

## 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

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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

Document B, Jonathan Dayton on behalf of widow Dickinson

Document C, Alexander Hamilton on behalf of widow de Neuville

Document D, Peter Hagner in regards to Samuel Hull

Document E, Joseph Howell in regards to Edward Whelan

#### **Historian’s worksheet**

#### **Teacher answer key**

### **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.