

## Revolutionary War Pension Account Excerpts

When former soldiers of the Revolution applied to receive pensions, they were required to submit information orally or in writing to document and confirm their military service, including length of service, commanders each individual served under, engagements the soldiers participated in and confirmation from other veterans still alive who remembered serving with them.

Many historians consider this application process the nation's first oral history project. Oral history is a field of study that gathers, preserves and interprets the voices and memories of participants in past events. This vast written archive of nearly 80,000 applications gives historians and students of the American Revolution great insight into the experiences of those whose recollections might otherwise have been lost.

Below are excerpts of three pension applications from Revolutionary War veterans submitted to the federal government in the nineteenth century.

**Deborah Sampson** enlisted in the Massachusetts Continental Line in May 1782 using the name Robert Shurtleff. She disguised the fact that she was a woman, even when wounded in a fight near Tarrytown, New York. To avoid detection, she removed a musket ball from her thigh herself and carried another in her leg for the rest of her life. When she fell ill in 1783, a doctor discovered her secret but did not tell her commanding officer until the end of her service. Sampson married a man named Benjamin Gannett in 1785. Their farm did not prosper, and they slipped into poverty. In 1797, with the help of editor and printer Herman Mann, Sampson published her memoirs to support her case for a disability pension which she received in 1805. She later relinquished this pension for another which she was awarded under the Pension Act of 1818. Below is her 1818 pension application. Note her claim to have enlisted in 1781 instead of 1782. It is likely Sampson romanticized her account to demonstrate the dedication of her service and to place her at such a notable event as the surrender of General Cornwallis at Yorktown.

“United States-  
Massachusetts District-

Deborah Gannett, of Sharon, in the county of Norfolk, and District of Massachusetts. . .maketh oath, That she served as a private soldier, under the name of Robert Shurtleff – in the war of the revolution upwards of two years in the manner following. Enlisted in April 1781 in the company commanded by Captain George Webb in the Massachusetts Regiment commanded then by Colonel Shepherd and afterwards by Colonel Henry Jackson– and served in said corps, in Massachusetts, and New York–until November 1783 when she was honorably discharged in writing, which discharge is lost. During the time of her service, she was at the capture of Lord Cornwallis–was wounded at Tarrytown . . .She is in such reduced circumstances as to require the aid of her country for her support–

Deborah Gannett”

**John Harris** was an African American man who served with the Continental Army. Possibly enslaved at the time of his service, he was assigned as a servant to Major James Monroe, who later

became the fifth president of the United States. In 1818, during the presidency of the man he served under during the war, Harris applied for a pension in Prince George County, Virginia. He had worked for many years as a cooper but had fallen on hard times trying to support his four children. Records indicate Harris died in 1838 when he was about 85 years old. Interestingly, a Bounty Land application in the Library of Virginia contains a note dated November 10, 1790 in which James Monroe certifies a man names John Harris who “was permitted to attend me as a servant during part of that campaign and until March 1770 as well as I remember he had acted for three years.”

“Prince George County,

This 27<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1818 personally appeared before me, Richard E. Parker, one of the Judges of the Judicial Court. . . John Harris, a free man of Colour. . . and in order to obtain the assistance thereby afforded to revolutionary officers and soldiers, in reduced circumstance, made oath that during the year 1777 he entered Captain [James] Harris’s company, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Continental regiment Va. Line. . .that he was taken from that regiment, and made servant to President Monroe, who was then Major of horse and Aid de Camp to Lord Stirling; that he acted in these situations about thirteen months, that he then got a furlough and returned to Virginia. . . as appears by his discharge hereto annexed; that he has received no pension or other bounty from government.”

Harris also provided what were likely his original discharge papers dated October 15, 1780. In 1821, Harris submitted another pension, adding details such as his participation in the Battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778 and his role in building barracks at Chesterfield Courthouse in Virginia.

**Joseph Plumb Martin** is considered the everyman of the American Revolution. His memoir of his service is one of the most commonly cited sources for the experiences of a Revolutionary War soldier. His words are found throughout books and documentaries of the conflict and his memoir is found on college and high school syllabi across the country. His story was almost lost to us, however. When his memoir first published in 1830, his publisher in Maine published just a few hundred copies. His memoir was rediscovered in the mid-twentieth century and republished in numerous formats and is still in print today. His writing often contains dark humor to highlight the suffering of enlisted soldiers, as opposed to the perceived luxuries his commanding officers enjoyed.

Born in Massachusetts in 1760 but raised in Connecticut by his grandparents, he joined the Connecticut militia in 1776 and served throughout the war in numerous battles such as Brooklyn, Germantown, Monmouth and Yorktown. His memoir, written decades after the war, supports the struggle for veteran pensions and public acknowledgement, with Martin declaring after the war that his comrades were “turned adrift like old worn-out horses.” Living in the District of Maine by the time of the 1818 Pension Act, Martin traveled to the county courthouse and narrated for a clerk a more direct and unembellished account of his service than his memoirs would later convey.

“I Joseph Plumb Martin of Prospect in the county of Hancock and District of Maine on oath say and declare that I am a native citizen of the United States and that I serves more than nine months in the late revolutionary war as a private and noncommissioned officer.

That on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of April 1777 I enlisted as a private during the war and was embodied Peekskill in the Connecticut Line. I served until sometime in the summer following when I was transferred

into a company of sappers and miners attached to the engineers Department and served in said company till June 1783 when I was honorably discharged at West Point. I was at the Battle of Monmouth and the taking of Cornwallis.

I am 59 years old. I have a large family of children. I am in reduced circumstances and stand in need of the assistance of my country for my support.”