

## The Legacy of America's First Veterans

### Speech on the Pension Act of 1832 delivered by Representative Henry Hubbard in the U.S. House of Representatives, February 29, 1832

*Congress adopted a pension law in 1818 providing for the payment of modest monthly pensions to aging Revolutionary War soldiers in financial need. To receive these pensions, veterans had to prove that they were poor by providing the federal government with statements made in open court and signed by a judge listing all their property and financial assets, including the value of their homes, livestock, clothing, and household furnishings, down to the pots and pans they used to cook. Many veterans felt exposing their poverty in this way was degrading. The Pension Act of 1818 only provided benefits to Continental Army and Navy veterans. It did not include veterans who had served in the state regiments or in militia, who were far more numerous than Continental veterans.*

*Henry Hubbard (1784-1857) championed the revision of the pension laws in Congress during the Jackson presidency. Hubbard served in the New Hampshire legislature before being elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1828 as a Jackson Democrat. Reelected in 1830, he was appointed chairman of the Committee on Revolutionary Pensions. On December 28, 1831, he introduced, on behalf of his committee, "a bill in addition to 'An act to provide for certain persons engaged in the land and naval services of the United States in the revolutionary war.'" This bill became the Pension Act of 1832, the first military pension law providing benefits to veterans without regard to financial need. When the House of Representatives began debate on the bill on February 29, 1832, Hubbard rose to present a carefully prepared speech making the case for a dramatic expansion of pension benefits for Revolutionary War veterans:*

I have ever regarded this subject as involving an honest claim upon the country. I have considered, that granting pensions to the soldiers of the Revolution, for their services and for their sacrifices, in that dark and discouraging period of our history, was but an act of inflexible justice — was in truth nothing more and nothing less than an imperfect discharge of an honest debt. But while I should be reluctant to dispose of the public treasure, on objects of public or of private charity . . . I cannot bring my mind to the conclusion that by giving annuities to the faithful soldiers of the Revolution, in satisfaction of their claims for revolutionary services, was in effect doing what I have invariably condemned as an unwarranted disposition of the common fund, the property of the whole republic.

Believing that the country justly owe this description of claimants an honest debt, I would now provide for its payment and discharge, as I would for the payment and discharge of any other equally well founded demand against the Government.

The act of Congress, of March, 1818 . . . declares the purpose of the Government. It was then deliberately determined to grant annuities to the surviving soldiers of the Revolution . . . It only remains for us to extend equal justice to all; to away invidious distinction; to look upon those who performed equal service in that glorious struggle which resulted in the establishment of their country's independence, and who now survive to witness the unexampled prosperity of this republic, as alike entitled to *justice* at our hands — to place them all on an equal and impartial footing—to carry the spirit and the equity of the act of 1818, into perfect operation; withholding justice from no one—rendering his honest due to every faithful soldier of the Revolution.

There still survives a small remnant of this faithful band of patriots, who feel most severely the extreme partiality and injustice of the present pension system, and who now look upon us with all

the intensity of hope, that their claims will no longer be disregarded; that such gross injustice will no longer be visited upon them; that they may yet live long enough to know that their services in the war of the Revolution were alike respected and alike appreciated.

Our country is now able — she should be now willing to dispense to all the surviving soldiers of the revolution, impartial and entire justice. Public sentiment demands this at our hands.

The bill now under consideration, provides . . . a full pension to every surviving soldier of the revolution, who performed a service equal to nine months. . . . The act of March 18, 1818, provides, that he who served in the war of the revolution, and who *“by reason of his reduced circumstances shall be in need of assistance from his country for support,”* is alone entitled to receive the benefit of said act.

This odious principle makes an essential distinction between the present bill and the act of March, 1818. This makes service exclusively the basis of a pension, while that makes service and indigence the foundation for such a claim.

Can any good reason be offered, why a claim to a pension for Revolutionary services, shall be made to depend on individual indigence?

I cannot yield my assent to the policy . . . which seems to require that a man should be, either a tenant of a poor-house, or so reduced in this world’s goods, as to require the exercise of individual charity to supply his daily wants, before he can successfully apply to his Government for justice — for an appropriate compensation for the virtue and valor of the Revolution.

