that itemized the number of pensioners under the law would show that the vast majority of claimants came from the North. The leading states were New York, Massachusetts, the District of Maine, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania. The entire absence of Southern states from this list is noticeable and indicative of the nature of the Continental Army and the importance of the militia to the Southern colonies during the war.

Born into the Revolutionary generation, Senator Smith himself had not fought during the war, although he argued eloquently on behalf of those who did. Alluding to the changed and negative public attitude toward the militia, Smith questioned the fact that “we are told the militia cannot be relied on either as respects their bravery or their honor.” Hotly contesting this view, he emphatically argued that the government owed protection and support as much to the veteran militiamen as to the soldiers of the continental line.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Senator Macon also referred to the unique character of the war in the South, where it was “neighbor against neighbor,” where “destruction and death were the orders of the day,” and all felt the costs and devastation of the war. Realizing that few Southerners would be eligible for pensions under the Senate version of the bill, Senator Macon, like Smith, argued unsuccessfully for the restoration of the militia as beneficiaries.<sup>58</sup>

Both Smith and Macon, although arguing the merits of the militia, actually opposed the pension bill on matters of principle, perhaps because they saw that their battle to include the militia would be lost. In his remarks, Macon stated that to “undertake to provide for those who will not provide for themselves, will, on experiment, be found to be an endless task.”<sup>59</sup> Referring to the fact that it was appropriate to offer pensions because the soldiers deserved compensation and were in need of assistance, he queried, “[W]ould it not follow that all who deserved well, and are now poor, ought to receive a pension?” Fearing the establishment of a precedent for pensioning all military personnel, Macon cautioned Congress against the passage of the bill.<sup>60</sup> Senator Smith also cited precedent in his arguments against the

pension policy, fearing that: “This will be the beginning of a military pension system that posterity may regret.”<sup>61</sup>

Both Southern senators might have been reacting more to economic concerns than patriotic ones here, in light of the ongoing debate over the tariff and its revenues to the nation. The argument that treasury surpluses—in combination with the desire of Northern manufacturing interests to preserve the customs and tariff structure from which increased federal revenues were derived—is found throughout William Glasson and David Kinley’s 1918 definitive study of the American pension policy, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States*. Stating that revolutionary pension legislation operated to the disadvantage of the South in the distribution of the public revenues, Glasson and Kinley clearly fault the excessively generous attitude of Congress in providing service pensions and believed that the precedent established by the 1818 bill was ultimately detrimental to the nation in numerous ways.<sup>62</sup>



This "TAKE NOTICE" poster is often erroneously presented as a recruitment effort for the American Revolution. It is actually from 1798 and was designed to recruit soldiers for an altercation with France that never escalated into war.

Senator Macon, although speaking in opposition to the bill, mentioned the change in national opinion on the subject of pensions and clearly understood that his stand on this issue was unpopular. Referring to old controversies over the granting of lifetime half-pay for officers and the commutation of this entitlement into a five-year lump sum payment, Macon noted the fact that the “opinion in favor of pensions is fast gaining ground.”<sup>63</sup> This illustrates the argument that the sentiment behind granting these new pensions was widely supported throughout the nation, while previous attempts to provide service pensions had been unsuccessful and highly controversial.

Senator Robert Goldsborough of Maryland also alluded to prior prejudice against pensions and blamed it on anti-British sentiment and fear of creating a class of hirelings and mercenaries. Arguing that the Revolutionary pensions now proposed were just, Goldsborough believed that it was appropriate to allow “a grateful country to make them [Revolutionary War veterans] the

Despite this, the poster is representative of the general approach taken by recruiters of the era. Although there is brief mention of liberty and appeals to patriotism, the main recruiting focus is on the generous financial compensation and promises that an enlisting soldier can expect to return home “with his pockets FULL of money and his head COVERED with laurels.”

The full text reads:

**TAKE NOTICE THAT . . .** Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at Spotswood in Middlesex [MA] county, attendance will be given by Lieutenant Reutling [and] . . . Ogden for the purpose of receiving the enrollment of such youth of SPIRIT, as may be willing to enter into this HONOURABLE service.

The ENCOURAGEMENT at this time, to enlist, is truly liberal and generous, namely, a bounty of TWELVE dollars, an annual and fully sufficient supply of good and handsome cloathing, a daily allowance of a large and ample ration of provisions, together with SIXTY dollars a year in GOLD and SILVER money on account of pay, the whole of which the soldier may lay up for himself and friends, as all articles proper for his subsistance and comfort are provided by law, without any expense to him.

Those who may favour this recruiting party . . . will have an opportunity of hearing and seeing in a more particular manner, the great advantages which these brave men will have, who shall embrace this opportunity of spending a few happy years in viewing the different parts of this beautiful continent, in the honourable and truly respectable character of a soldier, after which, he may, if he pleases return home to his friends, with his pockets FULL of money and his head COVERED with laurels.

objects of generous munificence.” As a Federalist, this senator attempted to identify the pensions as charity, not as a debt owed for military service rendered during the war.<sup>64</sup>

Once again, this distinction is important to note. As has been discussed, there was a difference in the way Federalists and Democratic-Republicans perceived the pension bill before them. While members of both parties spoke in favor of providing pensions for veterans, the Federalists viewed the bill as charitable in intent while the Democratic-Republicans conceived of pensions as rewards for service rendered to the nation. While both parties supported the bill, their motives in doing so were diametrically opposed in some cases and created partisan conflict on the floor of the Senate.

