

## LESSON PLAN:

### **Pensions for Veterans, Widows, and Orphans in the *Papers of the War Department* online collection**

**Overview:** This lesson invites students to explore letters to the War Department at the end of the eighteenth century. Each of these letters was written in regards to a petition for money from the federal government on the basis of a veteran's service during the War of Independence. Students will analyze a variety of primary sources from the *Papers of the War Department* collection to learn more about the claims, attitudes, and expectations made by both American citizens and agents of the government in the country's first years.

This lesson is suitable for history classes focused on colonial and early American history, and for government and civics classes focused on life under the new Constitution.

### **ACTIVITY:**

**Historical background:** What does the country owe those who serve it in wartime? What does the nation owe the surviving spouses and children of those who are killed in its defense?

These questions of national obligation remain profoundly important here in the twenty-first century. They were no less important at the end of the eighteenth century, as the young United States confronted the question of what to do for those who had served in the Continental Army—the army that won the country its independence in the long war against Great Britain.

To modern Americans, it seems obvious and a matter of simple justice that the country would help support those who had served it in war. But the idea was not so straightforward in the country's early years. Determining who had earned what, and managing the logistics of these payments, proved an enormous challenge to the embryonic federal government, and to the War Department, the largest office within that new national government.

Beginning in the spring of 1778—before the United States had even won its independence from Great Britain—the Congress authorized payments of half-pay to the widows and orphans of officers killed in the War of Independence. Starting in 1789, the newly-formed War Department assumed responsibility for making these payments, as well as other pension obligations claimed by veterans of the Continental Army. The War Department itself did not create policy; Congress legislated the terms and conditions under which service members and their families could claim money from the Federal government. But the task of disbursing funds, and making rulings according to Congress' legislation, fell to the War Department.

Though it was one of the most significant Federal departments created by the new Constitution, the War Department in its early years was very small. Its modest office housed the Secretary of War, two clerks responsible for day-to-day correspondence, and two or three other functionaries who carried out the activities of the department: ordering arms and supplies, investigating claims lodged against the military, maintaining the army, policing the boundaries of the new nation and—after the end of the War of

Independence—looking after those who served in the Army according to Congress’ direction. That program became the very first national social-welfare program in the new United States.

**Lesson objective:** To explore the relationship between the new United States government and its citizens by exploring their interactions in the first national welfare program: pensions for veterans, widows, and orphans of the War of Independence. Students will discover how different the attitudes toward military veterans and military service were in the 1790s compared to today.

### **Lesson materials**

#### **Primary source document packet:**

Document A, John Stagg on behalf of Blackburn (p. 5)

Document B, Jonathan Dayton on behalf of widow Dickinson (p. 6-7)

Document C, Alexander Hamilton on behalf of widow de Neuville (p. 8-9)

Document D, Peter Hagner in regards to Samuel Hull (p. 10-11)

Document E, Joseph Howell in regards to Edward Whelan (p. 12-13)

**Historian’s worksheet** (p. 14)

**Teacher answer key** (p. 15-19)

### **Lesson preparation**

Divide your class into groups A-E. Print a copy of each document and its associated transcription for each student. Print one copy of the historian’s worksheet for each group.

### **Lesson procedure**

**Optional icebreaker introduction:** Each of the primary sources comes with a transcription. The eighteenth-century originals were all handwritten, and digital scans of each original letter accompany the transcribed version in the lesson packet. If your students can read cursive handwriting, you can begin the lesson with a short exercise in which students transcribe a document themselves.

This is an exercise that often works best in groups of two or three, since good transcribers must often use context clues and inference to figure out words and abbreviations that are unclear. Document A, John Stagg’s letter, is an excellent document to begin with, since the penmanship is excellent and presents the fewest challenges for novices. Alexander Hamilton’s letter, by contrast, is much, much more difficult.

Students will likely find this process extremely frustrating (professional historians find it frustrating, too!), but a five-minute attempt to transcribe the documents can help them appreciate the challenges that teachers and textbook authors face in making sense of original letters from this period, even if the student attempts are unsuccessful.