The next feature in the bill which distinguishes it from the act of March 1818, is, that it expressly provides for all those who performed the requisite period of service, whether in regiments raised by the Continental Congress; in regiments raised by the authority of the States; in regiments which then constituted the militia of the country, or in regiments raised by voluntary association of individuals.

It would be extremely difficult to assign any good reason why these regiments, raised by State authority, should be regarded with any less favor than Continental troops. . . . No body of troops were more patriotic — no men were more ardent in the prosecution of the war of the revolution — no men in public service endured more, or suffered more — no men were clothed less, fed less, or paid less, than they were. In every point of view, they have as strong claims upon the justice and gratitude of the country, as any of the surviving soldiers of the revolution. The bill before us, extends the benefits of the Pension system to them.

And, I would ask, on what ground, shall those who served in the Militia, during the war of the revolution, be excluded from the benefits of the Pension system?

It must be well known by every individual conversant with the history of the times, that great reliance was placed on the militia . . . for the sacred preservation of public freedom.

It was the pure patriotism — it was the unwavering devotion to the best interests of the republic — it was the virtue and valor of the militia, that gave to our cause an impulse which was irresistible, an impulse which the whole physical force of England, aided by her subsidized Hessians, proved wholly incompetent to control and to vanquish.

The battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill taught the enemy that the soil of freemen could not be invaded with impunity . . . Were it necessary to advert to events to show forth the value of the militia, I would direct your attention to every great battle that was fought in the war of the revolution.

Our revolution was founded in nature; was proclaimed by public virtue; sustained by public valor. It was a war waged by England against the liberty of America, and the rights of man. It was a war which called into active exercise, the best, the purest principles of American freemen. . . . it was a war, as regarded by the American people, for the defense of their soil, their homes, their altars, their institutions; for the maintenance of those free principles, which they loved and cherished. While memory shall exercise any dominion over the human mind, the services of the soldiers of the revolution will be recollected by their children, and their children's children, so long as one generation shall succeed another.

We are now happy at home — enjoying every blessing which can pertain to freemen. We are respected abroad, participating in every right guaranteed to the most honored nation. . . . Every citizen in this great republic, is made secure in the enjoyment of all his rights, by the moral influence of our free institutions. How wonderful has been the practical effects of the American Revolution. How great has been the advance of our general population — the march of improvement — the progress of the arts — our extended and extending West, comes forth in all her majesty — in all her physical and moral power, to bear evidence to the wonder world, of the great and glorious fruits of the Revolution. The cause of learning — the pure spirit of Christianity trace their astonishing advancement to the impulse received at that eventful period. The science of self government — the free institutions of our land, rest upon a deep and enduring foundation, laid in the war of the Revolution. In every latitude — in every region — in every part of Christendom, are to be found the effects of American genius, American enterprize, and of American Industry. . . . can we fail to take a retrospect and bring to mind, by whose efforts and energies; by whose services and sacrifices these invaluable blessings have been secured?

Let us then unite with one mind and with one heart to effect a satisfactory payment of this debt.

The sum of the whole matter is, that if this bill should now pass, for a few years to come a million dollars may be required to carry its purposes into full effect. But it can only be required for a few, *a very few* years. The surviving soldiers of the revolution have already passed that boundary which has been assigned by high authority as the duration of human existence. . . . I am reminded by the journals of the day — by every newspaper that I take into my hands, that here and there the brave founders of the republic are daily increasing the congregation of the dead.

I would then most solemnly urge . . . the passage of this bill — and my fervent prayer to the Father of the faithful would be, that many may long live to enjoy its benefits. That they may call around them their children and their children's children, and by more patriotic effort rivet their affections still strong to the republic, by pointing them to this act of the just and gratitude of their beloved country.

Source: *Speech of Mr. Hubbard, of New Hampshire, upon the Bill Making Further Provisions for the Persons Engaged in the Land and Naval Service of the U. States, during the Revolutionary War* (Washington, D.C.: Printed at the Globe Office, 1832).