Senator Goldsborough next confronted the arguments in favor of pensioning the militia by illustrating the severe trials and tribulations suffered by the continental soldiers, in contrast to the experiences of the militia:

Half-starved, half-naked, tracked in their course by the blood from their unshod feet, they followed their Heaven-directed leader with heroic constancy and courage—defying the elements—exposed to every vicissitude of season and of weather—bearing up against the multiplied calamities of the most ill provided warfare.<sup>65</sup>

These images, so evocative even today of the legacy of the Revolution, were very powerful and served to establish the Continental Army as the true embodiment of Democratic-Republicanism. Whereas immediately after the Revolution the ideal of the militiaman as citizen soldier was upheld by 1817, in the aftermath of the War of 1812, and with the new focus on national identity, Washington’s army had supplanted the militia as liberty’s defenders. In effect, congressional supporters of the Pension Act revised the history of the Revolution to make the Continental Army, not the militia, the military centerpiece of the war, and credited it with being the repository of Democratic-Republican virtue. In the name of honoring and preserving the legacy of the Revolution, the passage of the Pension Act altered the meaning of that legacy and contributed to the formation of the public culture of the early republic.<sup>66</sup>

## **PROJECTED COSTS OF THE BILL AND FINAL SENATE AMENDMENTS**

As in the House, attention was also given in the Senate to the projected cost of the program and the actual numbers of veteran pensioners anticipated.

Seeking to document these factors, Senator Goldsborough began with the number of soldiers discharged from the Continental Army in 1783. Starting with this figure of approximately 13,500 men, Goldsborough added 25% to allow for men who had been discharged after one, two, or three years of service. This resulted in a total of 16,875 possible pensioners. To this were added 2,000 veteran officers, a number garnered from the records of the Society of the Cincinnati. Allowing for a 10% survival rate, the senator was confident that not more than 1,614 Revolutionary War survivors remained alive in 1818.<sup>67</sup>

Although the methodology was certainly inexact, and the total anticipated applicants fell far short of the actual numbers of eligible veterans who came forward, what is most intriguing is how little Congress seemed to know of the makeup and character of the Continental Army. With the problem of frequent desertions, the constant inflow of new recruits, and the short-term enlistments common for the first years of the war, it should have been obvious that an accurate estimate of surviving veterans would have been at least ten times what Congress was willing to concede. The length of the war, as well as the very nature of the average rank-and-file soldier—his youth, transience, and generally short term of enlistment—seemingly would have alerted someone to the fact that this policy would be costly, and that any given soldier might survive well beyond the ten or twenty years that most congressmen seemed to anticipate.<sup>68</sup>

Senator Goldsborough moved on to laud the motives of national feeling and character that strongly urged the adoption of the pension policy and called on Congress to aid the veterans and not abandon them “in their advanced age and infirmities to the precarious offerings of public charity.”<sup>69</sup> Clearly, many senators and representatives agreed that it would be a blight on the nation’s reputation were they to refuse to support its veterans during their time of need. In light of the government’s ability to offer aid and sustenance to these men, it would be shameful for the United States to refuse to care for those who fought to establish the republic. These sentiments appear over and over again in the debates and had significant political and social ramifications.

With public opinion so favorably disposed toward the Revolutionary veterans, congressional approval of the Pension Act seemed assured. Few in Congress spoke out forcefully against the policy, and those who did were admittedly in the minority. In the absence of any evidence that the policy would escalate out of control and the favorable economic state of the union at the time, the prospect of military pensions for Revolutionary veterans was difficult to oppose.

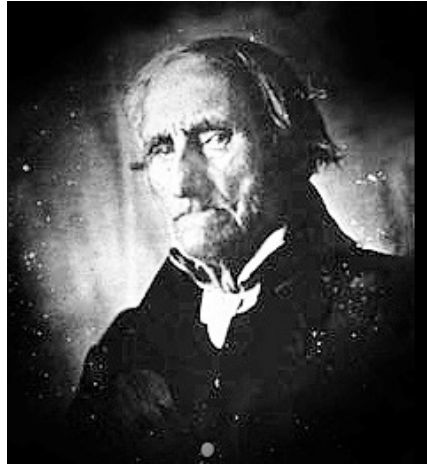
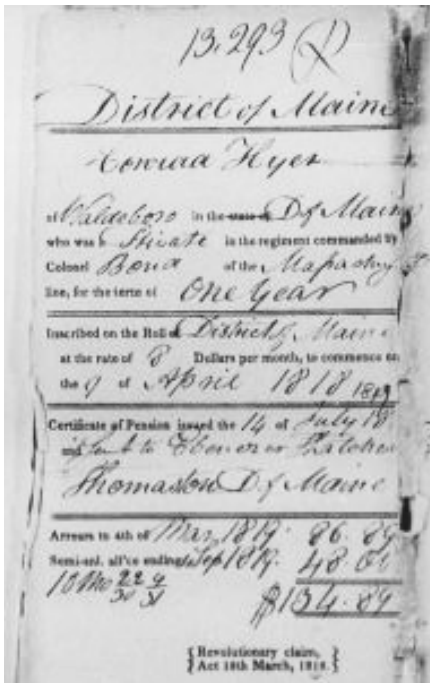


The debate in favor of the Pension Act now revolved around the Senate's "high and solemn duty . . . to make some remuneration to the worthy and indigent men" that would benefit from the bill.<sup>70</sup> By attributing motives of national feeling and character to the proponents of the bill and arguing that the reputation of the republic would suffer if the nation abandoned its Revolutionary War veterans to poverty, Senator Goldsborough continued to argue forcefully in favor of the bill.