Depending on whether you are using this lesson in a history class or a government class, you will want to place the pension program within the context of the early Federal period or life under the Constitution. Explain that the end of the War of Independence left thousands of soldiers, or their widows and orphans, eligible for pensions to be paid out from the United States Treasury. Congress created the program, and the employees of the War Department were responsible for administering it.

Engage the class in some brainstorming before beginning the group exercise: What would be the goal of such a program for veterans, widows, and orphans? What would the government be worried about? How should the program be administered to be fair and appropriately generous?

Once the students have some rough ideas about what they expect the program to look like, divide them into groups A-E and distribute copies of **Documents A-E** and the accompanying transcription to the group. (If your students cannot read cursive or if time does not permit them to attempt a transcription, the original document serves mainly as an illustration rather than a critical part of the activity). Give each group a copy of **Historian's worksheet**.

Have each group work together to determine who wrote each document, what the letter-writer is requesting, and what the logic or rationale behind the request seems to be. Then have each group identify surprising or confusing parts of each letter to discuss with the class as a whole. The **Teacher Answer Key** includes a description and explanation of each of the documents and things that students and scholars might find interesting or revealing about each letter.

Once each group has completed its investigation, reconvene the class. Have a member of each group briefly summarize its document and the information from their group's worksheet. After the groups have presented all five documents, have the class see what patterns or themes they can spot that might tell us something about early Americans' relationship with their new federal government.

Students may not see patterns right away, but they may be able to make educated guesses about them once the patterns are identified. Two that are particularly interesting:

1. The default position of the War Department (and, by extension, the Federal Government) seems to be one of skepticism. Several of the letters offer third-person testimony confirming that the subject did, indeed, serve in the Continental Army. John Stagg's letter to the physician requests an examination to establish that the applicant did in fact suffer a disability as a result of military service.

What does this default attitude of skepticism tell us about the first pension program? It suggests that the federal government was concerned about fakers: applicants who would try to get money from the government by misrepresenting their service, their injuries, or their relationship to a veteran. This is an attitude that will strike many students as alien, given the veneration paid to contemporary veterans and military families. It seems somehow un-American to ask someone who claims to have been disabled as a result of military service, or who lost a family member in war, to "Prove it."

But that skepticism will make more sense to students when they consider how difficult record-keeping was in the late eighteenth century. Without photo identification, national service and medical databases, and any quick method of communication, it was often very difficult to establish someone's identity, much less the details of military service performed a decade earlier. Remind students that this was the *very first* social welfare program administered by the Federal government; familiar organizations like the VA were still decades away. (This pension program is a very early forerunner of the Veteran's Administration organized in 1930.)

When Congress passed the legislation authorizing pensions for veterans and their families, it was accompanied by a great deal of concern that offering money from the Treasury would encourage con artists, grifters, and fakers to either fabricate a service record, to exaggerate the extent of medical conditions, or to pose as a widow of a service member. Since the incentive to try and get money would be high, and since it was so difficult to prove that a veteran was who he said he was, many of the letters in the War Department files from this period are simply an effort to establish that the person making the application was indeed trustworthy and served in the Continental Army. Having a well-known and respected supporter, like Alexander Hamilton, was a powerful way to convince a skeptical government.

2. Women did not usually write on their own behalf. There are nearly two hundred letters concerning pensions for widows in the War Department files, and only a handful that women wrote themselves. In the overwhelming majority of cases, widows found a male supporter to argue on their behalf. Students can make educated guesses as to why this is: the most powerful seems to be that a legal claim on the federal government carries more weight, and is thus more likely to succeed, if a man intercedes in the case.

**Optional Extension:** Paul Revere's letter on Deborah Sampson's behalf, though not part of the online *Papers of the War Department* collection, and falling slightly outside of the collection's time frame, is one of the most fascinating documents in this chapter of American history. Revere seems as concerned about establishing that Sampson is a respectable woman who no longer engages in transgressive behavior like dressing in male clothes than he is about the details of her military service. Find this letter from the Massachusetts Historical Society through the following link, and discuss with your class:  
<https://www.masshist.org/database/326>.

**Optional concluding exercise:** Have students, in their groups or as a short take-home writing assignment, compose a short letter on behalf of Elizabeth Jones, widow of Continental Army veteran John Jones. Students should employ their insights about the relationship between pension applicants and the government to craft a short, 4-6 sentence letter making a case that his surviving family members deserve a pension drawn from the Federal treasury based on his service.