As debate continued on the bill throughout February, a series of amendments were proposed, including one to postpone a vote on the bill until July. This was soundly defeated and indicates a strong sense of urgency on the part of Congress. On the seventeenth, John Crittenden, a Democratic-Republican from Kentucky, proposed yet another amendment to include the militia. This motion was defeated with only seven senators voting in support of the militia. Clearly, a majority of senators chose to temper the liberality of the House in deciding to pension only continental soldiers.<sup>71</sup> They justified this by emphasizing the short length of service most militiamen engaged in versus the fact that many continental soldiers served for the duration of the war. Whether this was politically motivated by the desire to foster feelings of national pride through the edification of the army over the militia or was simply financially prudent is difficult to judge, but by eliminating pensions for the citizen soldier, the Senate in effect elevated the status and reputation of the Continental Army.

In the final days of debate in the Senate, several other amendments were discussed and acted upon as well. On February 18, Senator Isham Talbot, a Democratic-Republican from Kentucky, moved to change the wording of the bill regarding eligibility from simply "reduced to indigence" to a specific dollar amount of property under which the veteran might apply for a pension. This was no doubt another attempt to restrict the provisions of the bill and to avoid possible misinterpretations of its intent. The Senate seemed to take a much more cautious approach than the House did on issues of eligibility and perhaps feared that some ex-soldiers might seek to take advantage of the largesse of the government by fraudulently applying for a pension. Although the consideration of this subject produced a good deal of debate, the proposal was narrowly defeated by a vote of fourteen to eighteen.<sup>72</sup> In fact, when he later attempted to administer the new pensions, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun was forced to deal with the ambiguity that resulted from the law's rather vague description of proof of indigence.<sup>73</sup>

On February 25, 1818 the final and most significant change was made to the bill with the passage of amendments proposed by Senator Abner Lacock, a Democratic-Republican from Pennsylvania who also served as the Chairman



**1819 Pension Certificate  
 for Conrad Heyer**

Born in April 1749 in Waldboro, Maine, he enlisted in a Massachusetts regiment in late 1775. The photo was taken in 1852, when Heyer was age 103.

of the Committee on Pensions, and Senator Talbot. In two close votes, the pension's eligibility requirement was changed from a service requirement of two years to only nine months.<sup>74</sup> The final attempt to change the bill consisted of a motion made by Senator Goldsborough to delete the proviso requiring applicants to relinquish prior pensions before becoming eligible for the new service pension. Recalling his impassioned support of the bill, surely this was another attempt to maintain and protect the dignity of the veteran applicants, by allowing them to retain any other subsidies they had been collecting due to injuries sustained during the war. This amendment was easily defeated, however, by a vote of ten to twenty-one.<sup>75</sup> The final bill was passed with only eight senators voting in the negative.<sup>76</sup> Massachusetts senators Eli P. Ashmun and Harrison Gray Otis, both Federalists, supported the bill.<sup>77</sup>

## THE HOUSE SEEKS TO RESTORE THE MILITIA

As the bill was returned to the U.S. House of Representatives for reconsideration, several of its provisions had been substantially altered. Eligibility now required service in the Continental Army with militiamen

completely excluded, and the term of service had been reduced to nine months from three years. The exclusion of the militia appears to have been motivated by a combination of caution over the size and scope of the pension policy and partisan politics. While Southern senators argued relentlessly for the inclusion of the militia, they had severe reservations about the Revolutionary War Pension Act itself and expressed concern over its impact on the nation. Ultimately, sectionalism won out over party politics, and though the Democratic-Republican Party championed the right of veterans to a pension, in the end conscience, principle, and sectional loyalty did not allow eight Democratic-Republicans to approve the pension law. The text of the Senate bill read in part as follows:

That every commissioned officer, non-commissioned officer, musician, and private soldier, who served in the war of the Revolution until the end thereof, or for a term of nine months, or longer, at any period of the war, on the Continental Establishment, and every commissioned officer, non-commissioned officer, mariner or marine, who served at the same time, and for a like term in the naval service of the United States, who is yet a resident citizen of the United States, is or hereafter, by reason of his reduced circumstances in life, shall be in need of assistance from his country for support, and shall have substantiated his claim to pension in the manner hereinafter directed, shall receive a pension from the United States.<sup>78</sup>

The U.S. House of Representatives, upon receipt of the altered bill, acted to restore it to a semblance of its original form by amending the Senate version to include the militia. Once again, this issue proved extremely contentious and engendered much debate on both sides. The motion to strike out the words “on the Continental Establishment” was made by Weldon Edwards, a Democratic-Republican from North Carolina. His amendment “gave rise to considerable debate” and was urgently supported by Edwards, Eldred Simkins of South Carolina, and Strother from Virginia, all Democratic-Republicans. Sentiment in favor of adding the militia centered on the important service supplied to the nation by its citizen soldiers, particularly in the South, and the fact that this service was more meritorious than that of the regulars because it was not offered under the impulse of professional inducements and obligations but was provided freely and without compensation of any kind. Opposing the amendment were John Palmer, a Democratic-Republican from New York, and the bill’s original sponsor, General Bloomfield of New Jersey.

While not disputing the merit of the services of the militia, they cited the difficulty of discriminating between those who served for a particular term of time and those who may have not have provided a sufficient length of service.

The main argument against the amendment, however, centered on the injudicious nature of returning the bill again to the Senate, as the disposition of that body toward this issue had been made clear by its actions in amending the bill. Apparently unwilling to risk the loss of the entire pension bill, the members of the House voted to defeat Edwards's amendment to include militiamen, sixty ayes to ninety-one nays. The bill was returned to the Senate for concurrence and signed into law on March 18, 1818.

## AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSION

The Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 provided lifetime pensions of \$20 per month for officers and \$8 for enlisted men to poverty-stricken continental and US Navy veterans who had served at least nine months or until the end of the war. According to historian John Resch, "The Pension Act was hailed for its prudence, its cultivation of virtue, its sentiment of gratitude, its expression of justice, its democratic principles and its spirit of nationalism."<sup>79</sup>

On April 18, one month after the bill's passage, a Boston paper reported that about 220 "old revolutionary warriors" appeared before the local magistrate to present their pension claims. The author noted that "It is grateful to believe that the few years left to such may be smoothed by the justice of their country."<sup>80</sup> Americans took pride in the fact that the country was finally paying its debt of gratitude by making "ample provision for the poor who jeopardized their lives . . . in defense of the sacred rights of American," in the words of a New Hampshire veteran.<sup>81</sup>

In June of 1818, a veteran wrote to the *Niles Weekly Register*, effusively thanking Monroe and Congress for making:

ample provision for the poor who jeopardized their lives in the high places of the field, in defense of the sacred rights of America. Thanks be to God, that their labours were blessed, and we [the soldiers] were not carried into captivity before our enemies. . . . Save the president. Let his enemies bow and tremble before him: may his people rejoice in his administration. . . . God save the president!

Although this veteran's sentimentality may be cloying, it is evidence of the public perception of Monroe's responsibility for the passage of the Pension Act.

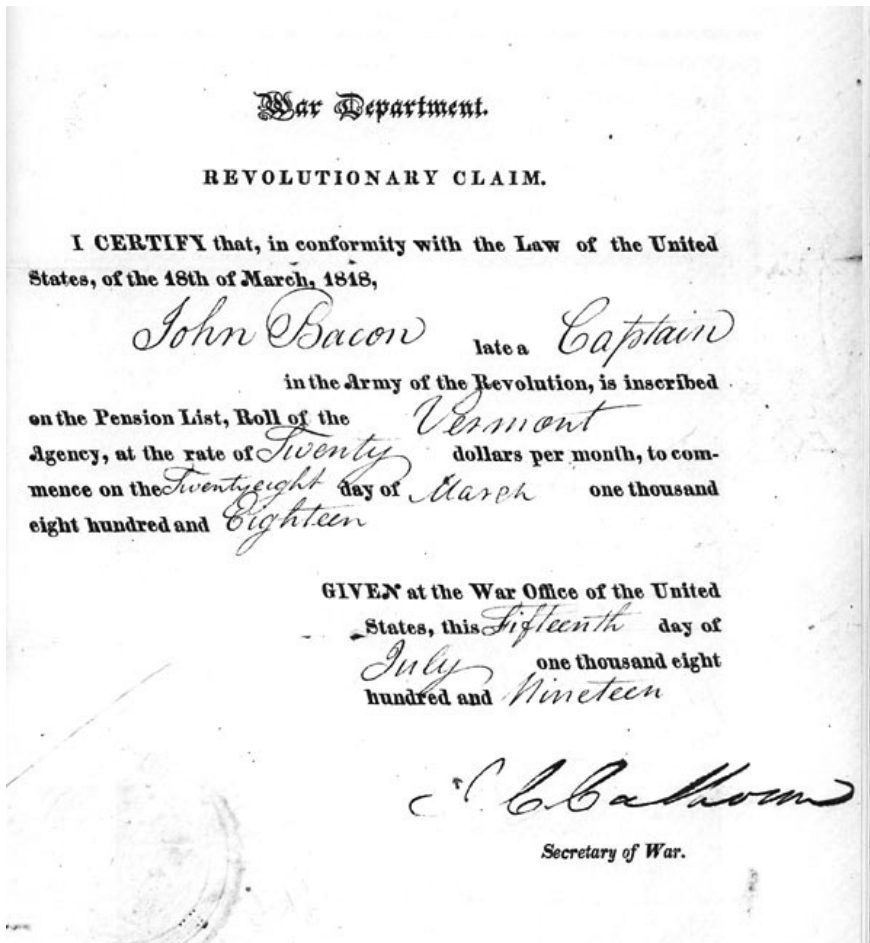
Several key issues seem to have affected the introduction and passage of this policy. The changing nature of public opinion regarding both the value and meaning of the Continental Army to the nation, as was evidenced by the outpouring of sentimentality regarding the Revolutionary War era that began soon after the War of 1812 ended, seemed to have convinced President Monroe that pensioning the veterans of the Revolution would be a popular and unifying act. Although Monroe's speech to Congress in December 1817 was certainly the proximate cause of the legislation introduced later that month by General Bloomfield, his desire to develop a sense of patriotism and restore sectional unity, combined with a sincere instinct to bely the suffering of aged veterans, encouraged him to introduce the subject of service pensions to Congress. Monroe, himself a veteran of the Revolution, took advantage of the abundant state of the federal treasury to achieve his own political goals of consolidating a national identity and promoting respect and gratitude for revolutionary ideals. Once the subject of pensions was introduced, it was left to Congress to implement the president's proposal.