War-department, Feb<sup>r</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> 1793

Gentlemen.

John Blackburn, the bearer, has applied for a pension. The Secretary of War requests that you will please to examine him, and certify the nature of his disability, and your opinion thereon.

I am, Gentlemen,  
most respectfully,  
Your very humble serv<sup>t</sup>  
John Stagg

D<sup>rs</sup> William Shippen  
James Hutchinson

ABA03

John Blackburn, the bearer, has applied for a pension. The Secretary of War requests that you will please to examine him, and certify the nature of his disability, and your opinion thereon.

I am, gentlemen, most respectfully, your most humble servant, John Stagg



Sir,

Friday Oct. 24<sup>th</sup> 88



M<sup>rs</sup> Dickinson the widow of a man who was formerly a Captain in the New Jersey line has applied to me to aid and advise her in the settlement of his military acct<sup>s</sup> - I have referred her to you under a confidence of with an assurance that you will facilitate such settlement as far as is in your power consistently with your duty. In favor of her demand I do not hesitate to say from my own recollection that Capt. Dickinson was employed to purchase arms for the soldiery, & that I have reason to think they were converted to public use.

As the death of the principal puts it out of the power of the widow & the heirs to be as accurate in their vouchers or their proofs as otherwise would be necessary, you will doubtless consider their situation & make every proper allowance.

I am Sir Your hum. serv<sup>t</sup>

Jona. Dayton

Mrs. Dickinson the widow of a man who was formerly a Captain in the New Jersey Line has applied to me to aid and advise her in the settlement of his military acct. I have referred her to you under a confidence of with an assurance that you will facilitate such settlement as far as is in your power consistently with your duty. In favor of her demands I do not hesitate to say from my own recollection that Capt. Dickinson was employed to purchase arms for the soldiery, and that I have reason to think they were converted for public use.

As the death of the principal puts it out of the power of the widow and the heirs to be as accurate in their vouchers or their proofs otherwise would be necessary, you will doubtless consider their situation and make every proper allowance. Jonathan Dayton.

My Dear Sir

This note probably be handed you  
by Mrs de Beauville widow of Mr de Neville of  
Kilham a Gentleman who embarked very zealously and  
very early in the cause of this county - was instrumental  
in promoting it and as I understand an object  
of persecution in consequence of it, which was a  
link in the chain of his pecuniary ruin - I think  
his widow has a strong claim upon the kindness  
of our country as far as general confidance will  
admit relief - and she has a particular claim upon  
any body's good will that of being a distressed &  
amiable woman. I wish for her your patronage  
& good offices

Your Obedt Servant  
Edm. My Dr Friend  
Yrs truly A. Hamilton

Jan 19. 1797

1797

J. M. Henry Esq

John de Beauville Esq

No. 51796

(Printed & Sold by J. M. Henry, (New)  
101 Q. to 580



This will probably be handed you by Madame De Neuville widow of Mr. De Neuville of Holland, a Gentleman who embarked very zealously and very early in the cause of this country—was instrumental in promoting it and as I understand an object of persecution in consequence of it, which was a link in the chain of his pecuniary ruin.

I think his widow has a strong claim upon the kindness of our country as far as general considerations will admit relief—and she has a particular claim upon every body's good will, that of being a distressed & amiable woman. I ask for her your patronage & good offices. Adieu My Dr Friend

Yrs. Truly—A. Hamilton, Jan. 19, 1797

The Hon:  
Gen<sup>l</sup> Dayton,  
Elizabeth Town  
New York

Accountants Office,  
July 31 - 1796 -

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Sir

I have the honor in the absence  
of the Accountant, to acknowledge the rec<sup>d</sup> of your letter of the 19<sup>th</sup>  
Inst<sup>l</sup> relative to the claim of Samuel Hull. In answer  
thereto I have to inform you that as regards his pension, his  
evidences are incomplete in the following particulars viz<sup>t</sup>