In the House, passage was accomplished quickly and without partisan or sectional conflict. The primary goal of the House was to approve a comprehensive bill and protect the honor of the nation by providing relief for its needy veterans. Although some cautioned against the scope of the pensions and feared establishing a dangerous precedent, the bill passed easily in the House. In the Senate, however, partisanship and sectionalism emerged, and several senators took decidedly different stands.

As we have seen, Southern senators argued vociferously in favor of pensioning the militia in addition to the soldiers of the continental line. For economic as well as political reasons, it was important for men like Barbour, Smith, and Macon to urge the inclusion of the militia under the new pension policy. Although ultimately unsuccessful, their efforts were determined and persistent. While their motives do not emerge as clearly, other Southern senators like Goldsborough and Morrill argued persuasively against offering pensions to those who served in the militia and were able to supersede the wishes of their Southern compatriots. Certainly, judging from the percentages of men who served in the Continental Army from Northern and Middle states, pensioning regular army soldiers would have been very popular there. Even though the proposed costs of the bill—even without the inclusion of the militia—were wildly underestimated, most certainly the Senate version of the bill reflected a degree of fiscal caution. Although not

given much weight during the debates, warnings against the liberality of the bill impacted its particulars.

However, the Senate had grossly miscalculated. According to historian John P. Resch, by November 1818, a full "20,000 applications had poured into the War Department. Ten thousand more came in the following year." This was the largest public program in the nation's young history, and the infrastructure did not exist to effectively handle the number of applicants. Resch continues:



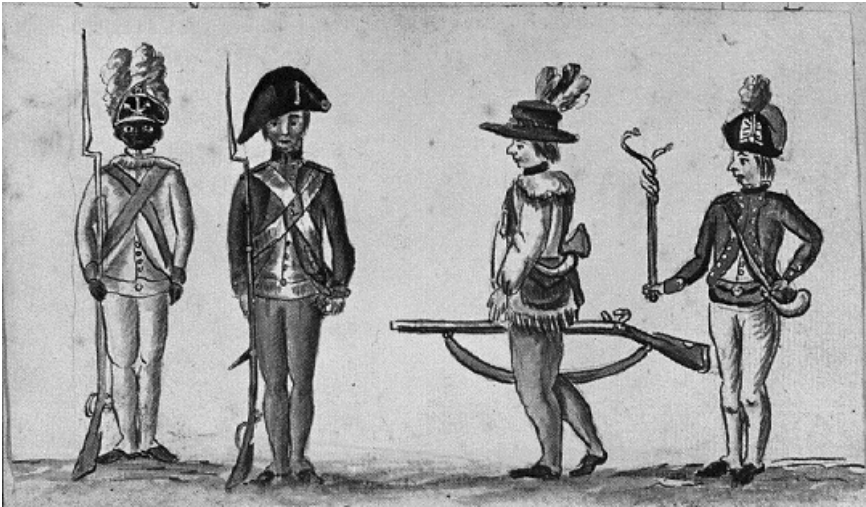
Certification that John Bacon was eligible to receive a pension for his Revolutionary War service, dated July 15, 1819

Source: Records of the Veterans Administration, RG 15.

The War Department was swamped by the applications, inquiries, and claims, complaints over administration of the act, and alarms that thousands of applicants submitted fraudulent claims and that many wealthy veterans were awarded pensions. Costs for the program came to nearly \$2 million in its first year; Congress had estimated that only \$155,000 was needed.<sup>82</sup>

In the end, Massachusetts residents would be among the greatest beneficiaries of the nation's largesse due to its large numbers of Continental Army veterans.

The Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 broke with tradition by offering former soldiers a service pension as opposed to the longstanding policy of providing only invalid and widow's pensions. Developed partly as an effort to reward long-neglected and meritorious service and as an attempt to engender patriotism in a young nation recovering from its "second American Revolution," this new policy had its beginnings in affection for the values and memories of the Revolutionary era. Some forty years after the Declaration of Independence, the United States began to move toward a new national identity. By rewarding the authors of its liberty, the Continental Army, the president and Congress took the first steps toward consolidating and strengthening the power of the federal government and enabled a young nation to congratulate itself on its survival as a republic while providing for those who had fought for its freedoms.



**Soldiers of the Continental Army, sketch by French army officer, c. 1781**

## APPENDIX: RESEARCH STRATEGIES

In attempting to trace the establishment of a new military pension policy for Revolutionary War veterans in 1818, the bulk of my research material was taken from the *Annals of Congress*. By going directly to the source of the Pension Act itself, I was able to get a sense of what issues were important in the development of this policy as well as the procedure followed in its evolution. Although the record of votes on the various amendments to the bill was a valuable research tool, of more importance for my work were the actual floor debates. From these, I was able to elicit a sense of how sectional and political differences affected the development of this policy as well as to gauge the impact of the changing attitude of the public toward these particular pensions.

Initially, believing that an overview of existing pension laws would be useful in interpreting the 1818 law, I began my research by tracking and itemizing the myriad regulations dealing with all types of pensions offered by the United States starting from 1776. This proved to be time-consuming and ultimately unnecessary, as the majority of the laws dealt with invalid pensions or pensions for surviving widows and orphans of soldiers. The 1818 law was very different, as it was the first time service pensions were approved by the Congress. Although the information I uncovered by looking at each and every pension regulation did give me the background I needed to ascertain that the 1818 law was unique, the specifics of those different acts did not impact my interpretation of why and how the policy was changed so drastically in 1818.

Establishing a chronology of events pertaining specifically to the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 from Congressional records proved to be more fruitful. By looking at the evolution of the bill as it was discussed and debated first in the House then the Senate, I was able to determine what particular aspects of the law were problematic, and for whom. Party affiliation was another important factor in both whether and why individual senators and representatives spoke in favor of the bill. I was able to obtain biographical information on the men most frequently quoted in the *Annals of Congress* through the Biographical Directory of the U. S. Congress at <http://bioguide.gov>. This saved an enormous amount of time and enabled me to quickly ascertain several key points about fifty key congressmen, including the state from which they were elected, their party affiliation, committee membership, whether they themselves were veterans of the Revolution, and if so, their rank in either the Continental Army or the militia. As my research





**Aerial View of Bunker Hill Monument, 1929**

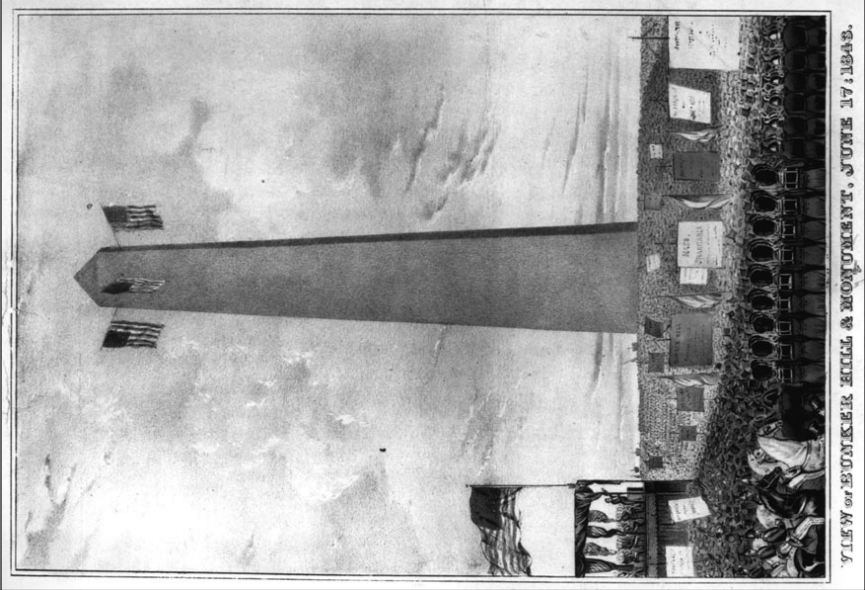
Courtesy of Boston Public Library.

### 1825 Bostonians Lay Cornerstone for Bunker Hill Monument

When President James Monroe spoke to a crowd at the Bunker Hill in 1817, only a simple wooden memorial existed that had been erected in 1797. In 1822, a group of prominent citizens formed the Bunker Hill Monument Association (BHMA) to preserve the memory of the battle and to celebrate Massachusetts' contribution to the Revolution. In January 1825, Governor William Eustis proposed that the state officially sponsor the monument, but the legislature refused.

Despite this, on June 17, 1825, the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument was laid. Daniel Webster addressed a crowd of 100,000, including 190 veterans who had survived the first major battle of the Revolution. Fifty years later, "on the ground distinguished by their valor . . . and the shedding of their blood," Webster called on Americans to make a thriving democracy and a strong union a living memorial to the men who had died there.

The Monument Association had to raise the money itself. Schoolchildren sent pennies, and men and women around New England paid \$5.00 to become members. Through the 1830s and 1840s, the Ladies' Fair at Boston's Quincy Market sold food, handicrafts, books, and other goods produced and collected by women all over Massachusetts. The \$30,000 raised was donated to the monument. On June 17, 1843, the 221-foot granite obelisk was finally dedicated at the largest Bunker Hill Day celebration since 1825. A stately procession, led by President John Tyler and an assortment of dignitaries, took three hours to march from the State House to Bunker Hill. The speaker was again Daniel Webster, then at the peak of his oratorical powers. Source: MassMoments, a project of *MassHumanities*.



VIEW OF BUNKER HILL & MONUMENT, JUNE 17, 1843.

progressed, it became apparent that each of these details impacted in some way on their attitude toward the pension bill and the Revolution itself.

Another important source of information was various newspapers of the period. I found several references to the changing public attitude toward the revolutionary veterans and included this information in my interpretation of the pension policy's development. The *Niles Weekly Register*, with its editor involved in soliciting and publishing a compendium of speeches, memoirs, and documents of the Revolution, proved to be especially helpful to my work. Within this paper, I found several references to other newspapers and journals which also mentioned the pension issue and discussed the Revolutionary era in nostalgic and romantic terms. I was able to use this to bolster my argument that public opinion in large part helped to shape the development of the pension policy. Additional work in this area would certainly be fruitful. It could possibly help establish exactly when and how public opinion evolved on the issue of pensions and the status of the Continental Army versus the militia. Hundreds of journals and weekly newspapers existed, and a close reading of those of the period immediately following the War of 1812 should turn up additional documentation.