There is only the evidence of one person to prove his being  
wounded, the law requires two or the testimony of the Command<sup>g</sup>  
Officer or Surgeon - The affidavits of three freeholders are  
wanting to prove the continuance of disability, means of support,  
and mode of life - No evidence of leaving the service -

His name is returned to the District Judge of New York, agreeable  
to a resolve of Congress, the nature of his disability, not being  
ascertained; & no examination by physicians is required

As regards his pay, he appears on the Muster Rolls -  
in Capt<sup>s</sup> Hoscroft's Company enlisted 21 April 77 - for the war  
promoted Sergeant June 78 and left off the Muster in Dec<sup>r</sup>  
78. so far his narrative corresponds with the Muster

after which I cannot trace his service should his account  
be found to be a true one, he would have been entitled to all  
the emoluments allowed to a soldier serving to the end of  
the war, had an application been filed in the office agreeable  
to the Act of Congress of the 27 March 92 - as it now stands

he cannot receive anything, without the Interference of  
Congress in his behalf - Enclosed I return the list of  
Thomson's list and have the honor to be respectfully  
P. Hagner per C. C.

I have the honor in the absence of the accountant to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 19<sup>th</sup> inst relating to the claim of Samuel Hull. In answer hereto I have to inform you that as regards his pension his evidences are incomplete in the following particulars:

There is only the evidence of one person to prove his being wounded, the law regarding two or the Commanding Officer or Surgeon;

The affidavits of three freeholders are wanting to prove the continuance of disability, means of support, and mode of life;

The evidence of leaving the service.

This missive is returned to the District Judge of New York agreeable to a resolve of Congress, the state of his disability not being ascertained; a reexamination by physician is required.

As regards his pay, he appears on the muster rolls in Capt. Rosenkrantz's company enlisted 21 April 77 for the war. Promoted Sergeant June 78 and left off the musters in Dec 78.

So far his narrative corresponds with the musters after which I cannot trace his service. Should his account be found to be a true one he would have been entitled to all the emoluments allowed to soldiers serving to the end of the war had an application XXX in the office agreeably to the Act of Congress of this 27 March 92.

As it now stands he cannot receive anything without the interference of Congress in his behalf. Enclosed I return the affidavits of Thomson Stille

And have the honor to respectfully be, Peter Hagner

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New York Octo<sup>r</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> 1858

Sir

There is an Edward Whelan in this City who was formerly a Sergeant in Col<sup>d</sup> John Pattons Regiment, afterwards transferred to the General Guards and discharged from that Corps the 10<sup>th</sup> March 82 — this poor fellow has been a long time afflicted with Rheumatic and other complaints which prevents him from procuring a livelihood, — I have endeavored to get him on the pension list of this State but without effect. I have therefore to request you will oblige me in the information whether it is now possible for him to derive any benefit from the State of Penn<sup>a</sup>. to which he once belonged & from whom he has received his Depreciation — while he was in service he was respected as a sober, orderly man & a good Soldier I wish something could be done for him as I conceive he deserves a compensation for the loss of health and the use of limbs in the defence of his Country — I will particularly thank you for a line on this subject as early as possible —

John Nicholson esquire

J. Howell J.

Sir: There is an Edward Whelan in this City who was formerly a Sergeant in Colonel John Patton's Regiment, afterwards transferred to the General Guards and discharged from that Corps the 18 March 82. This poor fellow has been a long time afflicted with rheumatic and other complaints, which prevents him from procuring a livelihood.

I have endeavored to get him on the pension list of this State but without effect. I have therefore to request you will oblige me in the information whether it is now possible for him to receive any benefit from the State of Penn to which he once belonged and from whom he has received his depreciation.

While he was in service he was respected as a sober, orderly man and a good soldier. I wish something could be done for him as I conceive he deserved a compensation for the loss of health and the use of limbs in the defence of his country.

I will particularly thank you for a line on this subject as early as possible. Joseph Howell

**Who is the author of this letter?**

**What is author asking for?**

**What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?**

**What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?**



## Document A

### **Who is the author of this letter?**

John Stagg, a clerk in the War Department. Clerks handled day-to-day correspondence in the office.

### **What is author asking for?**

The letter is prepared for John Blackburn, a man who claims to be a veteran of the War of Independence and has applied for a pension.