An additional source that should be consulted is the selection of committee records assembled on microfilm by the National Archives. According to secondary sources, the Records of the U. S. Senate, Record Group 46, and the Records of the U. S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233, contain various committee documents and early versions of the pension bill that would be helpful in tracking its development and evolution. I was unable to access these records locally and have requested an index to these record groups directly from the National Archives in Washington, D. C. This will allow me to request individual reels of film that contain the specific committee records dealing with pension issues. While it is possible to see the changes in the bill as it moved from committees within the House and Senate and on to debate on the floor of both chambers, to be able to view the actual word-for-word alterations and have access to committee notes and memoranda would certainly be invaluable. Without knowing the extent of information available through the National Archives, it is difficult to say whether that data might have altered my perception of how the policy developed.

Working directly from the Congressional record was at times frustrating, as the discussions were often summarized, yet enough direct testimony was included to really allow the researcher to feel the passion of the debate. The images used by the congressmen in making their points were at times vivid, and often passionately descriptive. The establishment of

the pension policy of 1818 was clearly marked by political partisanship and sectional loyalty, but the undercurrent of nationalism and patriotic fervor is patently obvious as well.<sup>83</sup>

HJM

## Notes

1. Fold 3 by Ancestry. "Revolutionary War Pensions." <https://www.fold3.com/title/467/Revolutionary-war-pensions/description> (accessed December 1, 2018).
2. *Annals of Congress*, 15th Congress, 1st sess., 12–20.
3. John P. Resch, "Politics and Public Culture: The Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818," *Journal of the Early Republic* 8, no. 2 (1988): 139.
4. Editor's note: for examples of historians' use of pension files for social history research, see Theodore J. Crackel, "Revolutionary War Pension Records and Patterns of American Mobility, 1780-1830," *Prologue Magazine* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1984). For excellent information from National Archives staff on how to do research using the pension files, see Jean Nudd, "Using Revolutionary War Pension Files to Find Family Information," *Prologue Magazine* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2015) and Claire Prechtel-Kluskens, "Follow the Money: Tracking Revolutionary War Army Pension Payments," *Prologue Magazine* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2008). All articles can be accessed at <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/>
5. James Monroe, "First Annual Message," American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/first-annual-message-1> (accessed December 13, 2018).
6. *Annals of Congress*, 12–20.
7. [www.historyofmassachusetts.org/continental-soldiers-Revolutionary-war/](http://www.historyofmassachusetts.org/continental-soldiers-Revolutionary-war/) (accessed October 4, 2018).
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Annals of Congress*, 140.
10. William Henry Glasson and David Kinley, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1918), 1–3, 20–53; John P. Resch, "Federal Welfare for Revolutionary War Veterans," *Social Service Review* 56, no. 2 (1982): 172.
11. Resch, "Politics and Public Culture," 139.
12. Harry Ammon, *James Monroe and the Quest for National Identity* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), 19.
13. Ernest May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), 13–14.
14. S. Putnam Waldo, *The Tour of James Monroe, President of the United States*,

*through the Northern and Eastern States in 1817; His Tour in the Year 1818; Together with a sketch of his Life, with Descriptive and Historical Notes* (Hartford: Silas Andrus, 1820), 112–113.

15. *Ibid.*, 129.

16. *Ibid.*, 145–146.

17. *Ibid.*, 165.

18. Society of the Cincinnati. <https://www.societyofthecincinnati.org/> (accessed October 30, 2018).

19. Waldo, 160–161.

20. Resch, “Politics and Public Culture,” 141.

21. Resch, “Federal Welfare,” 171.

22. Ammon, 381.

23. Resch, “Politics and Public Culture,” 141.

24. *Niles Weekly Register*, November 23, 1816, 194–195.

25. John P. Resch, *Suffering Soldiers Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 88; quoted in *Niles Weekly Register*, February 8, 1817.

26. *Niles Weekly Register*, January 4, 1817, 297, 313.

27. *Ibid.*, March 1, 1817, 2.

28. *Ibid.*, February 8, 1817, 396–397.

29. *Ibid.*, supplement to vol. 11, no. 19, January 4, 1817, 313.

30. Constance B. Schultz, “Revolutionary War Pension Applications: A Neglected Source for Social and Family History,” *Prologue* 15 (Summer 1983): 108. Evidence of the increased local burden caused by aging veterans can be found in the pension applications themselves and is also reflected in the considerable effort that local government officials made in procuring federal pensions for illiterate and destitute veterans once the 1818 law passed.

31. Ammon, 366.

32. National Archives. “Records of the Committee on Pensions and Revolutionary War Claims (1813–1825) and Committee on Revolutionary Pensions (1825), History and Jurisdiction, 6.33,” Chapter 6. [www.archives.gov/legislative/guide/house/chapter-06-pensions-revolutionary-war-1813-1825.html](http://www.archives.gov/legislative/guide/house/chapter-06-pensions-revolutionary-war-1813-1825.html) (accessed July 12, 2018).

33. *Annals of Congress*, 445.

34. Resch, “Federal Welfare,” 172.

35. Resch, *Suffering Soldiers*, 101; quoted in the *Boston Columbian Sentinel*, December 20, 1817.

36. *Annals of Congress*, 492.

37. *Ibid.*, 508.

38. *Ibid.*, 492.