The letter is to a physician. Blackburn has been instructed to take Stagg's letter to the physician. Stagg asks the physician to give Blackburn a physical examination.

### **What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?**

Stagg asks the physician to give Blackburn a physical exam to confirm the extent of Blackburn's disability and to report back to the War Department.

### **What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?**

One thing readers may find confusing is the fact that Stagg cannot trust Blackburn's self-reported claim about his disability.

<b>Document B</b>
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**Who is the author of this letter?**

Jonathan Dayton, a congressman from New Jersey, is writing the War Department.

**What is author asking for?**

Dayton is requesting a pension for Mrs. Dickinson, the widow of a New Jersey man who served as an officer in the Continental Army.

**What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?**

Dayton states that he remembers Mrs. Dickinson's husband's service, and notes that his death makes it impossible for her to provide proof about his service.

**What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?**

Dayton goes out of his way to mention that Mrs. Dickinson's husband purchased arms for the soldiery but that he has "reason to think they were converted for public use." This seems to be a reference to the fact that Mrs. Dickinson's did not personally profit from his service in the Continental Army—the implication is that at the end of the war these weapons were returned to the state militias, rather than sold by Mrs. Dickinson's husband for his own personal profit.

Dayton also urges the War Department to consider the widow's situation in deciding whether to award her a pension.

## Document C

### **Who is the author of this letter?**

This letter is from Alexander Hamilton (yes, that Alexander Hamilton!) to the War Department.

### **What is author asking for?**

Hamilton is requesting a pension for the widow of a Dutch supporter of the American Revolution.

### **What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?**

Hamilton makes his case for the widow's pension by praising her husband's service. He was an early supporter of the patriot cause, and as Hamilton understands was persecuted as a result of supporting the patriots. According to Hamilton, supporting the American cause was "a link in the chain" of his financial ruin. Her husband's financial ruin appears to have left the widow destitute.

Hamilton urges the War Department to issue the widow a pension based on her husband's contributions to the American cause.

### **What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?**

Students may be surprised that the widow has enlisted a well-known figure from the Revolution to plead her case. Students may also note the language that Hamilton uses (he emphasizes that she is "distressed" and "amiable") in making a claim on America's goodwill.

## Document D

### **Who is the author of this letter?**

This letter is from Peter Hagner, a clerk in the War Department office, to Jonathan Dayton, a New Jersey Congressman.

### **What is author asking for?**

Hagner is responding to a letter Dayton sent earlier in the month. In that letter, Dayton requested a pension for a Continental War veteran named Samuel Hull. Hagner explains why the request has been rejected.

### **What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?**

Hagner gives a variety of reasons why Hull's claim has been rejected. Hull has only one witness to the fact that he was wounded; the law requires two witnesses, or the commanding officer or surgeon. Hull has not been able to provide evidence from three free landowning neighbors who can testify to his continuing disability, his means of support, and his "mode of life"; Hull has no evidence of leaving the service.

Hagner states that if Hull's service had been established he would have been entitled to money from the Treasury according to an Act of Congress. As things now stand, Hull cannot receive any money without Congress interfering on his behalf.

### **What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?**

Students may be surprised at the apparent callousness the War Department shows a man claiming to be a wounded veteran. The clerk lists a number of reasons that the applicant's file has been rejected, all of which revolve around the applicant's failure to prove his service and his wound to the satisfaction of the law.

<b>Document E</b>
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**Who is the author of this letter?**

This letter is from Joseph Howell, an accountant in the War Department.

**What is author asking for?**

Howell is asking for a pension for a Continental Army veteran names Edward Whalen. Whelan had unsuccessfully petitioned New York state for a pension but had been rejected.

**What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?**

Howell emphasizes that Whelan suffers from rheumatism and other complaints, and that his injuries prevent him from earning a living. New York State refused Whelan’s claim and Howell is asking whether Pennsylvania might honor it.

**What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?**

Howell emphasizes that Whelan is in poor condition due to his service. He also stresses Whelan’s character: in the Army, Whelan was “respected as a sober, orderly man” and was considered a good soldier.

Students may be surprised that a veteran with a medical condition has been rejected for a pension and is dependent upon a government bureaucrat to plead his case.