39. *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, from the First Session of the First to the Second Session of the Seventeenth Congress, Inclusive*, Walter Lowrie and Walter S. Franklin, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1834), vol. 1, 612, at “Claims,” Library of Congress. [www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwsplink.html#anchor9](http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwsplink.html#anchor9) (accessed July 12, 2018).
40. *Annals of Congress*, 498.
41. *Ibid.*, 469, 509–512; Resch, “Politics and Public Culture,” 143–144.
42. *New York Evening Post*, February 18, 1818, 1.
43. *American State Papers: Claims, 1790–1823*, Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke, eds. (Greenville, South Carolina: Southern Historical Press, 1994), vol. 9, 682–684; Glasson and Kinley, 68.
44. *Annals of Congress*, 505. Although strict application procedures were not imposed in 1820, with the pension system overwhelmed with more than 20,000 applicants, the policy was revised to require additional proof of eligibility. In fact, in that year, payments under the 1818 Act were suspended, and every pensioner had to reapply. New eligibility requirements forced veterans to submit lengthy applications, including a schedule of household goods, “containing his whole estate and income (his necessary clothing and bedding excepted),” and the swearing of an oath that the schedule constituted his entire estate and that he had not sold or given away any property in order to qualify for a pension. The secretary of war, John C. Calhoun, judged whether the applicant was in indigent circumstances based on the applications and was “unable to support himself without the assistance of his country.” Schulz, “Revolutionary War Pension Applications,” 108.
45. The average wage earner only made sixteen dollars per week. Some trades only made two, three, four, or six dollars a week. In 1818, eight dollars was equivalent in purchasing power to today’s \$152.45, while twenty dollars was equivalent in purchasing power to today’s \$381.14 (2018); via CPI Inflation Calculator at the Official Data Foundation. [www.officialdata.org/1818-dollars-in-2018?amount=20](http://www.officialdata.org/1818-dollars-in-2018?amount=20) (accessed September 14, 2018). For cost comparisons of everyday items, see “Cost of Food Prices and Wages in the 1800s.” [www.oldrecipebook.com/1800s-livingcost.html](http://www.oldrecipebook.com/1800s-livingcost.html) (accessed September 14, 2018).
46. *Annals of Congress*, 151–2.
47. Glasson and Kinley, 52. The first half-pay pension for officers was authorized on May 15, 1778. [www.fold3.com/title/467/Revolutionary-war-pensions/description](http://www.fold3.com/title/467/Revolutionary-war-pensions/description) (accessed October 30, 2018).
48. *American State Papers*, Claims (1834), 612.
49. *Annals of Congress*, 140.
50. Resch, “Politics and Public Culture,” 144.
51. Shaw Livermore, *The Twilight of Federalism: The Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815–1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 13–14.

52. *Annals of Congress*, 141.
53. *Ibid.*, 153.
54. *Ibid.*, 155.
55. *Ibid.*, 144–145; Robert Leckie, *The Wars of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 194, 200.
56. *Annals of Congress*, 146. It is noteworthy that in his comments, Smith refers to the fact that at the end of the war, the militia enjoyed a much better reputation than the continentals did, yet in 1818, it is Washington's army to which independence is attributed. This supports my earlier contention that the debate over this pension policy contributed to an attitude shift within the United States over the relative value of the militia versus the Continental Army.
57. *Ibid.*, 147.
58. *Ibid.*, 158–159.
59. *Ibid.*, 156.
60. *Ibid.*, 157.
61. *Ibid.*, 150.
62. Glasson and Kinley, 96.
63. *Annals of Congress*, 158.
64. *Ibid.*, 191–192.
65. *Ibid.*, 195.
66. Resch, "Politics and Public Culture," 140.
67. *Annals of Congress*, 196.
68. Although all Revolutionary War soldiers on the pension rolls had died by June 30, 1867, the last war widow on the pension list did not die until November 11, 1906. The estimated total cost of Revolutionary service pensions was nearly \$50 million, with a total number of original claims from soldiers and sailors given as 52,504 (Glasson, 94–95).
69. *Annals of Congress*, 197.
70. *Ibid.*, 191.
71. *Ibid.*, 209.
72. *Ibid.*, 211.
73. W. Edwin Hemphill, ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1963), li, 207, 208, 263, 264, 277.
74. *Annals of Congress*, 220–221.
75. *Ibid.*, 222.
76. *Ibid.*, 223.
77. Massachusetts Senator Harrison Gray Otis served from March 4, 1817 until May 30, 1822. Eli P. Ashmun of Northampton served from June 12, 1816 until May 10, 1818. He was replaced by Prentiss Mellen (Federalist), from June 5, 1818. Ashmun died in 1819, possibly of heart disease. He is buried at Northampton's

Bridge Street Cemetery.

78. *Annals of Congress*, 1108–1109.

79. Resch, *Suffering Soldiers*, 119.

80. *Niles Weekly Register*, April 18, 1818, 135.

81. Quoted in Resch, *Suffering Soldiers*, 121.

82. Resch, “Politics and Public Culture,” 139.

83. Additional sources for this topic include the following (which were not listed in previous endnotes): Charles J. Finocchiaro and Jeffery A. Jenkins, “Distributive politics, the electoral connection and the antebellum US Congress: The case of military service pensions,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 28, no. 2 (2016); James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender. *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Illinois, 1982); Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, 1979); and Emily Jane Teipe, “With Paper Promises in their Pockets: American Revolutionary Veterans in the New Republic,” Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 1997.